HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

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

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE AND CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHESS OF LANCASTER—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION—The Rt Hon. David Davis, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, MP
LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)
Sam Gyimah, MP (Minister for Higher Education) §
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Andrew Griffiths, MP
Richard Harrington, MP
The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

Cabinet Office—
MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE AND CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHESS OF LANCASTER—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—
Oliver Dowden, MP
Chloe Smith, MP

Defence—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §
The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP
Guto Bebb, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Tracey Crouch, MP
Lord Ashton of Hyde
Michael Ellis, MP
Education
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)
The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)
Sam Gyimah, MP (Minister for Higher Education) §
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Lord Agnew of Oulton
Nadhim Zahawi, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—George Eustice, MP (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Thérèse Coffey, MP
Lord Gardiner of Kimble

Exiting the European Union
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Davis, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—
Lord Callanan
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Robin Walker, MP
Steve Baker, MP
Suella Fernandes, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan, MP (Minister for Europe and the Americas)
The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt, MP (Minister for the Middle East) §
Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)
The Rt Hon. Mark Field, MP (Minister for Asia and the Pacific)
Harriett Baldwin, MP (Minister for Africa) §

Health and Social Care
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Stephen Barclay, MP
Caroline Dinenage, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Jackie Doyle-Price, MP
Steve Brine, MP
Lord O’Shaughnessy

Home Office
SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP (Minister for Immigration)
The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP (Minister for Security and Economic Crime)
The Rt Hon. Nick Hurd, MP (Minister for Policing and the Fire Service)
Baroness Williams of Trafford (Minister for Countering Extremism and Minister for Equalities)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretary OF STATE—
Victoria Atkins, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Dominic Raab, MP (Minister for Housing and Planning)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF STATE—
Jake Berry, MP
Heather Wheeler, MP
Rishi Sunak, MP
Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

International Development
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt, MP §
Harriett Baldwin, MP §
The Rt Hon. Lord Bates
International Trade—
SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Greg Hands, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)
Baroness Fairhead (Minister for Trade and Export Promotion)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

Justice—
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Rory Stewart, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of State—
Phillip Lee, MP
Lucy Frazer, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Law Officers—
ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
SOLICITOR GENERAL—Robert Buckland, QC, MP

Leader of the House of Commons—
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL—The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP

Northern Ireland—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Shailesh Vara, MP
Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Scotland Office—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Transport—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
MINISTER OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR LONDON—Jo Johnson, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Jesse Norman, MP
Baroness Sugg, CBE §
Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Treasury—
PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP
FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Mel Stride, MP
EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Robert Jenrick, MP
ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Julian Smith, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—
Andrew Stephenson, MP
Paul Maynard, MP
Craig Whittaker, MP
Rebecca Harris, MP
David Rutley, MP
Nigel Adams, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—
Nusrat Ghani, MP §
Mike Freer, MP
Jo Churchill, MP
Amanda Milling, MP
Stuart Andrew, MP §
Kelly Tolhurst, MP
Wendy Morton, MP
Mims Davies, MP
UK Export Finance—
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE AND EXPORT PROMOTION—Baroness Fairhead

Wales Office—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretary OF STATE—
Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §
Stuart Andrew, MP §

Work and Pensions—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)
Sarah Newton, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SecretARIES OF STATE—
Guy Opperman, MP
Kit Malthouse, MP
Baroness Buscombe

Office of the Leader of the House of Lords—
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

Her Majesty’s Household—
LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL
LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie
MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord Vestey KCVO
TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP
COMPTROLLER—Chris Heaton-Harris, MP
VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Mark Spencer, MP
CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE
CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN’S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown
BARONESSES IN WAITING—Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Chisholm of Oxleigh, Baroness Stedman-Scott.
LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH
§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt. Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP
REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Bridget Phillipson, MP
REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—Mr Charles Walker, MP
REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP
CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—Sir Edward Leigh, MP
HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. John Bercow, MP
CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP
FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Eleanor Laing, MP
SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS
Sir David Amess, Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Henry Bellingham, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone,
Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir David Crausby, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies,
Ms Nadine Dorries, Mr Nigel Evans, Sir Roger Gale, Mike Gapes, The Rt Hon. Dame Cheryl Gillan, James Gray,
The Rt Hon. David Hanson, Mr Philip Hollobone, Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. George Howarth,
Sir Edward Leigh, Mrs Anne Main, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Albert Owen,
Ian Paisley, Mark Pritchard, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, The Rt Hon. Joan Ryan,
Mr Virendra Sharma, Mr Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Mr Charles Walker, Phil Wilson

SECRETARY—Colin Lee

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION
The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, The Rt Hon.
Andrea Leadsom, MP (Leader of the House), Stewart Hosie, MP, Valerie Vaz, MP, The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie
Winterton, MP, David Natzler (Clerk of the House), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons),
Dame Janet Gaymer, DBE (External Member), Jane McCall (External Member)
SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski
ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Helen Wood

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE
Dame Janet Gaymer, DBE (Chair), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP,
Jane McCall, Bob Scruton
SECRETARY—John-Paul Flaherty

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD
Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Myfanwy Barrett (Managing Director, Corporate
Services and Finance Director), John Benger (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and
Committees), Carlos Bamford (Managing Director, In-House Services), Brian Finnimore (Managing Director,
Strategic Estates), Eric Hepburn (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (Director of the
Parliamentary Digital Service), David Natzler (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons
Service), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information, and Managing Director,
Participation)
SECRETARY OF THE BOARD—Sarah Petit
SPEAKER’S SECRETARY—Peter Barratt
SPEAKER’S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi
SPEAKER’S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin
PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone

22 January 2018
Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Remedial Fire Safety Work

1. Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): How much Government funding has been allocated to local authorities for remedial fire safety work as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire. [903413]

Sajid Javid: Let me update the hon. Lady. My records show that the number of authorities is still 36. We have requested further information from 10 of them, and four have provided it. As I said a moment ago, however, we are ready to provide any local authority with whatever financial flexibilities are necessary to ensure that all essential fire safety work is done.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): How are local authorities or other landlords to know what steps to take to ensure that there is adequate fire protection when the relevant building regulations are 11 years old and no review of them has yet commenced?

Sajid Javid: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not in Parliament last year when the Home Secretary and I asked for an independent review of all building regulations by Dame Judith Hackitt. Just a few weeks ago, in the House, I presented the findings of her interim report, the recommendations of which we accepted in full.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Grenfell Tower is seared in all our memories, and of course we must do whatever we can. I very much agree with what was said by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock)—I hope I can call her my hon. Friend—but am I not right in thinking that if a local authority runs out of funds for fire protection measures, a trigger mechanism allows them to spend more, beyond their normal restraints?

Sajid Javid: First, I can tell my hon. Friend that I am not sure that the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) is his hon. Friend. As for his question, mechanisms do exist, and we have gone further by saying to local authorities that if there are certain flexibilities that they need, they should contact us, and those flexibilities will be provided.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): My hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) are absent
to pay tribute and respect to Kieran Quinn, whose funeral is taking place this afternoon. He was the leader of Tameside Council, which was council of the year in 2016. Our thoughts and condolences are with his family and friends today.

I welcome the new ministerial faces to the Department with a new name, but what the country really needs are new policies to fix the growing housing crisis. More than seven months on from the Grenfell Tower tragedy, how many tower blocks with the same dangerous cladding have had that cladding taken down and replaced?

Sajid Javid: I join the right hon. Gentleman in extending my condolences to Kieran Quinn’s family and friends on what will certainly be a very difficult day for all of them.

According to my figures, which I think are accurate up to 10 January, 312 buildings have been tested, of which 299 have not passed the test. The cladding on a number of buildings has started to come down and is slowly being replaced. We are anxious to ensure that there is enough capacity in the industry to meet the extra demand that it is now experiencing, and we are working on that with both the industry and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary.

John Healey: I wonder whether the Secretary of State has read the update that his Department issued this morning. The number of tower blocks with the same dangerous flammable cladding that has been taken down and replaced—more than seven months on from Grenfell Tower—is three. How has it come to this? Seven months on from Grenfell, only one in four families who are Grenfell survivors has a new permanent home. The Government still cannot confirm how many other tower blocks across the country are unsafe. Ministers still refuse to help to fund essential fire safety work when they know that blocks are dangerous. The Secretary of State is sitting back and letting individual flat owners, rather than landlords and developers, pick up the full costs for private tower blocks. The Secretary of State must know that that is not good enough. What new action will he take to sort out these serious problems?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman will know, because he shares this view, that the No. 1 priority for buildings safety following the Grenfell Tower tragedy is to ensure that anyone living in any tower that might have similar cladding feels completely safe and that those buildings are properly tested. If anything is found before that cladding can be taken down and replaced, which will of course take time, we must ensure that adequate measures such as 24/7 fire wardens are put in place, on the advice of the local fire and rescue service. That is exactly what has been done in every single case. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about private sector tower blocks and the cost of any remedial work that is needed. I have made it clear in the House and since our last oral questions that, just as social landlords are picking up the tab for those changes and whatever the legal case might be in the event of a private relationship, the moral case is clear: the tab should be picked up by the freeholders of those properties.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. These are extremely important matters, but we need to speed up a bit because we have a lot of questions to get through.

2. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What progress has been made on piloting the Housing First approach to tackling homelessness.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In the recent Budget, we announced £28 million to pilot Housing First for some of the country’s most entrenched rough睡ers in the west midlands, the Liverpool city region and Greater Manchester. We are continuing to work with the pilot regions to refine the scope and design, ready for launch later this year.

Michael Tomlinson: Ahead of the commencement of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, will the Secretary of State join me in praising the work of Routes to Roots, a local charity that helps homeless and vulnerably housed adults in Poole?

Sajid Javid: First, let me thank my hon. Friend for the role that he played on the Bill Committee in getting that legislation on to the statute book. It will help to prevent homelessness in Poole and elsewhere. I agree that there is a lot that individuals can do to help to end the homelessness cycle, including by getting involved with voluntary groups such as Routes to Roots in his constituency, and to make a real difference for vulnerable people.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On Boxing day, a group called Activists for Love created a squat to shelter homeless people in Hull. I went to meet the residents on Saturday. The landlord, MRC lettings, has been very accommodating and is actually going to find everyone living there a home. However, I am concerned that the funding cuts to Hull City Council mean that it does not have the money for much-needed aftercare support to prevent these people from becoming homeless again. Will the Government please commit to providing more money for an aftercare homelessness service for Hull West and Hessle?

Sajid Javid: I can tell that the hon. Lady shares our desire, and that of all Members, to fight homelessness and rough sleeping. That is why I am sure that she will welcome the £1 billion that the Government have allocated to 2020 to fight homelessness, including £315 million for core funding for local authorities.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend the Government for initiating the Housing First pilots, but what assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the problem of homelessness in this country unless London does its bit, and I am afraid that the Mayor of London is letting the people of London down. In his first year in office, not a single home for social rent was started in London. That is a tragic record.

Housing First
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The centre for housing policy at the University of York is leading on policy development and on validation of the Housing First initiative, yet City of York Council has presided over a fifteenfold increase in street homelessness since 2010. How will the Minister ensure that the residents of York can benefit from Housing First not just in theory, but through action?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the hon. Lady agrees that it makes sense to pilot Housing First properly so that we ensure that when it can be rolled out across the country, it will work properly. That is why we have set up the pilot areas. There are still lots of types of help in other parts of the country, much of which comes from the £1 billion of funding that we have allocated to 2020, which includes funding for local authorities such as York.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The December report of the local government and social care ombudsman, “Still No Place Like Home”, found that in seven out of 10 of the housing cases that it investigated, families were being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation for unlawfully lengthy periods, with some lasting more than two years. The report highlights the appalling physical and mental impact, including on children, of living in inadequate, crowded and sometimes damp conditions. Does the Secretary of State recognise just how damaging living in insecure, inappropriate housing is? Will we see any improvement for those families in the next 12 months?

Sajid Javid: I share the concerns of many hon. Members, which is why the Government have made fighting homelessness and reducing rough sleeping an absolute priority. The hon. Lady’s question recognises that action is required on many fronts—economic, mental health, addiction and other issues—and the Government have put together a programme to pursue them.

Fire Safety

3. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to ensure the fire safety of buildings in England.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Fire and rescue services have visited over 1,250 high-rise buildings since the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, and those inspections have included the checking of compartmentalisation, fire doors and other relevant features. The National Fire Chiefs Council has reaffirmed the principle of “stay put”, but it is the responsible person who must determine what is appropriate for each particular building.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I want to refer to Approved Document B of the building regulations and the guidance contained within it. Paragraph 12.7 specifically prevents the use of combustible material in the insulation of high-rise buildings. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the guidance is a lot less clear about cladding and appears to allow for the continued use of combustible materials in the cladding on high-rise buildings? If so, is the Secretary of State comfortable with that situation?

Sajid Javid: I do not think that that is still the case. However, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the need to review the guidance and the regulations themselves. That point was made clear by Dame Judith Hackitt in the interim report that she published last month, the recommendations of which we accepted in full.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Citiscape is a residential block in Croydon with the same flammable cladding as Grenfell Tower, and its residents fear that they are living in a deathtrap. The Secretary of State has told them that the responsible person should take action, but the freeholder, the developer, the managing agent and the insurer all deny liability, and the cladding stays in place while legal wrangles go on. There is only one responsible person left, so when will the Secretary of State take action to remove the dangerous cladding, and to keep people and their families safe?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to reiterate that the responsible person in such situations is clearly the freeholder. Whatever the legal case might be, the freeholder should take responsibility. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing has spoken to the chief executive officer of Proxima GR Properties, the company in this case, and is engaged in dialogue to try to see what we can do to ensure that it does the right thing.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): As the Secretary of State has said, one of the key recommendations of the interim review of building regulations and fire safety was to restructure the whole suite of approved documents to provide more clarity on how fire safety measures are applied. Will the Secretary of State therefore provide an update on what steps his Department is taking to implement that recommendation, with particular regard to planning guidance?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that the report was an interim report, with the final report due in the spring. There were some interim recommendations that we could act on immediately, and we have accepted all of them. For example, a recommendation about restricting how and when desktop studies can be used is being implemented right now. The hon. Lady might be interested to know that a convention involving industry experts,
stakeholders and Dame Judith Hackitt is going on as we speak, just down the road from Parliament—I attended this morning—to look at what more can be done in the interim.

Rough Sleeping

4. Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016.


13. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016.

17. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016.

22. Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): There are too many people sleeping rough and I am determined to do more. That is why the rough sleeping and homelessness reduction taskforce will deliver a cross-Government strategy to tackle this issue, with the help of an expert advisory panel.

Matt Western: I welcome the Minister to her new role. Rough sleeping has doubled nationally since 2010, but in my constituency it has doubled in the past two years, according to our local charities Leamington Winter Support and Helping Hands. Of course, the biggest cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing. In my constituency, developers have delivered—

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise, but we have a lot to get through. What we need is a question, not a series of statements—a question with a question mark. One sentence, please. Help others; help yourself.

Matt Western: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Given the lack of affordable housing being delivered by developers—the rate is currently running at 27% compared with the 40% set in the local plan—what does the Minister plan to do to ensure that that is enforced locally?

Mrs Wheeler: I like truths across the whole UK. The interesting issue will be the amount of money and the packages that we can put in place to spread funding for affordable housing across the nation. That is something that we are determined to do.

Eleanor Smith: In Wolverhampton, the estimated number of rough sleepers has doubled since 2010. What plans do the Government have to decrease the number of rough sleepers, because their current plan is certainly not working?

Mrs Wheeler: The interesting thing about the Wolverhampton area is that it is part of the west midlands, so we are working very hard with Mayor Andy Street, who will be joining me on the rough sleeping strategy panel. I look forward to our first meeting on 1 February.
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am launching an appeal for mobile phones with local charity Doorway to enable those who are homeless or suffering to get back on their feet—literally—and have an emergency lifeline. Will the Minister offer support for what is, for some people, a controversial initiative locally and agree that it is much more controversial that in the UK today we still have some people who are homeless, which is why the Government are prioritising that area?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for referring to that interesting, innovative way to deal with such issues in the future, and I would be interested to see how the pilot in her area works. I congratulate her local area on being so proactive.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In Rugby, council officers go out into the community to speak to rough sleepers and have recently placed four in supported accommodation, but more often than not offers of support are declined and only last week Warwickshire police charged two rough sleepers for aggressive begging. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we provide support for those who are forced to sleep rough, but that it is important also to ensure that support goes to those who are in genuine need?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is quite correct: this is a complex matter involving some inherent difficulties such as mental health issues, family breakdown, crisis and chaos, but equally, the state has to be fair-handed, and if people are begging aggressively and have properties of their own, the state will do what it has to do. Our focus is on rough sleepers who need the help most.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to welcome the Minister to her place. She will be aware that, following a grant that provided funding for the Torbay End Street Homelessness campaign, we have seen the number of rough sleepers fall. Will she confirm how work of that sort will be complemented by the Homelessness Reduction Act coming into force later this year?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend, whom I have known for many years, for his good question. We want to pick up on the pilots around the country that are working so well, and the Homelessness Reduction Act means that councils will have a duty to try to help people before they become homeless. That is why, as part of a suite of efforts, we are looking into dealing with these matters. We are confident that, by 2022, we will halve rough sleeping in this country.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): There has been a noticeable increase in the number of rough sleepers in Shipley over the past year or so. Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing with Bradford Council to try to deal with that issue? Does she agree that, to help homeless people, it is important that Bradford Council develops new housing in cheaper, affordable areas in Bradford, rather than concentrating on building unaffordable, expensive houses on the green belt in Wharfedale in my constituency?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; he never fails to disappoint. Interestingly, one area where councils will be able to flex their muscles more is in taking on empty homes and looking into quality rented properties that are affordable for everybody so that communities stay together. I think that is something Bradford Council ought to do.

Affordable Homes: Rural Areas

5. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of affordable homes in rural areas.

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): More than 119,000 affordable homes have been delivered in rural communities since 2010. Homes England has invested £142 million in the rural affordable homes programme schemes in the past four years, which is around 9% of total spend.

Neil Parish: I very much welcome those figures on affordable homes. There are redundant farm building sites, which could be classed as brownfield sites. If they were, that would release a lot more land for affordable homes. Will the Minister consider that, please?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have introduced a requirement for each local authority to publish registers of brownfield land. More than 90% of local authorities have done so, and the information to date suggests that nearly 16,500 brownfield sites covering 26,000 hectares have already been identified in England alone.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As well as helping rural areas, what is the Minister going to do for places such as Birmingham? How will he respond to the council’s request for additional assistance with the provision of new homes, essential maintenance on existing properties and the discharge of statutory obligations, such as health and safety and annual gas inspections?

Dominic Raab: Since 2010, we have delivered more than 370,000 new affordable homes, but of course we are ambitious to do more—working with housing associations and local mayors such as Andy Street. Of course, we have raised the housing revenue account borrowing cap for local authorities to give them greater flexibility.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): In welcoming my hon. Friend to his new role, may I ask him to look, with the intellectual vigour that I know he has, into what national parks do to supply affordable homes? They are not exempt from the need.

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend has considerable experience, both as a Minister and as a long-standing Member. We will certainly look into all such matters because we are absolutely committed to using every lever that we possibly can to increase home building in this country for the next generation.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): One of the best ways to provide more affordable homes to rent in rural and, indeed, urban areas is through the provision
of more co-operative housing. What further co-operative housing initiatives are the Minister and his Department thinking of pursuing?

Domestic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right, and a lot of social housing is of a co-operative nature. It particularly depends on any given community’s specific needs, which are often for the local authorities to help to identify. Local authorities in rural areas need to focus on the particular needs of their communities. For example, some areas have rural exception sites, which provide long-term protection for affordable homes in rural areas.

Coastal Communities

6. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What progress his Department has made on supporting the economies of coastal communities. [903418]

20. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What progress his Department has made on supporting the economies of coastal communities. [903433]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Since 2012, we have invested £174 million in 295 coastal communities fund projects throughout the UK. Those projects are forecast to deliver 18,000 jobs, and we have announced that round 5 of the coastal community fund, worth £40 million, will open shortly.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. The Lowestoft coastal communities team has developed an exciting strategy for the regeneration of the town’s historic seafront. Will my hon. Friend visit Lowestoft to see for himself the work that will transform Britain’s most easterly town into the east coast’s destination of choice?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend’s constituency has already received more than £1.5 million from the coastal communities fund, which shows how he is delivering for his constituents through his campaigning. I would be delighted to visit when I am in his area.

Trudy Harrison: The Social Mobility Commission’s “State of the Nation” report revealed that the socioeconomic prospects of those who live in rural coastal areas are poor. We have world-class industries and skills in many sectors, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we realise our full potential?

Jake Berry: I had the pleasure and privilege of visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency last year, and I saw those world-class skills in action, particularly in the nuclear supply chain. I am delighted that, through our industrial strategy and the northern powerhouse, we are supporting people throughout the country, so that they can grow the economy, wherever they may reside.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister is leading on this issue, so he will know that the northern powerhouse growth deal, which will affect north Wales and its coastal communities, is about connectivity with Liverpool and Manchester and the improvement of infrastructure. Will he give an indication of when he will reach some conclusions on the budget for that growth deal?

Jake Berry: Ultimately, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and his Ministers are leading on the north Wales growth deal, but with them I have an absolute determination to ensure that the deal delivers for the people of north Wales. On Thursday this week, I shall visit local authorities in north Wales to ask them what progress they have made and to update me on the projects that they would like to see.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I extend the condolences of the Scottish National party group to the friends and family of Councillor Kieran Quinn for the sadness and sudden loss they have faced.

Is the Minister aware of the Cardiff declaration by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions? It was signed in November by the Scottish Government, alongside representatives of more than 20 other EU regions. Does he agree with its statement that Brexit will have a disproportionate impact on coastal regions and their key economic sectors?

Jake Berry: I do not agree with the statement that Brexit will have a disproportionate impact on the coastal regions, because taking back control of our fishing industry will pay a huge dividend for the people who live along our coast. It was hugely exciting for me to visit Dumfries and Galloway only last Thursday to talk about the borderlands deal, which is unique in that it goes from coast to coast, covers the English and Scottish border areas and is a partnership of two Governments—the Scottish Government and the UK Government—coming together as equals to deliver for the people of the borderlands.

Alison Thewliss: That does not really answer the question. Coastal communities face economic and social deprivation, and the Cardiff declaration highlights the fact that a hard Brexit will exacerbate that. Will the Minister meet representatives of the CPMR, and does he agree with them that if this Government do the unthinkable and walk away from a deal, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should still be able to access EU funding programmes?

Jake Berry: Of course I will be happy to discuss having a meeting with the people to whom the hon. Lady refers. However, I gently point out that this Government—the UK Government—have already invested £174 million in our coastal communities and are getting behind those communities. What have the Scottish Government done? I think nothing.

Self-build Housing: South-west

7. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote self-build housing projects in the south-west. [903419]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): The Government are promoting a step change in self-build through the £4.5 billion home-building fund and the 2016 self-build regulations.

Scott Mann: I welcome the Minister to his place. May I just ask him what discussions he has had with the Treasury regarding the continuation of the community housing fund to deliver more local houses for people in Cornwall?
Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The community housing fund was worth £600 million in its first year. In the context of the Budget in November, we announced that it would be continuing for a further three years. That includes capital and revenue funding, and it is part of the Government’s drive to support community groups bringing forward home-build projects.

Looked-after Children

8. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on outcomes for looked-after children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Like the hon. Gentleman, this Government have high ambitions for looked-after children and care leavers. The forthcoming corporate parenting provisions in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 will ensure high-quality care and support for these vulnerable young people.

Alex Cunningham: I welcome the Minister, my near neighbour, to his new post. When will the Government actually provide adequate funds properly to support these special young people?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that, shortly, the Government will announce the winning applicants to their social impact bond to provide funding for local authorities to improve outcomes in education, training and employment for care leavers.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I, too, welcome the Minister to his position, and I know that he will be excellent in his role. Does he agree that no child should be taken into care if family support would allow them to stay safely at home? What will he do to provide more support to struggling families to prevent children from being taken into care?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for her warm words and wholeheartedly agree that, where possible, children are of course looked after best by their own families. That is why the troubled families programme, in which we are investing £1 billion through to 2020, is working with those families to reduce the need for children to go into care. I am delighted to tell her that the results in December show a decrease in the number of children in need in that programme.

14. [903427] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I remind the Minister that, whether we are talking about children in care or the elderly in care, the real question that he must answer is what has happened to the fabric of social support and care, which has been driven down by local authority cuts over the past few years?

Rishi Sunak: This Government are ensuring that local authorities have the resources they need to provide important local services: £200 billion over these five years; a real-terms funding increase over these two years; and £2 billion announced in the last Budget specifically for social care.

Local Government Finance

9. Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the local government finance settlement on the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities.

19. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the local government finance settlement on the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Our fair and sustainable financial settlement gives local authorities the ability to protect important local services. It marks the third of a four-year deal, providing funding certainty to local government and a real-terms increase in available resources to the sector.

Karen Lee: How does the Minister intend to ensure that, under the fairer funding review, individual local authorities receive an adequate level of funding that is not only fair, but sustainable, given that the Government’s intention to reset the business rates baseline from 2020-21 may result in all the individual growth that has been built up since the start of the business retention scheme being taken away? Can the Minister provide any assurances that this growth will be protected?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently encourage colleagues in preparing their questions to recognise the merits of the blue pencil? Usually something drafted can be shortened.

Rishi Sunak: The Government are piloting 100% business rates retention and have seen extraordinary applications for those pilots, and we are learning from them to design the appropriate system to take over in 2019-20 together with, as the hon. Lady said, a full review of fair funding, so that we can get the allocations right.

Lilian Greenwood: This Government have deliberately targeted their cuts at the most deprived communities. Nottingham City Council has lost a staggering 80% of its funding since 2010. Now the Government’s only answer to the social care crisis is to add another 3% to council tax bills. In Nottingham, that will raise just £3 million, which is way short of the extra £12 million the city needs to meet the costs of caring for more elderly and disabled people. When will the Minister stop dumping the financial burden on to Nottingham’s taxpayers and start funding social care properly and fairly?

Rishi Sunak: I gently point out to the hon. Lady that core spending power per dwelling in the 10% most deprived local authorities is actually 23% higher than that in the least deprived, and indeed in her local authority, it is 11% higher than the national average.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) rose—
Mr Speaker: Can the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) write the brevity textbook?

Mr Hollobone: I welcome the Government’s best value inspection of Northamptonshire County Council. Will the Minister ensure that the transfer of the fire service out of the council to the police and crime commissioner is not delayed by this inspection?

Rishi Sunak: As my hon. Friend knows, the Secretary of State has asked Max Caller to look at the authority, and we await his findings eagerly. It is difficult for me to comment further at this time, as I am sure my hon. Friend appreciates.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new post. Somerset, which is underfunded relative to other local authorities, was disappointed not to be part of the business rates pilot. Will he meet me to discuss the upcoming local government finance round?

Rishi Sunak: As my hon. Friend will know, we had an overwhelming number of applications for the pilot, and I am disappointed for him that Somerset is not a member. He should encourage his local authority to apply again when we rerun the pilot this year. In the meantime, I would be delighted to meet him to discuss fair funding for Somerset.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The local government finance settlement descended into a complete and utter shambles last week. The figures sent to local authorities were wrong. Back in March 2017, the National Audit Office was concerned that there was not the capacity within the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Valuation Office Agency to handle the Secretary of State’s plans. This new error will certainly not engender confidence in the Department. What steps are being taken to ensure that the error is not repeated?

Rishi Sunak: The Valuation Office Agency made a mistake with the initial calculations. That was corrected and the Department has moved swiftly to provide accurate information to local authorities. I gently point out that overall the error meant that local authorities will receive an increase in the business rates retention forecast for this year.

Yvonne Fovargue: The last time we were able to question the Secretary of State, we asked how he planned to address the unsustainable and insufficient funding for children’s services and what he would do about the £2 billion funding gap. He told us to wait and see what happened in the local government finance settlement. Well, we waited and looked at his proposal, but there is no new money for these vital services. Was that another error, and will it be corrected in future?

Rishi Sunak: As I have already mentioned, local authorities will receive a real-terms increase in their aggregate funding this year and next. The Government have also invested £200 million in a social care innovation programme to look at ways to improve the delivery of children’s social services.

Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission

10. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission takes account of the needs of south Essex.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Under Sir John Armitt’s leadership, the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission is engaging all interested parties, including on last Friday’s visit to Southend airport, which I understand my hon. Friend attended. The commission is developing an ambitious vision for south Essex, north Kent and east London, and will publish its final report this spring.

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. London Southend airport, as we like to refer to it, will have a major impact on the commission. What role does he see London Southend airport playing in boosting growth and productivity across the whole of south Essex?

Jake Berry: I, too, like to refer to it as London Southend airport, which I think is its correct name. It is a real success story and has great potential for growth—it has an ambitious 2 million passenger target this year. Stobart Group has already invested £162 million in a new terminal. That puts London Southend airport at the heart of the Thames estuary commission’s growth plans.

Carillion

12. Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with local authorities on local government contingency arrangements as a result of Carillion entering liquidation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We have been working in close partnership with the Local Government Association, which contacted affected local authorities before Christmas about the financial difficulties Carillion was facing to ensure that they have appropriate contingency plans in place. We will continue to work with the LGA to ensure that there is no, or minimal, disruption to public service.

Ged Killen: Following revelations in the Sunday Herald that Keith Cochrane, the interim CEO of Carillion, sits on the Government’s network of non-executive directors, can the Minister advise on whether he or anyone from his Department has taken advice from or held meetings with Keith Cochrane?

Jake Berry: I am not aware of any meetings taking place or advice being given. However, I will check the records when I return to the Department and write to the hon. Gentleman if there have been such meetings.

Homes for Social Rent

15. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of new homes for social rent since 2010.

[903428]
The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): We have delivered 357,000 affordable homes since 2010—more than in the preceding seven years. That includes 257,000 for rent and 128,000 for social rent.

Afzal Khan: Will the Secretary of State adopt Labour’s plans to lift the borrowing cap on councils’ housing revenue accounts, which could alone build 80,000 council homes, according to the Local Government Association?

Dominic Raab: We are not going to take on Labour’s plans in this area or any other, because frankly they are not sustainable. We are going to increase the affordable homes budget to £9 billion up to 2021. We are restless to deliver more affordable homes, including for social rent. The hon. Gentleman may like to know that in the past year there were 1,100 new housing starts in Manchester, and we are talking to the Mayor of Manchester about the housing deal, which will include a social housing component.

Helen Hayes: Whichever way Ministers try to present the figures, the number of genuinely affordable social homes built with public sector grants on their watch is pitiful. If the Minister will not accept Labour’s policy, will he accept the recommendation of the Treasury Committee by lifting the borrowing cap on councils’ housing revenue accounts completely to enable councils to build desperately needed council homes—or will he confirm that only a Labour Government will take the action that we need on council housing?

Dominic Raab: The record speaks for itself. We have delivered 357,000 more affordable homes since 2010—more than in the preceding seven years under the previous Labour Government. We are raising the cap; we did that in the last Budget. We are also creating a stable financial envelope for local authorities and housing associations with long-term rent deals: the settlement is CPI plus 1%. That is the sustainable way to drive home building in this country.

Surplus Public Land

18. Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on enabling the development of surplus public land for housing.

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Between 2011 and 2015, Government land was sold with the capacity to deliver up to 109,000 new homes.

Mr Prisk: Some Labour councils, particularly in London, own hundreds of acres of surplus land. May I urge the new Minister to challenge those Labour authorities so that we can turn that land into family homes?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the 2015 autumn statement, the Chancellor set out our aim to release enough Government land by 2020 for 160,000 extra homes to be built. The Government are providing local authorities with money to help to facilitate that. I met Nick Walkley, the CEO of Homes England, last week to make sure that we get cracking on this top priority.

Temporary Accommodation

21. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of households in temporary accommodation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Temporary accommodation ensures that no family is left without a roof over their head. Prevention is at the centre of our approach to protect the most vulnerable. We are spending over £1 billion until 2020 to prevent homelessness, as well as implementing the most ambitious legislative reform in decades—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

Kate Green: Why does the Minister think that the number of children in temporary accommodation has risen by 73%, to 120,000, since 2010, according to the Public Accounts Committee, when the number had been falling under Labour?

Mrs Wheeler: I very much regret to have to point out to the hon. Lady that the number of children living in temporary accommodation is lower than at its peak in 2006. In 2011, we changed the law so that councils can place families in decent and affordable private rented homes. This now means that homeless households should not have to wait as long for settled accommodation.

Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial

23. Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle anti-Semitism and holocaust denial.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Anti-Semitism and holocaust denial are completely unacceptable in a civilized society, and this Government have taken a strong lead in tackling both. We have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-Semitism, and we are planning a striking new national memorial beside Parliament.

Iain Stewart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust is as important as ever, given the worrying levels of organised hatred and intimidation both at home and abroad?

Sajid Javid: I agree wholeheartedly, and I am very pleased to praise the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust. I was also pleased to announce in Speaker’s House last week that we are giving £144,000 of support jointly to the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Union of Jewish Students to tackle anti-Semitism, prejudice and intolerance on our university campuses.
Topical Questions

T1. [903438] Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The new year has meant a new name for my Department, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—or MoHoCoLoGo for short—and a fantastic new ministerial team, who will build on the great strides achieved by my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) and for Reading West (Alok Sharma). The name underlines the importance of our commitment to fix the broken housing market, and we will continue to help to build strong communities and to support local government. Something that resonates especially strongly this week is Holocaust Memorial Day, which is an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to rooting out hatred and anti-Semitism wherever it exists.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I thank my right hon. Friend for that upbeat statement. Both Scotland and Wales are totally served by unitary local authorities. How many people in England are served by unitary authorities, and what does he expect the figure to be in five years’ time?

Sajid Javid: First, may I say that it is a privilege to receive a question from my right hon. Friend? This is the first time I have received one from him in Parliament, and it is an opportunity for me to thank him for all the work he has done in government, of which he can be incredibly proud. I can tell him that 60% of English people are served by unitary authorities, and I expect the number to be higher in five years’ time, given the views of many local people about unitary authorities and our commitment to consider unitarisation whenever requested.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is clearly overflowing with excitement, and we are very pleased for him.

T2. [903439] Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Will the Secretary of State assure me that he will set up cross-departmental arrangements with the Department for Transport and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure delivery of the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, as envisaged by the National Infrastructure Commission?

Sajid Javid: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on becoming the champion for the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor? I know he is very determined to do an excellent job, and he will make a great difference. The cross-departmental co-operation he talked about is absolutely essential. It is exactly what we are arranging, and I know he will help with it.

T3. [903440] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Recent statistics published by the Department show that 54,000 households in London are living in temporary accommodation and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, 120,000 children are living in temporary accommodation this winter. Often, the standards are some of the worst, and the accommodation houses some of the most vulnerable. What steps will the Department now take to end the temporary accommodation crisis both in London and in the rest of the country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank the hon. Lady for that question. First, it is a very serious matter, which is why we have put more money into local authorities so that they can look at the quality of the private rented accommodation in which temporary accommodation now takes place. Secondly, on the point about children, we have made it clear that bed and breakfast accommodation should be acceptable for only an incredibly short period where children are concerned, and local authorities know that.

T4. [903441] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Earlier, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), promoted the borderlands growth deal and Moray apparently hopes to finalise a growth deal in the summer, so will someone in this Government tell me what blockers are preventing the UK Government from signing up to the original non-city deal, the Ayrshire growth deal?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, these growth deals are extremely complicated. That is why I have agreed to meet the backers of the Ayrshire growth deal to talk about how, for our part, the UK Government can take an exciting deal forward.

T5. [903444] Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the ability to buy a home at an affordable price is vital to developing and enhancing social mobility and to realising the Government’s goals on aspiration and opportunity? Does he also agree that we must massively increase house building and speed up the process right across the country?

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We delivered 217,000 new homes last year, which is 50% more than the last year of the last Labour Government. We want to get that level up to 300,000. We have planning reform, release of public sector land and targeted funding to achieve that, which is crucial for key workers, the next generation and those on low and middle incomes.

T6. [903446] Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): City of Lincoln Council is aiming to build 500 homes in the next five years to help to tackle its waiting list of more than 1,000 households. If the Government will not consider raising the borrowing cap on local housing revenue accounts, how do they plan to tackle the shortage of truly affordable rented housing?

Dominic Raab: We have, of course, raised the cap by £1 billion. It needs to be done in a responsible way, because we have to consider the amount of debt that has been taken on, but we will keep it under review. That is one aspect of the huge drive towards building the extra homes we need. I have talked about some of those issues, including targeted funding and release of public sector land. We want to make sure that we get up to the annual target of 300,000 as soon as possible.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Regeneration in Cleethorpes will be greatly assisted if the Government can conclude discussions with the local authority about a town growth deal under proposals by the Greater Grimsby project board. When do Ministers expect to reach a conclusion?

Jake Berry: I met members of the board of the Grimsby town growth deal on a recent visit to Cleethorpes and the town of Grimsby. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be as pleased as I am that the growth deal was specifically referenced in the industrial strategy, and I encourage him to contact the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to talk about how it can be taken forward.

Mrs Wheeler: This is a very complex matter. The interesting thing that I find now that I am getting to grips with it as a Minister is the different layers of problems that people have in their chaotic lives. It is very important that different councils have moved on with building new council housing, including my own Conservative South Derbyshire District Council—I declare an interest as my husband was the leader. Different levels are really attacking the issue and it is going to be a pleasure to get my teeth into it.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): The Secretary of State attended the launch of the new all-party parliamentary group on new towns, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). My right hon. Friend will know that the new towns and Milton Keynes were created because they were able to acquire land at a reasonable valuation close to its current use. That is no longer possible, because of the Land Compensation Act 1973. Among his many admirable ambitions for housebuilding in this country, will he agree to look at the Act and the possibility of reforming the valuation of land that is acquired?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with great experience. He made a number of important planning reforms when he was a Minister. I will commit to looking at the issue he raises and point him to some of the work we have already done, including an amendment in the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 which allows the Secretary of State to designate planning zones.

T.9. [903447] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Gateshead Council, of which I am a member, has seen its Government funding cut by 52% since 2010. Fifty per cent. of its budget is spent on vulnerable children and adult social care and demand is rising. With over 90% of our properties in council tax bands A to C, the social care precept does not go near addressing the shortfall. Will the Secretary of State urgently address the shortfall in funding for children and adult social care in Gateshead and elsewhere now, and will he produce a truly fair—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very well meaning but topical questions are supposed to be shorter than substantives. That was just as long.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Gateshead will receive a 1.5% real-terms increase in core spending power this year and, thanks to the steps taken in the spring Budget by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, an additional £40 million to fund adult social care in the forthcoming financial year.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor provided money in the Budget for a national rental deposit scheme. What plans does the Department have to introduce that scheme, and how many families does it believe it will assist?

Dominic Raab: We are certainly looking at that as part of our wider strategy, which I have already described. I am very happy to write to my hon. Friend about its particular impact on his constituency.

T.8. [903445] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I find the level of rough sleeping in Chesterfield and across the country deeply humiliating as an MP and it infuriates and disgusts my constituents. When Ministers walk past people living in sleeping bags, do they believe that it is the halving of councils’ Supporting People budget or the £5 billion cut to housing benefit that is most responsible for this national scar on our society?

Sajid Javid: We have made it an absolute priority in government to help to fight rough sleeping and homelessness. We have committed to halving it by the end of this Parliament and to eliminating it completely by 2027. I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns, but I hope that he agrees that this issue is not a party political football, and we should all work together across the House to deal with the issue.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I am delighted that the new Housing Minister has agreed to work with me to improve tenant safety in respect of carbon monoxide poisoning. Does he agree with the National Landlords Association and Headway, a brain injury charity, that more needs to be done to protect the public at large from death or injury through carbon monoxide poisoning?

Dominic Raab: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the tenacious way he has built the campaign. We will certainly listen to all voices on this issue. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to sit down with him to talk about his private Member’s Bill. We share the aim to make progress on carbon monoxide, but the key areas of his Bill. I look forward to working with him in future.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government work with the libraries taskforce at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to see how Northamptonshire’s public libraries can all be kept open?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Splendid. That exchange should be circulated to all colleagues.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State will have seen the leader of Wakefield Council’s announcement this morning that he now supports a wider Yorkshire deal. That means that 18 of the 20 local authorities across wider Yorkshire support it. Does the Secretary of State agree that in addition to finalising the detail of any Sheffield city region deal, an important conversation now needs to be had with the 18 leaders about a wider Yorkshire deal?

Sajid Javid: The crucial decision about any wider Yorkshire deal, if there ever is one, is in the hands of the local authorities concerned. We will be going ahead with the South Yorkshire deal, but earlier this week, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, we put forward a proposal to allow others, such as Barnsley and Doncaster, to take a different route, if they choose to do so.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): For the coming year, the Secretary of State has enabled councils to increase tax by 3%, compared with just 2% last year, but the cash limit has been retained at £5 when parity would be £7.50. That affects 88 small district councils. Will the Secretary of State consider a change?

Sajid Javid: A number of people have made that representation. I have listened carefully and we will keep the issue under review. As my hon. Friend knows, the draft settlement is just that at the moment, and we are looking at it carefully.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I welcome and congratulate the new members of the team? Ending a private rented sector tenancy is now the leading cause of homelessness. Will the Secretary of State extend the mandatory licensing scheme for landlords in the private sector?

Sajid Javid: Holocaust Memorial Day is a reminder to us all of the horrors of what mankind can do—if what we can do to each other—if no one speaks up. It is incumbent on all parties in this House to face up to anti-Semitism. I noted just a few days ago the Jewish Labour Movement was appealing to the Labour party leadership to throw out people who allegedly practise anti-Semitism. The Labour party talks about combating hate crime, but it has to show people that it really means it.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Too many people moving into brand-new homes on brand-new housing estates struggle with poor or no wi-fi. Will Ministers work with developers to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place when these houses are being built?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to see it and whatever form it takes?
Private Sector Pensions

3.36 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the Government’s plans to stop private sector pension abuse.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): The vast majority of employers do the right thing by their pension schemes, and members can expect to receive the pension benefits they have paid for throughout their working lives. The Pensions Regulator and the Pension Protection Fund were set up in 2004 to provide pension scheme members with a safety net to ensure pension benefits receive some protection when things go wrong—it is a fact that some businesses will fail. The PPF approach has been supported on a cross-party basis since 2004.

To prevent irresponsible employers from off-loading pension liabilities on to the PPF, the regulator was given a range of powers, including the ability to recover significant assets where employers failed to take account of the scheme. There are about 6,000 defined benefit schemes, however, and such cases are very few and far between. It is the responsibility of the regulator to strike a balance between protecting members and PPF levy payers, and minimising any adverse effects on the sustainability of employers and businesses when it comes to the regulation of defined benefit funding.

The regulator does not have the power to stop businesses paying out bonuses to executives or dividends to shareholders, but if it believes that a scheme is not being treated fairly, it will investigate to see whether the use of its powers is appropriate. The Government are clear, however, that where sponsoring employers can meet their pension promises, they should and must do so. That is why we have suggested ways of strengthening the current scheme to enable the regulator to be more proactive. In fact last February we published our Green Paper, “Security and Sustainability in Defined Benefit Pension Schemes”, which included suggested measures that could strengthen the powers of the Pensions Regulator by introducing punitive fines for actions that harm a pension scheme. We also set out powers to enhance the regulator’s ability to demand information to ensure effective governance and spot issues before damage is done.

Our manifesto in June 2017 reaffirmed this intent by proposing to give the regulator the power to impose punitive fines alongside contribution notices so that pension scheme members are fully protected. The details of the fine would be worked through with all the relevant stakeholders, but it would represent a significant strengthening of the deterrent. We also intend to make certain corporate transactions subject to mandatory clearance by the Pensions Regulator, but we must take care to ensure that these measures do not have an adverse effect on legitimate business activity and the wider economy.

I should tell colleagues that we have received 800 responses to the Green Paper, and they are being reviewed by the Department. The White Paper is in progress and will be published in the spring. Effective regulation is dependent on a prompt flow of information between the parties concerned, and on compliance with rules and processes. Following the publication of the White Paper, we will introduce new regulation to ensure that the regulator gets the information it requires to conduct investigations and casework effectively and efficiently. It remains the case that the Government support free markets, enterprise and businesses, but this has to be conducted responsibly.

Debbie Abrahams: Yesterday, the Prime Minister chose to announce via the media, in part in response to the collapse of Carillion, that the Government planned to introduce tough new rules to stop private sector pension abuse. Carillion had 13 defined benefit schemes in the UK, with 28,500 members and a combined pensions deficit of £587 million. Between the end of 2015 and last year’s interim results, the difference between Carillion’s assets and liabilities almost doubled, from £317 million to £587 million. We know that profit warnings started to be issued in the summer of 2017. Given the severity of the financial problems facing Carillion, why did the Government not act then, rather than attempting to close the stable door after the horse had bolted?

We have argued for years that the Government should take better action to protect people’s pensions. The Government had the opportunity to act in 2013 and again in 2015, by supporting Labour’s amendments to pensions governance in legislation. More recently, the Work and Pensions Committee warned the Government of the need for protections and for more powers for the regulator. Although we welcome the Green Paper, the urgency has just not been there. Why did the Minister choose to ignore those warnings?

The Committee made a number of recommendations, including that the Pensions Regulator should have mandatory clearance powers for corporate activities that put pension schemes at risk, and that it should have new powers to impose fines at a level that would genuinely deter such dangerous and irresponsible behaviour. Why did the Government refuse to implement those recommendations at the time? Are the Government now ready to commit to implementing them fully? If the Government had taken action, Carillion’s massive debt accrual might have been arrested.

Given the scale of the liabilities and the concerns for other defined benefit schemes, what does this mean for the adequacy of the Pension Protection Fund? The collapse of Carillion has already led to a rise in pension scammers targeting those with pension pots. What about the defined contribution schemes that are not covered by the Pension Protection Fund? Will the Secretary of State investigate the apparent conflict involved in BlackRock being responsible for those schemes while simultaneously betting against their employer? Finally, can she advise the House what measures will be proposed in the White Paper, and when, exactly, they will be brought to the House?

Ms McVey: As Members on both sides of the House know, the regulator is an independent, arm’s length body. It was set up in 2004 after much discussion about how it should work and how it could best support pensioners when they needed its help. What it never did was to interfere with the running of a business; that was what was decided. We said that we needed to make sure
that we could go further if we had to. That is why we have set about introducing a Green Paper—as I said, we have had 800 consultation responses—looking at where it is best to intervene, to make sure that we get the balance right. We do not want to tip the edge and unnecessarily cause harm to a business.

Profit warnings mean that a company will not get the profit that it expected—no more than that. We have to make sure that the Government do not precipitate anything that could be seen as negative from business. That is why we are looking at all these 800 responses, looking carefully and considering how to protect companies’ employees, protect pensions and move forward in the most conducive and careful manner. The new White Paper will be coming forward later this year.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to the way the British public are reacting to this issue? They are seriously repelled by the notion that executive directors and even ex-directors should carry on drawing large payments at the same time as there is a mounting pension deficit. If this was what capitalism was really like, people would not want it. What are the Government going to do to draw the attention of businesses and executive directors to their governance responsibilities in these situations in the future, although this is nothing like as bad as the Maxwell scandal?

Ms McVey: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. This is about strengthening the corporate governance of organisations. This is about giving power to the boardroom. This is about giving shareholders responsibility. This is about having responsible businesses doing the right thing. Where we can ensure that that happens, and where we can look into investigating what is going wrong—should things be going wrong—it is right that we do. As I said at the beginning, most businesses—the vast majority of businesses, and there are over 6,000 defined benefit schemes—are doing the right thing, but where they are not, it is right that there is fury from the public to make sure that they do the right thing. That is why the Insolvency Service carries out investigations in this regard and gets money back where it can.

Nell Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing it.

That we are talking about private sector pensions again highlights the fundamental need to address the regulation of the pensions industry—something that the SNP has been calling for for years, but that has until now fallen on deaf ears. The BHS pension scheme was in deficit by more than £500 million. Carillion is estimated to be up to £900 million in the red, and there are over 5,000 other private sector defined benefit schemes in deficit, to the tune of £900 billion—a ticking time bomb for savers.

However, the real issue is that, while top executives make bad decisions and are rewarded for it, 11 million people who rely on a final salary pension could still be at risk of having the rug pulled from under their feet and of facing reduced entitlements should cases such as BHS or Carillion continue to be repeated.

The SNP has long called for the establishment of an independent pensions commission to ensure that employees’ savings are protected and that a more progressive approach to fairer savings is considered. Alongside that, will the UK Government make sure that the Pensions Regulator is now given the appropriate authority to step in and protect the interests of savers and pensioners before cases such as those of BHS and Carillion happen again?

Ms McVey: The Pension Protection Fund is there to do just that: to support pensioners. It does step in and support them where necessary. The hon. Gentleman is quite right: where businesses have not worked responsibly, we should be getting involved, and we did that when we saw the conditions with British Home Stores. When happened there is that anti-avoidance enforcement did take place, and £363 million was got back, so we did not have to use the PPF. Also, a prosecution did take place. All these instances have been different, but the hon. Gentleman is quite right: where there has been an abuse of the system, we will carry out an investigation and bring people to account.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What action is my right hon. Friend taking in working with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to look at the conduct of the directors of Carillion in this regard? Specifically, following on from the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), what can be done now to recover any of this money for the people affected?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend. An investigation is going on. Not only is there one that has been initiated by the Business Minister, but the Insolvency Service will also be investigating what went on. If there is any evidence that untoward things have been done, a prosecution will follow. That is what we are about: we want businesses to act responsibly. They employ the majority of people in this country, so it is only right that we support them when they need our support and bring them to account when they are doing things wrong.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Lady back to this Department. The Government, of course, are responsible for the regulatory framework for pensions. Will she respond to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) about defined contribution schemes? Are the Government looking at possible changes to the rules for those, as well as for defined benefit schemes, which the Minister has said the Government are looking at?

Ms McVey: We are not currently considering changing the rules on defined contribution schemes. In that instance a contribution has been made which will be protected and moved to another pension, whereas a pension in a defined benefit scheme is what someone was expecting to receive at the end, and will therefore be protected. They are very different schemes, and different protections and rules apply to them.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that constituents with existing Carillion pensions will receive 100% recovery through the Pension Protection Fund?
Ms McVey: I can indeed state that that is the case, but anyone who is concerned about a pension should call the free hotline. The number is 0800 756 1012. I know that my hon. Friend is a great supporter of employees and businesses in her local area.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State does not seem to have grasped the fact that the decision to carry on paying dividends and to boost the bonuses of the board while running up a pensions deficit was made by the board itself. What will she do to prevent that from happening again?

Ms McVey: I do understand the gravity of what happened, but there is one thing that we never seek to do in the House. In 2004, after much discussion, we asked an independent arm’s length body to look into these matters. When there have been misdemeanours and irresponsible behaviour and things have gone wrong, we announce that investigations are under way, but we are not the investigator. What we do is legislate to ensure that people are brought to account—and if they have done something wrong, my goodness, we need to bring them to account.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): A number of my constituents have been affected by the Carillion situation. What will the Pension Protection Fund do to support those who have pensions through Carillion, and what more will the Government do to ensure that people with private pensions can be confident that investing their savings in a company pension fund is the right thing to do?

Ms McVey: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Pension Protection Fund is there to provide a lifeboat. Those who have retired will receive 100% support, while those who have not will receive 90% support, with a cap. That is what we are here to do: to protect the people who have done the right thing in saving for their future and to look after them in a responsible way, while also ensuring that regulations and processes exist to bring to account those who have done the wrong thing.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): BlackRock was responsible for Carillion workers’ pensions, while simultaneously betting against their employer on the stock market. What measures will the White Paper contain to ensure that such a conflict of interests cannot happen again?

Ms McVey: We received 800 responses to the Green Paper. We want to learn from the people who know most about these matters what they think is the best way to tackle the problem, because obviously we do not want such things to happen again.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What impact would renationalisation below the market have on pension funds?

Ms McVey: It would be an absolute disaster.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): My constituent Michael Evans, a retired employee of Barclays, has raised serious concerns about the future of its pension fund. Given the £7 billion shortfall, is Barclays moving its liability to its investment branch in the hope that it can avoid having to cover the deficit?

Ms McVey: People who are concerned about their pensions should take advice from the Pensions Advisory Service. That is the best thing they can do. Obviously, the regulator will look into any incidents that it thinks need to be investigated.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to do more to protect the pensions of private sector workers. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is absolutely necessary to have private sector providers of public services, and that the Government should continue to support them?

Ms McVey: Of course it is important that we have the private sector delivering an array of services, because as the world gets more complicated and more specific, we need people with specific skills to go forward and do that. That is the best way to have a well-functioning country.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The creation of the British Steel pension scheme mark 2 created fertile territory for unscrupulous pension advisers to swoop in like vultures and exploit vulnerable people. What lessons have been learned from the British Steel experience, and what will the Secretary of State do to ensure that we do not see the whole sorry tale of Carillion leading once again to the privatisation of profit and the socialisation of risk?

Ms McVey: What we have learned from that is that straight away, eight companies were banned from doing what they had done in any kind of pension scam. We are also going to bring together all the advice under a single body so that people are well aware of what they can and should be doing and whether they have done the right checks to ensure that they are dealing with a positive organisation for their pension.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Workers have been encouraged to take part in buying their pensions, and they need to have confidence in their scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) mentioned the fact that fat cats are seen to bear no risk in this process. What more can we do to achieve greater transparency in how private pensions work within companies? What can we do to enable people to get the best possible information to ensure that they are not being sold short while other people seem to float high above all the risk?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend raises a key point. There does need to be transparency. A pension is something that people invest in all their lives and hope to recoup when they retire, so transparency is key. Our White Paper will seek to determine best practice and, in parallel, to set out stronger corporate governance within pensions organisations.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I should like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting an urgent question on this important issue. I should also like to welcome the Secretary of State back to the Front Bench. Is she
aware that, under the current rules, pension obligations are unsecured, meaning that insolvent companies fund their pension schemes only when they have compensated their other, supposedly more important, secured creditors? If so, has her Department considered carrying out a review of those rules so that employees with private pensions can be given a justifiably higher priority in future?

Ms McVey: That is key—where do they fit in the line of creditors? Are people being given the correct protection for their pensions? That is why the Pension Protection Fund was brought in. Again, this is something that needs to be brought forward under the governance rules for pensions.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): The whole subject of pensions is very complex. In the context of providing advice for people who are looking for a pension, or who already have one, what action are the Government taking to ensure the better delivery of financial and debt advice?

Ms McVey: The Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, which we will be debating straight after this urgent question, deals with the advice and support that people can get in order to understand what options are on the table. That represents a positive move by this Conservative Government to allow people to control and understand their finances, because they need to know where to put their money and be assured that it will come back to them in a good pension.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and in the light of Carillion’s board members rewarding themselves with bonuses while allowing the pension deficit to grow, does the Secretary of State agree that she needs additional powers to bring such executives to account for their corporate greed and irresponsible behaviour?

Ms McVey: The situation is being assessed at the moment, and what happened is being investigated. The regulator already has the power to look into anti-avoidance measures and enforcement, which could be utilised to do precisely what the hon. Lady seeks. Lady talks about. Strengthening the regulator’s hand was in our manifesto, and we will be bringing that forward in the White Paper.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Hon. Members are understandably focusing on the directors of Carillion but, having been through the BHS investigation conducted by this House, I encourage my right hon. Friend to look closely at the expertise, advice and powers available to pension trustees.

Ms McVey: I will indeed do that. My hon. Friend knows a lot about such matters. We will take advice such as that and the 800 responses to the Green Paper into account when drawing up our solution.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Over the past 30 years, successive Governments have made promises from time to time about strengthening the rules around pension schemes, but nothing happens.

The Carillion situation will have a major impact on the west midlands supply chain. When are we going to get tough on directors and get some tough legislation? The White Paper will not be worth the paper it is written on unless the Government do something positive.

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman is right that we are looking for ways to bring to account those who have not acted scrupulously. The regulator has taken measures, and they have proved successful. For example, BHS was prosecuted and we recouped £363 million. We have to adapt to situations as they arise and try to pre-empt other things, because none of the cases that have been mentioned today resulted from the same action. The hon. Gentleman is right that we have to ensure that unscrupulous businesspeople are brought to account, because we need good private business and good entrepreneurs.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I applaud the Prime Minister’s call for tougher new rules for executives who put workers’ pensions at risk. My constituents want to be confident that private pensions are secure and sustainable. After all, we have encouraged them to take them out. To put my constituents’ minds at rest soon, will my right hon. Friend please give an assurance that the Government are taking matters seriously?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. The people watching at home who have a pension or are thinking about investing in one want to know that they are safe. They also want to know what the Government are doing to ensure that they will be safe going forward. That is exactly what we in intend to do with the White Paper by reinforcing corporate governance measures and making them tougher.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As Carillion owes millions of pounds to subcontractors such as small plumbing companies, it is inevitable that there will be other insolvencies. If a plumbing company goes under, its nominal liabilities transfer to fellow employers through a multi-employer pension scheme. That is clearly unfair, but it happens because the PPF refuses to act as guarantor of last resort for multi-employer schemes. When will the Government end that anomaly? If they will not, will they support my ten-minute rule Bill that would sort out the situation?

Ms McVey: I am aware that that was debated with the Pensions Minister 10 days ago, and he is looking specifically at the points the hon. Gentleman raised then. The hon. Gentleman is fighting a good cause, and I am sure that we will be able to come up with a solution.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The best form of pension protection that anyone can have is a sustainable employer. While the Pensions Regulator has wide-ranging powers, they are rarely used and it is often a bit toothless. Is the Secretary of State satisfied that any new powers, welcome though they may be, will be backed by proper resources?

Ms McVey: When we bring forward new powers, it is vital that they are workable, that they have a strong, secure footing and that they are affordable. We are looking at that as we review how to introduce stronger legislation.
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As part of the Tata Steel-Thyssenkrupp merger, workers faced the slashing of their pension funds if they joined the PPF or if they joined a new scheme with reduced benefits. Others opted for personal plans, leading to a feeding frenzy of mis-selling. Does the Secretary of State think the steelworkers of Wales were treated fairly, considering that the new company’s annual sales are estimated at £15 billion?

Ms McVey: We have to make sure that we look after people with pensions. We also have to ensure that we keep companies going as a viable concern. At the time, this was deemed to be the best option for the future. We always have to make sure it is the best solution at the time, and we have to secure future legislation to ensure that we have better regulation and better law in place.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Even this weekend I heard and saw some commentators, who really should know better, say things such as that Carillion pensioners risk losing their pensions. Can the Secretary of State confirm what percentage of their anticipated pension many Carillion pensioners can now expect to get through the PPF?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Those who are in receipt of a pension will receive 100%, and those who receive a pension in the future will get 90%, subject to a cap. People who are concerned about their pension should rest assured, and they can always go to our free helpline.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her new position and thank her for the reassurances she has given the House this afternoon. GKN employs 340 people in Telford and is currently the subject of a proposed hostile takeover. Will she confirm that the safety of pensions at GKN will be a priority for her Department if the takeover proceeds?

Ms McVey: That is a matter for the Pensions Regulator, but obviously we have the Pension Protection Fund in place, and we will be looking to ensure that pensioners are safe and protected.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How is it that some of these private sector pension fund deficits are allowed to get so large before any action is taken?

Ms McVey: We allow businesses to run themselves without interference from Government, and therefore we do not know the complete structure of their profit and loss, and of their assets and liabilities. Should anyone wish to raise a concern about their business, they are free to do so with the regulator. With our combined corporate governance review and new legislation, we will make sure that pensions are on as firm a footing as possible. We will make sure that such abuses do not happen.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that the recent prosecution of Dominic Chappell by the Pensions Regulator should put directors who take decisions that might endanger their employees’ pensions on notice of the liabilities they could face. But will she reassure me that the role and powers of the Pensions Regulator, particularly how much further we can go in attaching personal liability to those responsible for disastrous decisions, will be part of the White Paper?

Ms McVey: I reassure my hon. Friend that that is exactly what we will be doing. We are looking at how we empower the Pensions Regulator and, if need be, how we allow it to levy fines. It has to be a balanced response, not a knee-jerk response, and we have to make sure it works for both pensioners and businesses.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): When a major UK business collapses it is incredibly important that both existing and future pensioners are given reassurances about their situation. In the case of BHS, this House elected to constitute a joint Select Committee inquiry to consider aspects of both the pensions and the business. Does she agree that a joint Select Committee inquiry looking into both the pensions and business aspects of the collapse of Carillion would be welcome?

Secondly, in the worst-case scenario, existing pensioners will get 100% of what is due to them through the Pension Protection Fund, and future pensioners will get 90%. The PPF, with assets of some £29 billion, is extremely well funded and capable of looking after the worst-case scenario.

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend, who has a lot of experience in these matters, is right in saying that the Pension Protection Fund is robust. It has a lot of resources, so people are safe and will be protected. That is what they need to know now. The Government have very clearly, from the moment this happened, set out the support for pensioners, so that they knew that their pensions were safe and they could go to work knowing that they were being looked after. He is quite right: we have to make sure that we are taking the right approach going forward.
Points of Order

4.11 pm

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Friday, the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor came to my constituency and attended a meeting in Redbridge town hall. I first knew about this today, from the website of the Ilford Recorder, to which the Secretary of State has given an extensive interview talking about policing, crime, youth crime and other issues relating to my borough and my constituency. He did not have the courtesy to inform me—nor did he inform the leader of the council, Councillor Jas Athwal, or anybody else in Redbridge, except a few selected councillors—that he was coming to my constituency.

I have informed the Member today, through the answering machine in his House of Commons office, of this point of order. I tried five numbers at the Ministry of Justice, but all were unobtainable, including the public number given to me by the House of Commons Library. At least I had the courtesy to inform him that I was raising this point of order, but, Mr Speaker, I seek your advice. Given that Ministers will be quite active in coming to constituencies in the coming months, can we have it made clear that they should at least inform the Members for the constituencies that they are going to visit?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise that point of order. Moreover, the House has just learned from his detailed description of the prodigious efforts he made to contact the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, even if ultimately they were to no avail. I thank him, as I say, for giving me notice of the point of order.

As I have said on many occasions, colleagues, it is a strong convention, albeit not a rule, that a Member should give reasonable notice to a Member whose constituency he or she is intending to visit in a public capacity of the fact of that prospective visit. Apart from anything else, I regard this as a matter of courtesy.

I would say on this occasion that I am surprised to learn of this development, because I know the Secretary of State. Ordinarily, he would be regarded, I think, as one of the most courteous Members of the House. I do regard this as a lapse. It is regrettable and I hope that it will not happen again. We ought to treat each other with courtesy, which means giving some advance notice, as I have said.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance as to whether you have received notification from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that she will make an oral statement on personal independence payment. As you may be aware, late on Friday afternoon, the Government put out a written statement announcing that they would not appeal the High Court judgment of 23 December 2017 that in effect reversed the emergency PIP regulations that they introduced early last year.

As I am sure you recall, Mr Speaker, those regulations were brought in without a vote of the House as a negative statutory instrument despite two urgent questions, an emergency debate and widespread concern about their impact. I would be grateful for your guidance on how Members might have the opportunity to question Ministers in detail on this vital policy change, which will affect more than 150,000 people—primarily those with mental health conditions.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. In short, I have received no notification from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of an intention to make a statement on that matter. As the hon. Lady will know, the Secretary of State is in her place; she is welcome to come to the Dispatch Box and respond if she wishes, but she is under no obligation to do so.

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey)** indicated dissent.

**Mr Speaker:** She does not wish to do so at this time. The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) should table questions and see where she gets. If she and her colleagues judge that they wish to seek a debate on the matter, it is open to them to do so. For now, she has aired her concern and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.

---

**Points of Order**

4.11 pm

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Friday, the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor came to my constituency and attended a meeting in Redbridge town hall. I first knew about this today, from the website of the Ilford Recorder, to which the Secretary of State has given an extensive interview talking about policing, crime, youth crime and other issues relating to my borough and my constituency. He did not have the courtesy to inform me—nor did he inform the leader of the council, Councillor Jas Athwal, or anybody else in Redbridge, except a few selected councillors—that he was coming to my constituency.

I have informed the Member today, through the answering machine in his House of Commons office, of this point of order. I tried five numbers at the Ministry of Justice, but all were unobtainable, including the public number given to me by the House of Commons Library. At least I had the courtesy to inform him that I was raising this point of order, but, Mr Speaker, I seek your advice. Given that Ministers will be quite active in coming to constituencies in the coming months, can we have it made clear that they should at least inform the Members for the constituencies that they are going to visit?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise that point of order. Moreover, the House has just learned from his detailed description of the prodigious efforts he made to contact the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, even if ultimately they were to no avail. I thank him, as I say, for giving me notice of the point of order.

As I have said on many occasions, colleagues, it is a strong convention, albeit not a rule, that a Member should give reasonable notice to a Member whose constituency he or she is intending to visit in a public capacity of the fact of that prospective visit. Apart from anything else, I regard this as a matter of courtesy.

I would say on this occasion that I am surprised to learn of this development, because I know the Secretary of State. Ordinarily, he would be regarded, I think, as one of the most courteous Members of the House. I do regard this as a lapse. It is regrettable and I hope that it will not happen again. We ought to treat each other with courtesy, which means giving some advance notice, as I have said.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance as to whether you have received notification from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that she will make an oral statement on personal independence payment. As you may be aware, late on Friday afternoon, the Government put out a written statement announcing that they would not appeal the High Court judgment of 23 December 2017 that in effect reversed the emergency PIP regulations that they introduced early last year.

As I am sure you recall, Mr Speaker, those regulations were brought in without a vote of the House as a negative statutory instrument despite two urgent questions, an emergency debate and widespread concern about their impact. I would be grateful for your guidance on how Members might have the opportunity to question Ministers in detail on this vital policy change, which will affect more than 150,000 people—primarily those with mental health conditions.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. In short, I have received no notification from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of an intention to make a statement on that matter. As the hon. Lady will know, the Secretary of State is in her place; she is welcome to come to the Dispatch Box and respond if she wishes, but she is under no obligation to do so.

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey)** indicated dissent.

**Mr Speaker:** She does not wish to do so at this time. The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) should table questions and see where she gets. If she and her colleagues judge that they wish to seek a debate on the matter, it is open to them to do so. For now, she has aired her concern and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill
[Lords]


Second Reading

4.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill will reform the current financial guidance service landscape to improve outcomes for people in their everyday lives. It will bring about two changes. First, it will restructure the financial guidance landscape for members of the public by creating a new single financial guidance body and providing funding to the devolved authorities for locally commissioned debt advice. Secondly, it will move the regulation of claims management services from the Ministry of Justice to the Financial Conduct Authority. Both measures will benefit members of the public and provide a sustainable legislative framework for public financial guidance and the future regulation of claims management companies.

Ensuring that people, especially those who are struggling, are easily able to access free and impartial financial guidance to help them to make more effective financial decisions and to improve their confidence in dealing with financial service providers is an important step towards improving people’s financial capability. In addition, ensuring that people are able to access high-quality claims management services speaks to the Government’s commitment to ensuring that action is taken when markets work against consumer interests.

The provisions in part 1 of the Bill follow three consultations, conducted by the previous Conservative Government, on the provision of pensions and money management and the provision of advice on debt management. In particular, the consultations examined the demand for such services, how their provision should be structured and how to make that provision more effective for consumers. The final consultation revealed a broad consensus for a single body for financial guidance. As a result, the Bill will bring together the important work done by the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise to create a single financial guidance body. The relevant measures have received strong support from industry, stakeholders, charities and consumer groups.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): It is vital that we all work across party lines on financial guidance. I encourage the Secretary of State to place on the new financial guidance body a duty to promote financial resilience. Every year in Britain, 2 million people have unforeseen sickness absence. They cannot cope as their income suddenly falls. Eight out of 10 people in this country have very little savings, or none at all. It would be a real step forward to have a body that promotes financial resilience.

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Once the new body is set up, it will be able to see what is needed in the public arena and shape and craft what it does. That is important, as is debt advice for vulnerable people, who need to be able to plan a path for their future.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The fact that household debt in this country now stands at £1.9 trillion shows just how important it is to give people knowledge and understanding about the management of their finances. I welcome the Bill. Will the Secretary of State assure us that it will help constituents such as mine in Taunton Deane, who currently have to go to a plethora of bodies to get advice, to make the decisions that we hope will prevent them from getting into debt?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend raises a very good point about how to help those who are most vulnerable—how to help them to get out of debt. Debts are at high levels, but they are lower than they were in the first quarter of 2010. The latest figures, for the third quarter of 2017, showed that they had gone down, but they are still high, and we need to help people understand their finances. Understanding really is key to this—they need to understand what is going out, what is coming in and how to get life on a firmer footing, so that they can go forward with confidence.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) rose—

Ms McVey: If I can make a bit progress, I will take some more interventions.

Old Mutual Wealth has noted that consolidating the Money Advice Service, the Pension Advisory Service and Pension Wise into a single financial guidance body presents an opportunity materially to improve the quality and reach of Government-led primarily industry-funded services to encourage consumer engagement. Accordingly, the new body will ensure that people have access to the information and guidance needed to make the necessary and effective financial decisions that we all have to make throughout our lives. This information, guidance and, in respect of debt, advice will be not only independent and impartial, but free at the point of use, making it accessible to all those who need it. By merging those services into a single body, we will remove duplication of services, increase the efficiency of the service and ensure that those who require information, financial guidance and debt advice know exactly where to find it.

A single body also gives us the opportunity to provide a more seamless customer journey, doing the joining up behind the scenes. Importantly, it provides a hook back into the customer for follow-up support. The Government are concerned about low levels of financial capability in the UK. We recognise that not enough people know how to manage their money effectively, which is why we are taking decisive action through the Bill.

Steve McCabe: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. As she seems to be acknowledging, the evidence suggests that too many people do not have sufficient knowledge to make the best choices about their pensions. On that basis, does she agree that it is important that the new body concentrates on trying to provide as much face-to-face active support and guidance as possible, and does not simply rely on websites, which are a much more passive form of assistance?
Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. Different people glean information through different channels, so a website works for some and telephones work for others, and there will be a need for face-to-face advice. At the moment, that is being offered through the citizens advice bureaux. Therefore, he is right in saying that face-to-face advice is important, too.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One big problem with information for ordinary people is that it is complex. Will right hon. Lady give us an assurance that any information or advice that is being given is in simple language that people can understand? That is always the big difficulty with lots of forms—people just do not understand them.

Ms McVey: Again, a valid point—the advice has to be impartial, free and in a language that people understand. Sometimes people might not feel confident to say that they do not understand the terminology, because they think that there is a presumed knowledge that might not be there. I concur with what the hon. Gentleman says.

The new body will have a number of statutory objectives: to improve the ability of people to make informed financial decisions; to support the provision of information, money and pensions guidance and debt services in areas where it is specifically lacking; to ensure that information, guidance and debt advice is clear, cost-effective and not duplicated elsewhere; to ensure that information, guidance and debt advice is available to those most in need, particularly people in vulnerable circumstances; and to work closely with the devolved authorities.

Gareth Thomas: Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) about the rise in household debt, does the Secretary of State accept that there is a particular problem with household debt generated by high-cost credit lenders, such as BrightHouse? Under clause 10, the Financial Conduct Authority can levy to cover the costs of the new single financial guidance body. Can she reassure me that high-cost credit companies such as BrightHouse will be covered by such a levy, and will she tell the House what this body will do to encourage the take-up and awareness of the products offered by credit unions—a far lower cost of debt provision?

Ms McVey: First, debt is not rising. It has actually fallen over the past eight years, but it is still too high. This new body will offer guidance and advice, so that people understand what loans they are taking out and, fundamentally, what paying them back will mean for them. Secondly, we are today putting in place the legislative framework to set up the body, but it will determine the key things it wants to pursue. I am convinced that it will listen to the advice that the hon. Gentleman and others put forward.

The new body will also provide advice on a breathing space scheme, providing additional support to the Government’s policy development. The scheme will allow an individual in problem debt to apply for a period of protection from further fees, charges and enforcement action, alongside establishing a statutory debt management plan. One of the new body’s key functions will be to support over-indebted consumers, ensuring the provision of high-quality debt advice that is free at the point of use. Last year, the Money Advice Service spent £49 million to fund 440,000 debt advice sessions. We want the new body to build on that good work.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Further to the point that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) made about financial resilience, is the Secretary of State aware that household debt as a proportion of household income rose from 93% to a peak of 157% in 2008, under the previous Government? Does not that demonstrate that these kinds of measures are essential in helping people to make sensible choices about their finances?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Household debt rocketed under the previous Labour Government, and we are now ensuring that it comes down, because it is still too high. I particularly appreciate that the Bill has cross-party support, because we all know that we need to help people who are in debt.

As a result of a range of broader reforms and initiatives, such as automatic enrolment, which has increased the number of people saving into pension schemes and the pension freedoms that allow anyone aged 55 and over to take their whole pension as a lump sum without paying tax on the first 25%, the number of people looking for high-quality, impartial financial guidance continues to rise. We look forward to the new body meeting those challenges, building on the existing good work of the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Has the Minister considered whether the breathing space will apply to public as well as private sector debts, because many people find that they are pursued more vigorously by those creditors?

Ms McVey: While looking at this respite, we are having a call for evidence to determine how best to proceed, and no doubt the hon. Lady’s point will be raised.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms McVey: I will make a little progress before taking any more interventions, because otherwise I will never get through this, and I need to.

The second part of the Bill makes provision to strengthen the regulation of claims management companies. As many hon. Members will be aware, there is evidence of malpractice in the claims management sector in the form of disproportionate fees, nuisance calls, poor service, and the encouragement of fraudulent claims.

Following an independent review of claims management regulation led by Carol Brady, the Government announced in the 2016 Budget their commitment to clamping down on malpractice in the sector. Part 2 delivers this commitment in two key ways. First, it transfers regulatory responsibility for claims management regulation from the Claims Management Regulator, a unit based in the Ministry of Justice, to the Financial Conduct Authority. Secondly, it introduces new measures to ensure that consumers are protected from being charged excessive fees. Those measures include a duty on the Financial Conduct Authority to make rules restricting fees charged for
services provided in relation to financial services and products such as payment protection insurance claims, and a power for the FCA to introduce caps in other claims sectors should the need arise.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It is great to see you back in your rightful place, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I take the Secretary of State back to the first part of the Bill and the devolved functions in terms of debt advice? How will they be funded? Will it be based on a percentage share—a population share—of expenditure in England? Will it be based on Welsh need, or, as I read the Bill, will the Welsh Government send the Treasury a bill for its functions and then that will be levied by the FCA?

Ms McVey: I reiterate what the hon. Gentleman said by welcoming you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the Chair.

The money will be collected. At the moment, what is spent and how it is spent is down to the new body being formulated. However, it will be done by Government grants and then money will be taken back—financial bodies will be paying in. Obviously, going forward, where there is most need is where most money will be going. That is how it will be viewed.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I very much welcome part 2, which does improve protections. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Justice Committee looked at this issue in relation to changes to the small claims limit in personal injuries matters? Will she bear in mind the very strong evidence suggesting that, because the likely increase in the small claims limit will mean more litigants in personal injuries cases, the current cap in relation to payment protection insurance should be extended to personal injuries cases in order to extend consumer protection? Will she consider a “fit and proper person” test in relation to claims management companies operating in this area?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend always provides wise words. I can assure him that those matters will be taken into consideration.

This is not to say that claims management companies should be regulated out of existence. The Government believe that these firms provide a valuable service to consumers who may be less likely or unable to bring claims themselves. A well-functioning CMC market can also benefit the public interest by acting as a check and balance on business conduct. The measures therefore aim to strengthen claims management regulation in the round in order to enhance both consumer protection and professionalism in the sector.

The Bill ensures that those who use claims management services to make claims in relation to PPI are protected in the interim period before the FCA exercises its duty to introduce a fee cap. The Bill does this through the provision of an interim fee cap on PPI claims management services during the period between Royal Assent and implementation of the FCA cap. The Bill will cap these fees at 20% of the final compensation amount. The Association of British Insurers welcomed the claims management regulation measures, stating:

“Confirmation of tougher regulation of claims management companies cannot come soon enough for people who are plagued by unsolicited calls and texts.”

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): One thing that the Bill was silent on, until it was amended by the Opposition in the other place, is cold calling. In the seven years since the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, the Opposition have been pressing to have cold calling and spam texts outlawed. Is the Secretary of State going to say anything about that? Does she agree that there is no defence for having this blight on the lives of almost everyone in this country, and that it should not just be regulated but banned?

Ms McVey: There will be a ban on pension cold calling, and we will work through the detail of how that will work best for consumers at home.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: If I may, I will continue a little bit further and then I will take another question.

I will reflect on the passage of the Bill through the Lords. There was overwhelming support in the other place for the measures originally contained in the Bill. The amendments in the other place sought to include a Government manifesto commitment—a debt respite scheme—because noble Lords were concerned about legislative space. Some amendments made explicit in the Bill what was always implicit in policy, including making it clear that the single financial guidance body’s services are free at the point of use, and ensuring that the information, advice and guidance are impartial.

Other changes were more substantial, but none the less welcome. These ranged from the inclusion of a clause making it a criminal offence to impersonate the body to safeguarding clauses for its wind-up and requiring the FCA to create rules on signposting individuals to the body. Further additions include an interim fee cap for PPI claimants, which will ensure that CMCs charge fair and proportionate fees in relation to financial services claims during the interim period between Royal Assent and the introduction of the FCA’s fee cap, and making provision for the establishment of a debt respite scheme, which I will expand on shortly.

Patricia Gibson: Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the UK Government’s intentions with regard to adopting the provisions in my ten-minute rule Bill to do with director-level responsibility for unsolicited marketing communications? The Government have on two occasions set themselves a deadline to adopt this legislation, and on two occasions the deadline has passed. I hear what the Secretary of State has said about the provisions in this Bill, but is she concerned, like me, that it will be confined to protecting consumers with regard to pensions, not in a whole host of areas right across the marketplace?

Ms McVey: We are of course looking at pensions today, but other rules, regulations and laws are in place to protect people from unsolicited, unwanted cold calls and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is looking at how to strengthen them further. I now want to address some of these issues.

Several hon. Members rose—
Ms McVey: I will briefly give way but I will then continue with my speech.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I listened very closely to what the Secretary of State said about the breathing space, which is a really welcome period to help individuals—she mentioned individuals—to sort out their debts without getting into more problems. Will she confirm that that also covers households and families so that it helps the whole family, not just the individual?

Ms McVey: When people call seeking advice and support, they may be doing so for themselves or for the household—for example, they may need respite for all the family—and if so, they will invariably be looking for help not just for themselves, but for their family in its entirety.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new position? As the former Minister with responsibility for telecoms, I was involved in trying to stamp down on cold calling. It may not be necessary to ban cold calling entirely, but I certainly welcome the fact that the Bill has been amended to take account of the knock-on effects of claims management companies on cold calling. I hope that the Secretary of State will comment on the need to make it explicit that the new regulator must consult Ofcom on some of these issues. Ofcom is the body charged with cracking down on cold calling. We often forget that when we introduce measures that are consumer-friendly—rightly, to allow people to have redress—that can, unfortunately, inspire some of the less scrupulous to up their game in terms of cold calling.

Ms McVey: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. No one knows more about this subject than him, and I am glad he has put that on the record. These are all things that we need to consult on to make sure that we get the new regulation right.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): On the question of cold calling raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), the cold calling provisions appear in clause 4 in part 1 of the Bill. Could the Secretary of State clarify whether those powers to prohibit cold calling will apply not just to financial guidance but to claims management companies, which are the topic of part 2? I hope that the answer is yes.

Ms McVey: That is our intention and that is what we will do, but those finer points will be worked out by the body as it works responsibly on behalf of UK citizens.

I want now to address issues that I know will be of interest to hon. Members. The Government have been clear that we will not stand for unlawful, persistent cold calling made by companies in the claims management sector. Cold calling is already illegal under certain circumstances. Under the privacy and electronic communication regulations, we have forced companies to display their numbers when they call, made it easier to take action against those involved in making the calls, and strengthened the powers of the Information Commissioner’s Office to impose fines.

That being said, a number of companies continue to act disreputably, so it is only right that the Government continue to take steps to further regulate the sector. That is why the Government committed in the other place to introduce measures to tackle those issues. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is currently working through the details of an amendment to prohibit CMCs from making live, unsolicited calls unless the receiver has given prior consent. That step, combined with the Government’s previous actions in this area, should act as a warning to those acting unlawfully that we will not rest until the problem has truly been eradicated.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): May I welcome the findings of the report of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions exploring how to protect pensions from scammers. We remain committed to protecting savers from pension scams. We have already announced that we are banning pension cold calling, tightening HMRC’s rule to stop pension scammers and fraudulent schemes, and preventing the transfer of money from occupational pension schemes into fraudulent ones.

The Government are currently reviewing the alternative proposals for banning cold calling under the Bill. We have also listened to concerns about the risks of not receiving sufficient guidance or advice prior to taking advantage of the pensions freedoms, and we are currently considering the amendments recommended to ensure that members of the public are aware of the importance of receiving guidance.

Hon. Members will also be interested in the addition of the provision for a debt respite scheme, which includes a breathing space period and a statutory debt repayment plan. We understand the valuable additional support that the scheme could provide for thousands of vulnerable individuals and want to implement a breathing space scheme as quickly as possible.

The Government are pressing on with policy development. We have already set out a firm timetable for consultation and are continuing to work closely with a wide range of stakeholders. The call for evidence on breathing space was published in October last year and has now closed. After responding to that call for evidence, we will consult on a single policy proposal. The Bill gives us an enabling power to lay regulation to establish the scheme after receiving advice from the single financial guidance body on the design and certain aspects of the scheme. It is important that we take time to get this right. The scheme will achieve its intended benefits for indebted individuals only if it is properly designed. I look forward to the Government working constructively with hon. Members so that we can enable a scheme to benefit vulnerable families as quickly as possible.

Neil O’Brien: One of the important things that the Bill does is to regulate nuisance cold calling. It is sometimes tempting to dismiss it as merely a nuisance, but it is more than that for some vulnerable people. A constituent has emailed me to say:

“All my friends and family have signed up to the TPS, but are still bombarded by these parasites. Our friend who suffers from dementia seems to get several a day, as I check his phone calls each time we visit. These vulnerable people...say yes to anything.”
even if they have not had an accident. My constituent adds that

“TPS does not work...The only way to stop this abhorrent practice is for the regulator to hand out punitive fines”.

Will my right hon. Friend both maximise the scope of the Bill and encourage the regulator to clamp down hard on that kind of behaviour?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. I bet that many constituents could bring forward similar cases. The maximum penalty for breaches will remain the same; that is up to half a million pounds. We must make sure that people do not abuse the system, which is why, particularly in this Bill, we are looking at ways to ban pension cold calling.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: I will, but this intervention will be the last one.

Andy Slaughter: The Secretary of State is being extremely generous. I sense some puzzlement on both sides of the House that the Government are pulling their punches on cold calling. There is to be greater regulation; that is to be extended in some areas. Apart from the cold callers themselves, the consensus is that this should be banned. That includes claimant organisations such as the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers. Why will the Government not undertake now to ban spam texts and cold calls?

Ms McVey: We have brought that forward. That will be for this Bill. For pensions, there will be a ban. It is about working out how that is done, how we deliver it and how it is possible, but that is the intention.

Hon. Members will no doubt be aware that in October the DWP took on responsibility from the Treasury to work with regulators, the industry and other sectors to create a pensions dashboard. That digital interface would allow individuals to see all their pension savings in one place by collecting information about pensions held with different providers. We are conducting a feasibility study to explore the key issues and determine a path towards implementation. We expect to be able to report on that in March.

The Government believe that the needs of the consumer must be at the heart of the dashboard’s design. We want to maximise people’s engagement with their pensions while maintaining their trust. We will ensure that people’s interests are properly safeguarded and their information protected. As part of the study, we are also considering what role, if any, the single financial guidance body may have in relation to the dashboards.

I firmly believe that the Bill is useful, fair and has the individual at its heart. Its goal is to ensure that people are easily able to access free and impartial financial guidance to help them to make more effective financial decisions. Having access to guidance will boost their confidence when dealing with financial service providers and it is a crucial step towards improving their financial capability. The Bill sends a clear message to CMCs by transferring regulatory responsibility to the Financial Conduct Authority, providing a stronger framework to ensure that individuals are accountable for the actions of their businesses, and by introducing fee-capping powers to protect consumers from excessive fees.

This lies at the heart of Conservative philosophy. It is about understanding how an individual can be stronger by understanding their finances and, where possible, by not allowing themselves to get into debt. It is about supporting the individual, the family and the community, and they can best do that by understanding their finances. I look forward to having a constructive and positive dialogue in this House.

4.47 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): How lovely it is to see you in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker; I extend my good wishes to you.

It was remiss of me not to welcome the Secretary of State to her place during the earlier urgent question. I congratulate her and look forward to working with her, possibly not always in the same tone as today. I think this will be a constructive debate, but there is a lot for us to discuss in the Work and Pensions portfolio.

I thank the Secretary of State for outlining the content of the Bill. I take this opportunity to thank Members of the other place who have spent many months scrutinising it. Although concessions have been made, we believe that several more are still needed. However, we recognise the importance of the Bill’s stated aims: principally, to increase the levels of financial capacity, reduce the levels of problem debt and to improve public understanding of occupational and personal pensions. As such, we will not oppose it.

As has been explained—I will rush through this bit—the Bill is in two parts. The first establishes a new arm’s length entity to provide money and pensions guidance and debt advice. This body will replace three existing publicly funded consumer bodies: the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and the Department for Work and Pensions’ Pension Wise service. The new single financial guidance body will also have responsibility for the strategic function of supporting and co-ordinating the development of a national strategy. To ensure that the Bill’s stated aims are met, we want the new body to be a highly visible and properly resourced organisation able to identify and support the many people who need help.

The second part of the Bill introduces a tougher and welcome regulation regime to tackle conduct issues in the claims management market. We can also support that provision.

Gareth Thomas: Is not one problem that risks inhibiting the success of the new single financial guidance body the fact that we do not know where the highest levels of problem debt are in this country? Might it not be sensible to take the opportunity in Committee or on Report to consider the example of an American piece of legislation, the Community Reinvestment Act, which requires all lenders to publish anonymised details of the debts taken out with them so that community organisations and debt advice bodies can know where to target their expertise and help?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. I am not familiar with that particular piece of American legislation, but I will look at it and see what we can do in terms of tabling amendments in Committee.
As we have heard, the FCA will regulate claims management company activity as a regulated activity, taking over responsibility from the Ministry of Justice. The Bill is a high-level framework Bill that, thanks to our colleagues in the other place, is now in much better shape. We particularly welcome the Government’s assurances that the SFGB will work closely with the FCA and the Treasury on issues of financial inclusion. Given, however, that the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I was a member at the time, raised concerns nearly three years ago about the inadequacy of Government measures to protect pension savers, and given also the difficulties that have arisen since, I am bound to ask why it has taken so long to recognise these failings.

I am also concerned that there are no specifics on delivery channels, especially given the very large number of people currently failing to access services. It is vital that the SFGB has the autonomy and resources to make itself truly visible to the public. Given the failings in other parts of the Secretary of State’s Department, and given the complex needs and limited resources of the people who will most need its services, “digital by default” is not a mantra we want to hear from the SFGB or its sponsoring Department.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The transfer of the British Steel pension scheme into a new scheme was announced in early 2017 and was very public. When it all blew up and became fertile territory for unscrupulous pensions advisers, the FCA seemed surprised it was happening. Why did it not see that coming? What steps should the Bill take to improve the early-warning system so that regulators can see these things coming down the track and be far more proactive in getting out there? After all, prevention is better than cure.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes a very valuable point that I will come to later. This is what we are seeing: we saw it with the BSPS and are now seeing it with Carillion and the pension savers there.

Last year’s statistics from the FCA make shocking reading. Of those over 55 planning to retire in the next two years, only 10% had used the Pensions Advisory Service, and only 7% had used Pension Wise. The new SFGB will have to do much better than that. Eight million people in the UK are over-indebted, according to a Money Advice Service report from last March, and less than one in five of these individuals currently seeks advice. Many are among the most vulnerable: over half the clients seen by MAS-funded debt advice projects have had a diagnosed mental health condition. It is vital that those people continue to be supported during the transition period, and that the SFGB develops strategies to identify and reach people who do not currently use any services. The impact assessment talks about “long-term savings” once the SFGB has been established. It is difficult to see how such savings will be made if the new body is to fulfil all its objectives, particularly its objective of ensuring that information, guidance and advice are available to those who most need them. Have the Government considered what resources the SFGB will need to identify and support those who do not currently access advice or guidance? Has the Minister considered what arrangements will be put in place to ensure that people can continue to access existing services during the transition period?

The five areas on which the SFGB is expected to concentrate include provision of debt advice, and provision of information and guidance relating to occupational and personal pensions, accessing defined contribution pots and retirement planning. We welcome the Government’s decision, at the urging of our colleagues in the other place, to make it explicit in the Bill that the information, guidance and advice will be impartial, and that it will continue to be provided free to members of the public.

The SFGB will also help consumers to avoid financial fraud and scams; give information on wider money matters, and co-ordinate and influence efforts to improve financial capability; and co-ordinate non-governmental financial education programmes for children and young people. It also has a strategic function: to support and co-ordinate a national strategy. Given the appointment of a Minister with responsibility for financial inclusion, that needs to be strengthened to a “develop and deliver” function.

We welcome the focus on the provision of financial education for children and young people, but we think that the Government should be bolder, as recommended by the House of Lords Financial Exclusion Committee report “Tackling financial inclusion”. The new body will have to cope against a backdrop of rising prices and stagnant wage growth, a fall in real incomes and saving levels that have crashed. Evidence provided to the Lords Select Committee referred to fears expressed by debt agencies about the rise in queries concerning rent arrears, energy and water bills, telephone bills and council tax.

Then there is the impact of universal credit. As I have mentioned on numerous occasions inside and outside the House, we support UC’s aims of simplifying the benefit system, making transitions into work easier and, fundamentally, reducing child poverty. However, the Citizens Advice report “Universal Credit and Debt” showed that some aspects of UC risk causing or exacerbating personal debt problems. UC clients are more likely to have debt problems than those on legacy benefits. A quarter of the people that Citizens Advice helped with UC needed help with debt. UC clients are also struggling to pay off their debts. More than two in five debt clients on UC have no spare income to pay creditors.

Citizens Advice makes a number of recommendations, which are particularly pertinent in the context of the Bill. They include the need for more funding for free, impartial debt advice to meet existing increases in demand resulting from UC. In addition, Citizens Advice wants the Financial Conduct Authority actively to monitor the roll-out of UC. Has the Minister considered the impact of UC on personal debt, and its implications for the resourcing of the new SFGB? Taking up the Citizens Advice recommendations would alleviate some of the problems caused by UC. Fundamentally, as I have said, the Government must stop the roll-out of the programme and reverse the cuts to UC, which mean that it is failing to make work pay and failing the very people it is meant to help.

The SFGB will have to cope with an increasingly complex pensions sector. The growth of auto-enrolment brings more and more people within the scope of...
occupational pensions. The other major change has been the introduction of pension freedoms. In that context, we welcome the Government’s commitment in the other place to the delivery of the pensions dashboards. However, given the increasing issues that pension scheme members face—including those of British Steel, and now Carillion—in addition to a much tougher pension regulation framework, I want the Government to tackle the appalling abuse perpetrated by opportunistic financial scammers, who have targeted BSPS and Carillion pension members. I will say more on that later.

**Mr Leslie:** Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be useful to have a connection between the new financial guidance body and the Financial Conduct Authority? I slightly regret the fact that we are moving away from Treasury involvement in this whole issue. My hon. Friend may know that some of the products that people are investing in with asset managers and insurers, having got their pensions freedoms, are known as PRIIPS—packaged retail and insurance-based investment products. New regulations came out this month, but there is a risk of these products opening a whole new mis-selling scandal, because they are creating all sorts of wild projections about the amounts that could be earned. Does my hon. Friend agree that the guidance body needs to keep on top of this with the FCA?

**Debbie Abrahams:** My hon. Friend has made an absolutely key point. To go back to my urgent question, things are slipping through the net, and those links need to be tightened up. Again, this is something we need to explore in Committee.

As it stands, the SFGB will provide advice to the self-employed on their personal finances and debts only, and not on their business finances or debts. The Money Advice Trust, which helped more than 38,000 people last year, says that, for many self-employed people, there is simply no distinction between their personal and business finances. To exclude business finances and debts from the SFGB’s remit is a missed opportunity, particularly given the significant growth we have seen in self-employment in recent years. The self-employed as a group have also seen falling incomes since the recession. Will the Minister consider extending the SFGB’s remit to cover business finances and debts?

On the changes regarding claims management companies, we agree that the current arrangements regulating the industry are unsatisfactory. The current situation has been characterised by poor value for money, information imbalances, nuisance calls and texts, and the progression of speculative and fraudulent claims. We accept the proposition that there is a public interest in having an effective claims management market operating in the interest of consumers, as that can provide access to justice for those who are unwilling or unable to bring a claim for compensation.

Further, as the Carol Brady review asserts, a well-functioning CMC market can act as a check and balance on the conduct and the complaints-handling processes of individual businesses. We note that the Brady review considered that a move to the FCA would represent a step change. That seems the right decision, especially as 99% of turnover relates to financial services—PPI, packaged bank accounts or insurance.

Let me turn now to the content of the Bill. While we generally support the Bill, there are several aspects that we will look to strengthen, particularly in relation to clauses 4, 5, 25 and 28.

**Gareth Thomas:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. I am fortunate enough to chair the Co-operative party, and one thing we are keen to encourage is the take-up of the services offered by financial co-operatives, such as credit unions. Would she be sympathetic to an amendment on Report from Co-op MPs urging the single financial guidance body actively to promote credit union services across the country?

**Debbie Abrahams:** Again, my hon. Friend makes a very interesting point, and I would look to work with him on the details of that to understand exactly what he wants to achieve.

I also want to talk about the need for a duty of care on financial service providers and a breathing space for those trying to manage their debt problems.

On clause 4, we welcome the Government’s commitment to ban cold calling, which is the leading driver of pension scams. The scope of the clause is still too narrow, and the clause is not nearly urgent enough. Every day that passes without a ban, people are being avoidably conned out of their life savings.

However, there are also scams that work against businesses. In the last four years, the Association of British Travel Agents has recorded a 520% increase in gastric illness complaints. As a result, hoteliers in the markets affected are now threatening significant price increases, and some are even considering withdrawing the all-inclusive product from UK holidaymakers entirely. ABTA has recently released shocking statistics showing that one in five people have been contacted about making a compensation claim for holiday sickness, with cold calling being the most common method of approach.

On clause 5(2), within 24 hours of the collapse of Carillion last week, adverts started to appear online encouraging people to cash in their pension pots. That reflects the experience of BSPS members. The Minister will have noted the evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, before which the extent of pensions scamming was revealed. That involved some advisers travelling hundreds of miles in the hope of capturing high fees for each pension pot they succeeded in transferring. The Select Committee described retirement savings sharks reportedly circling around the British Steel pension scheme members, providing a “honeypot for scammers”. One steelworker is reported to have missed out on £200,000 of his pension transfer value after being advised, and as I have said, we are already seeing a similar targeting of Carillion pension members.

The law does not currently prohibit firms from acting as introducers, provided that they do not stray into providing services for which they require FCA authorisation. That applies to any non-regulated firm. Last year, the FCA received 8,612 reports of potential unauthorised activity in the United Kingdom. If the firms and/or individuals reported are within the remit of the FCA, it can investigate and take action, which ranges from publishing unauthorised firms’ and individuals’ warnings and taking down websites, to taking civil court action to stop activity and freeze assets, insolvency proceedings, and, in the most serious cases, criminal prosecution.
Last year, the number of enforcement cases taken was 69. Given the current climate, it is clear that enforcement action needs to increase, but most of the funds that the FCA collects from penalties on financial services firms go directly to the Treasury. What consideration has the Minister given to removing the exemption of introducers from the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001, and allowing the FCA to keep the financial penalties that it receives so that it can expand its enforcement work?

Free and impartial Pension Wise guidance is essential at times like this, and it is greatly valued by those who use it, but take-up is nowhere near high enough. Far too many people are currently making vital decisions in the dark, which puts them at greater risk of suffering irreversible financial detriment through scams or choices that are contrary to their interests, such as transferring pensions to savings accounts. Those problems will only grow as people become more reliant on income from direct contribution pensions in retirement. The existing Pension Wise promotion regime of signposting by pension providers—who have no business interest in promoting their service—and advertising has proved insufficient.

We welcome the Government’s acceptance that people should be given more encouragement to take guidance, but we believe that there should be a stronger nudge. Although clause 5(2) is welcome, we think that it can be improved through exemptions to avoid unnecessary burdens and stronger core requirements to make taking guidance a true default option. While individuals could choose not to take free and impartial guidance before accessing their pension pots, that would no longer be the consequence of passivity: as with the highly successful automatic enrolment policy, people would have to actively opt out. Default guidance would promote shopping around, better-informed decision making and protection against scams. Combined with a ban on cold calling, it would represent a step forward in consumer protection in an era of pension freedoms. Will the Minister agree to introduce new provisions in Committee to impose an immediate ban on cold calling and to introduce default guidance to assist people accessing or seeking to transfer their pension assets, with strong penalties for advisers who wilfully and detrimentally scam pension members?

Clause 25 gives the FCA the power to impose a cap on the fees that claims management companies can charge for their services, and a duty to exercise that power in respect of financial services firms. The Government have also introduced an interim cap on the fees that CMCs can charge consumers in relation to payment protection insurance claims. However, that does not go far enough to protect consumers from paying disproportionately high fees for what is often very little work. The Ministry of Justice estimates that the average amount of commission charged to consumers by CMCs is 28%, plus VAT. The FCA estimates that the average payout for PPI mis-selling is around £1,700, which means that a CMC would, on average, charge a successful claimant £476 plus VAT. Although the proposed fee cap would reduce the amount that consumers must pay CMCs, it would still mean an average charge of £340 with VAT on top. If the Government want to take meaningful action to protect consumers from high fees, they should propose a solution that would allow them to keep 100% of PPI compensation.

The Government should require firms to pay CMC costs for PPI claims, capped at 20% plus VAT, when they are at fault and when the consumer has used a CMC rather than claimed directly. This means that they should apply only for the interim period until the new FCA regulations came into force or until August 2019, the deadline for making PPI claims, whichever was the sooner. This would incentivise firms still paying compensation to proactively reach out and encourage consumers to make claims directly to them, and to allow that to be done easily. It would also protect consumers from paying high charges to CMCs.

We support the strengthening of the regulation of CMCs, but we look forward to a regulatory regime that better protects consumers from high charges, poor value for money and unacceptable behaviour on the part of far too many CMCs. We also welcome the improvements made during consideration of part 2 in the other place, notably clause 28, which introduces an interim cap on the fees that CMCs and law firms can charge for claims in respect of PPI. This is an important protection for consumers in the run-up to the FCA’s claims deadline of August 2019. Customers can claim directly from their PPI provider for free, but those who choose to enlist support would not have to face the fees currently being charged by some CMCs.

However, the clauses introduced by the Government at the urging of Baroness Meacher apply only to PPI claims, even though the Ministry of Justice’s original consultation considered other bulk claims by CMCs, notably in respect of packaged bank accounts. In the vast majority of cases, the pursuit of such claims does not require a significant amount of work, but in its response to the consultation, the MOJ merely asserted that “analysis of the evidence received” suggested that “PBA claims should be grouped with other financial-services claims due to additional work needed on these types of claims.”

It is far from clear that CMCs undertake significant work or add significant value in submitting PBA claims on behalf of consumers. If the CMCs’ approach to PBA claims truly differs little, if at all, from their approach to PPI claims, the Bill should cap their charges in exactly the same way. If the Government cannot provide justification or act to protect customers from millions of pounds of excess charges for PBA claims before the FCA introduces its own rules a year or more from now, we will table amendments in Committee to achieve that. We ask the Government for a better justification of their decision not to apply the interim fee cap to PBA claims.

I shall move on to the breathing space scheme. An estimated 2.4 million children live in families in problem debt in England and Wales, and the FCA estimates that half the UK population is financially vulnerable. It is shocking that an estimated 600,000 families in England and Wales are spending more on overdue bills than they spend on food. A measure that would protect such families is a breathing space scheme. Such a scheme would introduce a legal freeze on interest and charges, collections and enforcement action to give people time and space to stabilise their finances and put in place an affordable and repayment sustainable plan. Such a scheme, which has been championed by the Children’s Society, StepChange Debt Charity and many others, was included in our manifesto and that of the Conservatives, and I
am delighted to see that, following pressure in the other place, a commitment is now on the face of the Bill. Yet again, however, the timescales for implementation are too slow.

I appreciate that the consultation on the breathing space scheme has now closed, but I want it to have certain fundamental tenets. First, it should include a legal freeze on interest and charges, collections and enforcement action. Secondly, as many debts as possible need to be included, especially debts to public bodies. Thirdly, there should be no gaps in protection between the initial breathing space period and the transition to a statutory debt management plan. Finally, the breathing space scheme needs to be implemented as quickly as possible. Again, I would be grateful for the Minister’s response to those points, either at the end of the debate or in writing to me.

I would now like to focus on an idea that received a great deal of support in the other place and that has been raised by Members here today—namely, a duty of care on financial service providers. That is not currently in the Bill, but we now have an important opportunity to discuss the support that banks provide to their vulnerable customers. Research from Macmillan Cancer Support, which was mentioned earlier, shows that four out of five people with cancer are affected financially by increased costs and loss of income following their diagnosis. As the Bill recognises, ensuring that people have access to the right help and advice is essential to stopping financial problems.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): On that point, will the hon. Lady join me in congratulating Nationwide Building Society, which has led the way by working with Macmillan to ensure that appropriate support is made available as soon as there is a diagnosis?

Debbie Abrahams: I congratulate Nationwide and all organisations that recognise that they have a duty of care to their customers. We need to put that duty of care on the face of the Bill, particularly for those who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances.

As providers of mortgages and other key financial commitments, banks and building societies have a huge influence—good or bad—on the financial wellbeing of many households. When the right support is put in place, that can lead to improved outcomes for customers, as we have just heard. However, that Macmillan research shows that problems still exist and that there is a lack of consistency in the support offered to people when they seek help.

With that in mind, will the Government support a revision of legislation to incorporate the recommendation made by the Lords Financial Exclusion Committee regarding a duty of care? The Committee concluded that the Government should amend the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 to introduce a requirement for the FCA to make rules setting out a reasonable duty of care for financial services providers. I appreciate that any change as significant as that must be subject to proper consideration, and it is therefore welcome that the FCA has committed to publishing a discussion paper. However, the Government and the FCA have said this must wait until “after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU” becomes clear, but I do not think that we can wait, because people cannot wait. I therefore urge the Minister to look carefully at the issue and to bring forward suitable proposals in Committee.

In conclusion, we by and large support the Bill, but a number of areas can be strengthened significantly—for instance, the duty of care needs to be addressed on the face of the Bill—so I urge the Minister to act on those areas, and I look forward to his response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I want to suggest an informal time limit of between 10 and 12 minutes.

5.17 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I will try to do a great deal better than 10 minutes to 12 minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to follow the thoughtful speech of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I welcome the Bill and will of course be delighted to support it later on this evening, and I want to talk about part 2 and claims management companies.

The reason why I have taken an interest in claim management companies is that my wife and I were involved in a minor road traffic accident on the M5 a few years ago, while heading to Cornwall for a family holiday. For a year or so following that minor bump, I was plagued with calls to my mobile phone on an almost weekly basis by a claims management company. Goodness knows how it got my number. In each call, it essentially tried to persuade me to submit a fraudulent claim for whiplash. No matter how persistently I told the caller that my family and I suffered absolutely no injury and that we did not have even the slightest ache or pain, they would say, “Well, if you just tell us that your neck hurts a bit, we will get you £3,000.” They were extremely persistent, and I can imagine that if somebody was a bit short of cash, they might succumb to that kind of blandishment. I therefore made the topic something that I wanted to get involved in after being elected, and I have raised it several times in Westminster Hall and am delighted to be able to raise it again today.

The number of whiplash or soft tissue injury claims following minor road traffic accidents has increased by an astonishing 50% over the past few years. At the same time, the number of road traffic accidents has gone down by 30%, so the number of accidents that lead to a claim has increased stratospherically. If we compare the number of claims in this country with those in an equivalent European country, such as France or Germany, there are far more claims here than elsewhere in Europe.

As the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth mentioned, a similar phenomenon has recently started in relation to claims for gastric illness—tummy upsets—on holiday. I remind the House of my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests of a shareholding in a small holiday business, although not one that has had a significant problem in this area.

Since 2013, there has been a 568% increase in claims for tummy upsets on holiday. There have been some notorious cases, such as that of Deborah Briton and Paul Roberts, who a short time ago were respectively sentenced to nine months and 15 months in prison by Liverpool Crown court having rather foolishly tweeted and posted on Facebook about how wonderful their
holiday was before trying to claim, at the behest of some claims management company, that the holiday had been ruined by gastric illness.

Such cases, in which claims management companies have incited the public essentially to commit fraud, are becoming all too common. My objection to the activities of such claims management companies is twofold. First, they are inciting otherwise law-abiding members of the public to commit fraud, which is clearly a morally corrosive phenomenon. Secondly, of course, the cost of all these compensation payments is ultimately borne by drivers through higher insurance premiums—some people estimate the total cost of that at an extra £2.5 billion—or by consumers through higher holiday costs.

It is consumers—our constituents—who end up bearing the cost of such activities, so I am pleased that the Bill will begin to take steps to sort it out. Why does this happen? It happens because there are enormous financial incentives for claims management companies to operate in this way, particularly due to the concept of one-way cost shifting whereby, unusually, even if the defendant—the holiday company or the car insurance company—successfully defends a case, it none the less has to pay the claimant's legal costs. The legal costs for a fully contested case often run up to £10,000 or more, whereas settling a case often costs only £3,000 or £4,000, so the insurer or the holiday company sadly has a financial incentive to settle and the claims management company, knowing that, simply has to process the paperwork to collect very high fees.

Claims management companies are responding to a financial incentive that the current system has unfortunately created. The number of claims management companies mushroomed from 500 in 2006 to 3,300 in 2011. I am pleased to say that measures already taken have reduced the figure to 1,500, but that is still far too high and there is definitely more we need to do.

I welcome the fact that the Bill will transfer oversight responsibilities to the Financial Conduct Authority, and I certainly welcome the introduction of fee caps for claims management companies. We must be careful to draft those regulations to ensure that claims management companies cannot circumvent the cap. The cap refers to 20% or 25% of net recovery, and we need to ensure claims management companies cannot somehow extract any portion of the recovery by way of fixed charges levied upfront. We have to be careful about the detail of the wording because these companies are adept at circumventing Government attempts to restrict their activities.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful speech on an important issue. He will understand how much Scottish Conservative Members support the Bill because, until now, in Scotland there has been no protection whatever for consumers in the face of this onslaught by claims management companies.

Chris Philp: I am shocked to learn that the Scottish Government have been so slow to take action when the Westminster Government have been so quick.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will understand that this is a reserved matter, so the Scottish Government have no locus to act.

Stephen Kerr: That’s not true.

Chris Philp: I notice that my hon. Friend takes a different view from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), and no doubt he will elaborate on that point if he speaks later in the debate.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for making this powerful speech. In addition to raising the cost of insurance for everybody else and encouraging people to commit fraud, does he agree that cold calling can often cause huge distress to the person on the other end of the phone, who is constantly reminded about an accident that they might wish to forget?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I consider myself a fairly robust individual, but the constant pesterings by those companies was distressing, and if somebody is vulnerable in any way, I can imagine that it would be very distressing indeed.

That leads me to my next point in relation to the cold call ban contemplated under clause 4. I strongly welcome the clause’s inclusion, but its structure invites the new single regulatory authority to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State, who then, by regulation, has power to act. Given the pressing nature of the problem, will the Secretary of State consider a more direct route—that is, the Secretary of State having the power to ban cold calling in this area immediately, without needing to wait for a referral by the new regulatory authority? I see that the Secretary of State is listening to the point. I hope she will consider it, as Members on both sides of the House might welcome such an amendment as consideration of the Bill progresses.

There are other things that we need to do that are probably beyond the scope of the Bill but important none the less. In particular, the Government are consulting on the civil procedure rules and bringing overseas claims—holiday claims—within the scope of the fixed fee schedule. That would be an extremely welcome move, and I encourage the Ministry of Justice to expedite its response to that consultation, which is welcome.

In 2017, I had the pleasure of serving on the Committee that considered the Prisons and Courts Bill—I see the Minister recalls that—whose work was unfortunately interrupted by the general election. I believe that the Government plan to introduce a civil liability Bill in due course. Again, I encourage them to introduce that Bill as quickly as possible, because many important measures could be included in it that would assist in dealing with the problems to which I have referred, not least raising the threshold for the small claims track to £5,000, considering a ban on general damages in relation to low-value injuries and ensuring that the medical evidence standard for these various claims is made a little higher—for example, requiring someone actually to see an independent doctor face to face. The civil liabilities Bill could do a range of things once introduced.

Not wishing to stretch the elastic of your guidelines, Mr Deputy Speaker, I conclude by saying that this is a welcome Bill that will do a great deal to strengthen consumer protections. It is a great pleasure to speak in support of it on Second Reading.
5.28 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): May I say on behalf of those on the Scottish National party Benches what a pleasure it is to see you back in the Chair where you belong, Mr Deputy Speaker? Welcome back.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak for the SNP in this debate, and I should say at the outset that we broadly welcome the Bill’s aims and will not oppose its Second Reading.

By way of background and context, I should say that the Bill sets out in part 1 the proposal to merge three Government-sponsored guidance services—the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise—to create a new single financial guidance body. The UK Government hope that this will help to “ensure that members of the public can access good-quality, free-to-client, impartial financial guidance and debt advice.”

The SFGB is expected to be set up and operational from late 2018, as predicted during the passage of the Bill through the House of Lords.

Part 2 will make changes to the regulation of claims management companies. CMCs provide advice and services to assist people in managing compensation claims in various sectors, such as personal injury and financial products such as payment protection insurance.

The Government have expressed concern that “there is evidence of malpractice” in the industry. In March 2016, following an independent review, the Government said that they would change the regulatory system for CMCs. Under the Bill, the regulatory responsibility will pass from the Ministry of Justice to the Financial Conduct Authority.

Also under part 2, complaints handling will be transferred from the legal ombudsman to the Financial Ombudsman Service, and the FCA will be given the power to impose a cap on the fees that CMCs can charge for their services. Ahead of that, an interim cap on fees will apply to payment protection insurance claims.

The Bill also makes provision for the devolution of levy funding associated with debt advice provision. Powers over debt advice are, of course, already devolved to Scotland. I shall elaborate on all those elements during my speech.

On advice services, we welcome any measures that make the pensions or financial markets more accessible for people. There are aspects that we wish to query, and we hope to get some reassurances from the Minister in his response. First, I would like some detailed reassurances from the Minister that the amalgamation of three expert services into one will not dilute the overall service in any way, in terms of either output or quality. The Minister is shaking his head, but I hope he can provide some detailed reassurance as to how the Government will make sure of that. Whenever there is a merger of this sort, it normally results in a reduction of either specialism or capacity. I hope that he can assure us all that neither will happen. I also hope he will commit to significant investment in the new body to ensure that it is properly promoted and that awareness is therefore increased.

Government and Opposition Members have already stressed the importance of that.

We need reassurances on funding. It appears that all funding discretion currently rests with the Treasury, so who will take the decision on the budget of the new single body? Who will be able to challenge the Treasury on any additional funding? It is clear that for the new body to work, it needs to be properly resourced by both the financial sector and the Government. I ask because we all—not least the Government, I am sure—that the Bill will do some of the work necessary to catch up on some of the problems with pension freedoms that we all warned about and that are now starting to happen.

According the FCA, more than a million defined-contribution pension pots have been accessed since George Osborne’s reforms were introduced. The FCA also says that it has become the new norm to access pension pots early. That is where our concern starts. Between October 2015 and September 2016, the number of non-advised drawdown sales was on the rise, and it is currently at 30% of drawdown sales, compared with 5% before the reforms. Some 63%—almost two thirds—of all annuity sales are now to consumers who have not received advice. Indeed, the FCA estimates that only around 20% of consumers who access a DC pension in the third quarter of 2016 had a Pension Wise appointment either by telephone or face to face. That is a huge concern that I am sure the Government share. Indeed, I know that it now concerns them, because they are trying to play catch-up on the issues with pension freedoms that we warned about when they were being introduced. I am not sure that the Bill adequately addresses those issues yet.

I am not sure that the Bill addresses those customers who do not make a decision upon retirement. We are seeing more people choosing just to draw down the pot and put it in the bank. With interest and inflation rates as they are, those decisions are clearly losing people money. But people are doing it because that is what they know and are comfortable with. Even to seek pensions advice or guidance is a daunting, complex and alien prospect to most people. I am keen to hear from the Minister about not only his expectation for increased usage of the new service, but how the Government plan to ensure that the service engages people who are not put off talking about pensions at all. I am keen to hear from the Minister about not only his expectation for increased usage of the new service, but how the Government plan to ensure that the service engages people who are not put off talking about pensions at all.

When most people are near retirement, they will encounter the pensions world and its lexicology and products for the first time. It is intimidating, which is why we see some people using pension freedoms to bung their pots in the bank. For them to get the most out of their investments, we need to make sure that people are properly guided to make not only a decision, but an informed decision that is of benefit to them. It is a high-stakes game; once an annuity is purchased, that is it—it cannot be reversed. We need to ensure that people have the confidence to take a decision, and that comes from being informed that taking no decision and hoarding
cash may not be the best decision and that there is
specialist help out there and it does not have to cost.

The Government also tabled a useful amendment to
clause 2 in the Lords, which seeks to ensure that cognisance
is taken of the needs of people in vulnerable circumstances.
Perhaps that could be strengthened and clarified by
including it in the clause 3 functions.

I would also appreciate it if we had a word from the
Minister as to whether the UK Government plan to
provide greater clarification on what guidance and paid-for
advice will be in terms of the Bill. Providers and other
stakeholders will appreciate that clarification.

Part 1 also covers action on cold calling. Clearly, we
are delighted that the campaigning efforts on cold calling
by the Scottish National party, the Scottish Government
and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire
and Arran (Patricia Gibson) have started to pay off. I
congratulate her on this partial win, which should hopefully
make a difference to people, particularly pensioners,
getting bombarded by nuisance calls. Recent research
from the Money Advice Service suggests that there
could be as many as eight scam calls every second—the
equivalent of 250 million calls a year. Citizens Advice
has calculated that 10.9 million consumers have received
unsolicited contact about pensions alone since April 2015.
Perhaps the UK Government may wish to use the
opportunity in clause 4 to go a bit further on cold
calling and hold company bosses accountable, as suggested
by my hon. Friend in her Bill 18 months ago.

Clause 9 appears to afford a lot of power to the
Secretary of State to direct the exercise of the functions
of the new body, stating that it must
“comply with directions given to it by the Secretary of State”.

I hope that the Minister will explain why the UK
Government feel that that is a necessary provision and
how it will not be abused.

On debt, I want to query something that the Secretary
of State said at the Dispatch Box in her opening speech.
If I picked her up correctly, I think she said that
household debt was falling. If that is the case, I am sure
that she would want to correct the record because,
clearly, household debt is not falling. Standard & Poor’s
came out with very important research at the back end
of last year about its concern regarding UK rates of
household debt. Perhaps that could be clarified in time
either by the Minister or the Secretary of State.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Very briefly, on
the subject of clarification, does my hon. Friend agree
that, under devolution legislation, financial and economic
matters—fiscal, economic and monetary matters, including
financial services—are specific reservations held here at
Westminster?

Neil Gray: That clears up an earlier point of issue in a
previous speech regarding where responsibility lies for
the regulation in these areas. I thank my hon. Friend for
his intervention. We are pleased that the Scottish
Government have secured an improved allocation in
terms of the proposed funding formula for devolved
levy funding for debt advice provision. That improved
allocation will ensure that Scotland’s share takes account
of our adult population share and the levels of indebtedness
in Scotland. As a result of those discussions, Scottish
Government levy funding will increase from around
£2.2 million to more than £4.7 million, according to
estimates from the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government have also obtained agreement
on certain wider principles that shall apply in respect of
the new body, in that it must take greater account of
differences in the money and debt advice landscape in
Scotland to ensure that available resources are pooled
effectively, delivering a more holistic and joined-up
advice landscape. It must also establish a committee
with membership drawn from representatives from each
of the devolved Administrations, thereby embedding
the Scottish Government in its governance arrangements,
providing the Scottish Government with influence and
ensuring that collaborative working is achieved in practice
across money and pensions guidance. It must also be
capable of channelling funding in a way that best ensures
effective oversight and co-ordination or delivery of debt
advice, in the light of the devolution of levy funding.

Keith Brown MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for the
Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, has met the chief executive
and Scotland manager of the Money Advice Service as
part of a series of Scottish Government stakeholder
engagements, which are intended to help to ensure that
there is a seamless transfer of debt advice responsibilities
to the Scottish Government, and that the new body
engages effectively and delivers for Scottish consumers
from the outset.

I am grateful to StepChange for its briefing and for
its questions to the Minister: will the Government agree
on the importance of a certain implementation timeframe
to ensure that organisations can plan and develop the
relevant systems to deliver the breathing space scheme;
will they consider amending the Bill to commit to a
clearer target implementation date, for instance to have
regulations in place by the end of 2019 so that the
scheme can be launched by 2020; will they confirm their
manifesto promise and commit to introducing statutory
repayment plans as part of the proposed breathing
space scheme; do they agree that the initial period of
breathing space protection needs to be long enough for
people to gain acceptance for a long-term solution to
their debts; and will they consider allowing a regulated
debt adviser to extend the initial protection where necessary?

Does the Minister agree that the breathing space
scheme should cover all a person’s debts, including—this
point has already been made—debts owed to the public
sector? Does he agree that it would be unhelpful to the
scheme’s success to have creditors outside the scheme
undertaking people’s ability to stabilise their finances?
Could he also please clarify what powers will be conveyed
under clause 21(7), which allows the Secretary of State
to amend any provision made by an Act of Parliament,
an Act of the Scottish Parliament, a Measure or Act of
the National Assembly for Wales, or legislation of the
Northern Ireland Assembly? That seems rather far reaching
time, so I would appreciate some guidance on the
reasoning behind that provision.

With regard to part 2 of the Bill, which relates to
claims management companies, I hope that the Minister
can answer some queries and reassure us. Lloyds Banking
Group has highlighted that, although a cap on the fees
that CMCs can charge consumers on PPI claims is
welcome, CMCs are bringing other types of claims on
behalf of consumers that potentially require strengthened
regulation—packaged bank accounts, for example, which are current accounts that come with a package of extra features, from mobile phone and travel insurance to better rates on overdrafts and loans. Have the Government looked widely at the claims being brought by CMCs, and can they provide an assurance that customers are not potentially being exploited through exorbitant fees for other types of claims?

I am also concerned that the Financial Conduct Authority should take ownership of this from the Ministry of Justice as quickly as possible, to ensure that people are not exploited in between times. We must bear in mind that, with a deadline for PPI claims set in the next 18 months, CMCs will be rather busy trying to muster business in that period. We want to ensure that we can protect vulnerable people as much as possible.

In conclusion, the Bill has the right intentions and moves us in the right direction. I have posed a number of questions, and if the Minister is unable to answer them directly this evening, I hope that he will follow them up in writing in plenty of time before the Bill goes into Committee. I am grateful to Just, the People’s Pension, Lloyds Banking Group, StepChange and others for their briefings for today’s debate. I look forward to maintaining close and constructive engagement with the Bill as it progresses to ensure that it guarantees consumer rights, offers proper support for those needing advice and protects people from those seeking to exploit them.

5.42 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak today and make a detailed contribution to the Bill. I am particularly passionate about the need to provide more support to help people out of debt, to give them that lifting hand. For that reason, I shall focus on part 1 of the Bill.

Debt creates a vicious cycle that leaves people unable to pay the bills and pushes them further into debt. It soon becomes a fast-moving, downward spiral that can leave people feeling isolated, alone and trapped, and it can create and exacerbate mental health problems, leading to family breakdown and even suicide. Like all hon. Members, I have heard constituents tell harrowing stories of how they ended up feeling that they could not get out of the situation they were in—stories that started with a small amount of debt that grew out of control. There is a strong relationship between debt and mental health, as a number of studies have shown, including a recent one from the University of Southampton. Debt is serious, complex and challenging in so many ways, which is why it requires a robust and comprehensive approach.

As has been discussed, the Bill creates a new, single financial guidance body that will replace the three existing public financial guidance providers. I echo the strong support that stakeholders have expressed for establishing a single body. It will improve access to free and impartial money guidance, pensions guidance and debt advice, enabling people to make informed decisions about their finances by offering a more co-ordinated and strategic approach. Most importantly, it will simplify the help on offer to people, because the current situation can be very confusing. For the first time, it will provide a statutory requirement to target help towards those most in need, particularly those in the most vulnerable circumstances. It will also remove the duplication of services and identify gaps in provision.

The levels of secured and unsecured debt in the UK are a problem. In the past few decades those levels have increased with the rise of the credit card and payday loan era. Debt is easy to access and easy to accrue. At quarter 3 in 2017, the total level of household debt in the UK was a staggering £1.9 trillion, according to the Office for National Statistics. As we heard in the House of Lords, part 1 will ensure “that people have access to the information and guidance they need to make the important and effective financial decisions that we all have to make at some point in our lives.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 7 July 2017; Vol. 783, c. 904.]

What is important, though, is implementation, so that people know that they have access to this free and impartial help and how to get it. Proactive promotion is key. I have met far too many constituents who are unsure of where to turn to and how to access the help that they need. The Bill seeks to rectify this, but it is important that there is proactive promotion. I would like to hear more from the Minister about the plans for that.

This includes starting financial education early, at school age. I was delighted when, in 2014, for the first time, the Government made financial literacy statutory as part of the curriculum for 11 to 16-year-olds. I am equally delighted that clause 2 outlines a key function of the SFGB as being to improve the provision of financial education for children and young people.

Justin Tomlinson: At the time, I was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, and I was very grateful for my hon. Friend’s support in that campaign. I echo her comments. We live in a very complex society, with direct debits, standing orders and complicated marketing messages coming forward. Making sure that we equip people of all ages to make informed decisions is an absolute priority.

Michelle Donelan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I completely agree with his comments and commend him for the work that he did in this area.

After all, debt is more prominent among young people, with 71% of 25 to 34-year-olds having a credit card compared with only 20% of those aged 65 and over. It is time for this Bill, because the ease and availability of credit, over-lending, and the attendant consequences of problem debt are stark.

On Third Reading in the Lords, the Government amended the Bill to enable the introduction of a debt respite scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This was in the Conservative party manifesto, and it is crucial. It will offer breathing space to people who are trapped in debt—a ladder out of the hole they are stuck in—by stopping further interest, charges and enforcement action for a set period, and enabling a realistic repayment plan to be put in place. Budgeting advice is all well and good, but if the levels of interest and charges are compounding to an extent that people do not have the money to budget with, it is simply useless. That is why the debt respite scheme is so essential. It is crucial that it is offered and promoted effectively to help people in need.

This does, though, pose the question of how long the respite scheme would last for, which will be in the Secretary of State’s power. Charities in the sector are urging a six-month period. It is important that it is a
meaningful amount of time that will allow people enough
time to address their debt problems and get achievable
plans in place. It is in everyone’s interests that it is not a
mere six-week period. In fact, StepChange, the debt
charity, says that its clients usually take six to 12 months
to stabilise their finances. The debt respite scheme will
particularly help families. One in five parents say that
they have had problems in the past year with problem
debt, whereas in Scotland, where there is already a
respite scheme, only 10.9% of families said the same
thing.

I believe that our role as parliamentarians is to open
doors and create opportunities. However, opportunities
are useless if people are unable to access them. The debt
respite scheme will offer people the helping hand that
they need to seize those opportunities and the help that
will be available from the Bill. In addition, we need the
current system to work with the Bill, actively referring
people and taking a more proactive approach to debt.

Universal credit streamlines benefits, which can assist
with debt management and making work pay, but we are
still offering and giving budgeting loans to those in
considerable debt. More work needs to be done to
identify and to help people with chronic and severe debt
problems. I would like a debt review to be done when
people make applications for budgeting loans. This is
similar to what StepChange does when it reviews how
to help a person. If the applicant has severe problems
with debt, they can be referred and given the help,
information and advice they need, as well as offered the
debt respite scheme, with an achievable repayment plan.

It is irresponsible to add to such people’s debt in the
way we currently do, so I urge the Minister to consider
the matter in the context of debt support and management,
especially given the disproportionate link between debt
and unemployment. I have seen far too many constituents
crippled by debt and then given a budgeting loan on
top, which eats into the amount of universal credit that
they have to manage with. Such people do not come
forward and offer information about their debt for fear
of stigma, fear of losing benefits and concerns about
the legitimacy of having so many bank overdrafts and
credit card debts. They therefore do not get the help
they need and, instead, we give them a budgeting loan,
which further compounds their problems. Budgeting
loans are an excellent way to help many people with
short-term finance issues and start-up costs, but they
are not right for those already swimming in debt, who
are often the most vulnerable. Those are the people the
Bill is designed to help.

In conclusion, debt is arguably the biggest challenge
to social mobility in this country and it is time we had a
more proactive response in giving support. That is why
I support the Bill. It is in the interests of all of us to
address debt: this is not just a personal problem, but a
national one. In fact, StepChange estimates that the
cost to the state and society of problem debt, on top of
the personal cost, is about £8 million. Although I
applaud the Government for the Bill and their appreciation
of the need to tackle debt, I also ask for a much more
proactive approach to its implementation to ensure that
the Bill is as effective as it can be.

5.52 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure
to follow the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle
Donelan). Unsurprisingly, I will talk about debt later.

I welcome the thrust of the Bill. Consolidating the
three bodies into one makes sense, but the new one must
be well run. It may be a little churlish, but I would point
out that the Money Advice Service has rightly been
criticised over the years, not least in this place, for its
attempts to duplicate the work undertaken by more
experienced agencies that are better known to the public.
It has spent an inordinate amount on a fancy website
and on television adverts—£26 million in one year—which
did little to raise its profile. After all, who apart from me
remembers, “What would MA say?” in its adverts? I
remember that only because I used to swear at the
television when they came on.

The new body has to be leaner. The thrust of its role
must be to facilitate the work of others. That is where
the money should go: not on promoting itself—not on
fancy adverts—but on facilitating the work of others
that already have brand recognition. Frontline delivery
should be key, and it should not duplicate existing
services, but focus on filling the gaps using existing
high-quality not-for-profit providers.

I am a little alarmed that the recent contract round
included for-profit providers. I worked at a debt advice
charity when A4E got contracts, and I remember what a
disaster it was during those contracts. Given the recent
privatisation of Carillion and the problems it has had,
perhaps we should focus on not-for-profit agencies that
have existed for a very long time. In fact, the 80th anniversary
of Citizens Advice is coming up shortly. It has existed
for over 70 years with very little funding, so it—we—can
manage money.

Clause 3(10) makes it clear that the new body needs
to “work with others” in carrying out its strategic
function. I interpret this as meaning that it should take
a collaborative approach, and I hope that that will be
the case. Any standards put in place should be designed
in conjunction with the relevant providers and other
bodies, and designed around people’s needs—those of
the people who use the service and of the people who
deliver it—and what works in practice. I must say that
quantity does not always equal quality and good outcomes
for people using the service.

There should be different channels with different
funding. People may sometimes want to start on one
channel and move to another. Face-to-face access can
be more important, but people sometimes need an
initial contact. As I always say, it used to be a black joke
in the citizens advice bureau where I worked that if
someone walked in with a carrier bag with unopened
bills, we would say, “Aha! That’s a debt client.” If such
people cannot even open their bills, they are not going
to go online.

The object of the single financial guidance body is to
ensure that the public have access to good-quality, free
and impartial financial guidance, pension advice and
debt advice. That aim is fine, but if the new body is to
work well, we must ensure that its objectives and functions
are clear and comprehensive; that the governance and
oversight structure, under the Department to which it is
responsible, is robust; and that it does not stray into
trying to raise awareness of itself and conduct its own
research. I want the body to have a laser-like focus on commissioning high-quality, independent services that will help more people to avoid financial difficulty and debt.

Improvements were made in the Lords to the Bill as originally drafted, and I welcome them. For example, the consumer protection function is really vital, and I hope that the Government will not to remove the provision when the Bill goes into Committee. The same goes for cold calling. That amendment gives the new body the power to advise the Secretary of State to ban cold calling for pensions.

We have heard enough on both sides of the House to be able to say that such a ban should apply across the board. There is a strength of feeling in favour of saying that cold calling is not helping consumers or anyone else. I get cold calls asking whether I have had an accident, but I have not had an accident in my car—touch wood—for 25 years. When I had such a call last week, I got the name of the company and its telephone number, and I reported it to the Telephone Preference Service, but the TPS still could not find the company—it was a shell company—and that is not good enough.

To be fair, the Minister in the other place did listen, and on Third Reading the Government introduced their own amendment to add the objective that the new body should bear in mind “the needs of people in vulnerable circumstances”.

That is a real move forward, but it would be good to link this more explicitly with the promotion of financial inclusion, and it is a real shame that was missed. It is a real boon to have Ministers with responsibility for financial inclusion—they are a bit like buses: we wait for one, and then two come along at once—but there is a worry that something may fall through the cracks. I believe that the Lords Financial Exclusion Committee, which looked at this issue, was right to say that there should be a financial inclusion Minister who works across the board. How many Departments have been mentioned already today? We have heard about BEIS, DCMS, the Treasury, the DWP and the Ministry of Justice. We need somebody who can look at this across all Departments and have a proper financial inclusion strategy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I merely make the point that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and I will be hosting the financial inclusion policy forum together. Surely the whole purpose of the response to the Financial Exclusion Committee’s report was to ensure joined-up Government by the two principal Departments holding other Departments’ feet to the fire, and I assure the hon. Lady that that is what we intend most fully to do.

Yvonne Fovargue: I am very pleased to hear that, but I think financial inclusion is so important on so many levels that it needs a Cabinet position, and having one Minister responsible for it would be really helpful.

I am pleased to hear about the breathing space, for which there is cross-party support. It is long overdue, and we need to ensure that it is up and running as soon as possible. We should not really wait for the creation of the financial guidance body as is proposed in the Bill, because that will be at an uncertain date and we need a timeframe now. After all, six in 10 people, while they are waiting for advice, take out more credit while they are not protected and are being chased by creditors, because it is very easy to promise something to the last person who rings them or knocks on the door.

We have to get the scheme details right, as has been said. It should not just act as a moratorium or a freeze. It should introduce a statutory repayment plan so that debtors are protected while they repay their debts, and the period needs to be long enough for the debt solution to be put in place after seeking advice. Six weeks is not long enough. Frankly, when somebody brings in all their debts, they often forget one. When people write to creditors, some reply immediately while others delay, thinking, “If we don’t bother, we can put a bit of pressure on.” Then the person finds another debt that they had forgotten about, so they have to write again and do another financial statement. Six months is the minimum amount of time to get everything back and to work out a proper financial statement that covers all creditors. Twelve months is probably reasonable, but there should be a minimum period and an option to extend. It should be a reward for those people who are doing the right thing and seeking debt advice.

The scheme needs to include all debt, including that owed to central and local government, which have the worst record on forbearance. In fact, the utility companies, which are often derided, are often better. On council tax arrears, bailiffs are called in far too early and far too often.

It is crucial that the Government get it right when replacing the Money Advice Service. Getting effective financial guidance to people early is key to improving household finances and economic security. We need a body that recognises that people often need help before they reach crisis point. Moreover, once they reach that crisis point, they need to be able to access debt advice quickly, and they need to go to the right body. It is after they have sought debt advice and have a financial statement that they will focus on budgeting for the future, so let us give them guidance after they have had debt advice, because that is when they will concentrate on household bills and what they will do in the future.

The scheme also has to recognise that it does not take a lot to push those on low income into financial difficulty and a spiral of debt. It only takes an income shock. It does not always have to be a big thing such as divorce, job loss or bereavement. It is often something simple such as the washing machine breaking down or expensive repairs to the car they need to get to work. A little resilience and savings would help to address such issues. I want a scheme that helps people save, and the new body could play its part in that. Yes, there is the savings gateway, but, frankly, that expects people to design their lives around the savings scheme, which will not work. People on a low income regularly have small income shocks and saving every month is not always feasible.

I am keen on the work of the Behavioural Insights Team and the interesting developments it has seen on how to save. For example, some supermarket bills say, “You have saved £2 by using this supermarket”, and that money could be put into a savings scheme. People have to be able to say, “This week I cannot or can afford to save.” A regular amount is not really possible in today’s climate.
The Bill has been improved in the Lords and I hope that it can be further improved in this place, to produce a Bill that makes a real difference to people—not just those on a low income, but anyone who receives an income shock, is having problems managing their finances or needs a bit of help budgeting. Financial education in schools is really important. It is important that we teach children how to deal with their finances, but when the washing machine breaks down, speed trumps any form of lessons, interest rates and so on, and that is why the companies say—we have seen the adverts—“I can get the money to you tomorrow.”

6.4 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the heartfelt advice of the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue). It is clear that the world of personal finance can be hard to navigate. Without consolidated guidance, anybody could run into difficulties. That is why I welcome the Bill and the certainty it will provide, replacing a complex array of support services for different areas with a simple process for seeking advice.

There have long been calls to consolidate the financial advice services currently available in the UK, and I regularly signpost constituents to those organisations. The problem, however, is that constituents’ problems are rarely simple, and an individual experiencing financial hardship because of issues with their pension may benefit from more holistic financial advice. A single and well-publicised point of access for financial advice would certainly be of huge benefit to my constituents and provide timely and professional assistance to people across the country who encounter difficulties. I look forward to a strong marketing strategy to promote the service to my constituents, ensuring that everybody is aware of the opportunity to get help. Without such a strategy to raise awareness, it will be a waste of time.

I welcome the news that the Government have consulted extensively on the measures, that they are widely supported and that we already have a framework for financial advice that is fit for purpose. StepChange has commented on how important that is for social justice and for supporting families, including many in Mansfield who are just about managing.

Having heard a number of horror stories about the mismanagement of financial claims, I am also pleased that there is now a simpler way of seeking support when an insurance or other claim fails to go to plan. This simpler form of financial assistance is key in educating service users and promoting financial security. Wise into a new, single financial guidance body. The current landscape for free financial advice and guidance is unnecessarily complex, convoluted and often difficult to access, with several different agencies providing support. The Bill will, sensibly, improve the situation by creating a single, visible body, making it easier for people to find debt advice and consequently make more informed choices about their personal finances and pensions.

Another key reason why I support the Bill is that it transfers responsibility for regulating claims management companies, including PPI claims companies and the more dubious personal injury legal businesses, from the Ministry of Justice to the Financial Conduct Authority. I believe that the FCA, with its powers to cap the charges of claims management companies, will be a much tougher regulator than the Ministry of Justice has been.

The original version of this Bill when it was introduced in the other place was fundamentally flawed, but thanks to the Herculean efforts of Liberal Democrat peers Lord Sharkey and Baroness Kramer, along with some highly expert cross-party support, crucial amendments were made to it that have addressed many of those flaws. I pay tribute to my colleagues in the other place, as their amendments will benefit the consumer—the public—and that is what this Bill should be all about.

First, we tabled an amendment—to be frank, it is astonishing that this was not already part of the Bill—to ensure that one of the core objectives of the single financial guidance body will be to protect consumers. The SFGB will have to pass on evidence of malpractice to the FCA, so that perpetrators are properly investigated and punished. In my view, that is essential for the legislation’s whole premise to work properly and for it to receive the necessary confidence of the public.
Secondly, Liberal Democrat peers recognised that cold calling can be a real scourge, which has a negative impact on millions of people across the country, in some cases leading to severe financial distress and even ruin. Consequently, I am delighted that they succeeded in attaching an amendment to the Bill to give the Government the power to ban cold calling in specific sectors, if the SFGB concludes that it is harming consumers. That represents a positive game change for ordinary consumers in the cold calling industry and is long overdue. Ministers have also promised several concessions in this area to ensure that any ban is implemented faster. I am delighted that they will keep the amendment in the Bill, because its broadness in scope means that any financial services within the SFGB’s remit could face a ban.

We also ensured that pension companies must ask their customers whether they have received financial guidance before accessing or transferring their pension benefits. The FCA can then force companies to refer vulnerable customers for financial guidance, if they have not already received it. I was pleased that the Pensions Minister told the Work and Pensions Committee that he would not “fundamentally amend anything that emerges from their Lordships”, and I will hold him to that commitment.

Last but not least, Liberal Democrat peers worked closely with Labour peers and expert Cross Benchers to put the necessary pressure on the Government to introduce a breathing space scheme for people in severe financial distress—in other words, a limited debt moratorium to give someone affected the time to get debt advice and support. The amendment had been called for by leading charities in the sector, including StepChange and the Children’s Society, and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), for quite some time, so it is good to see it in the Bill.

However, despite such a breathing space scheme being in the Conservative 2017 general election manifesto and already existing in Scotland, where it is a proven success, the Government tried to argue in the other place that such a scheme was not in the scope of the Bill. Frankly, that was a ridiculous position to take, but fortunately our joint pressure paid off and the Government conceded by introducing a clause giving Ministers the power to introduce a breathing space scheme. The consultation that Her Majesty’s Government launched on breathing space wrapped up last week, and I will be watching them closely to ensure that it is not kicked into the long grass like so many of their other promises. The 8.3 million UK citizens suffering from debt problems and the 2.4 million children living in families with problem debt simply cannot afford to wait or be ignored any longer.

The Bill is still not perfect. For example, although the single financial guidance body has an objective to promote financial awareness and education, it will have no statutory powers to do so. We believe that financial literacy must be taught to all age groups, not only in schools but in the workplace, and that there should be strong mechanisms to enforce that. Otherwise, one of the root causes of poor financial management and financial distress will remain unaddressed. We hope that the Government will think again and beef that up in the Bill. If they do not, the constant talking, discussing and complaining about the lack of financial literacy among many members of the public will never change, and we will be in the same place in 10 years’ time. The Bill presents the Government with the opportunity to finally address that properly. I urge the Minister to respond to that point.

None the less, the Bill is a clear improvement on the current situation, which is why I and my party will support its Second Reading. I hope that the Government will recognise and appreciate the significant improvements that were made to the Bill in the other place by the Liberal Democrats and other parties, and that they will build on our amendments rather than fail to do so. To be honest, the public would deservedly be outraged if they did not do as they said.

6.15 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is good to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the Second Reading of the Bill. It is important that people have access to the right financial help and advice, which is essential to stop financial problems escalating. That is particularly pertinent when people are ill. When someone is diagnosed with a disease such as cancer—especially when the diagnosis is terminal—the financial implications are often the last thing on their mind. However, it can undoubtedly result in great difficulties and cause someone additional stress when they need normality, stability, dignity by being able to work and the ability to pay their bills.

 Banks and building societies have an unrivalled ability to reach and support people affected by the financial impact of cancer and other health conditions and disabilities, particularly regarding mortgages and other significant financial commitments. However, recent research from Macmillan shows that more needs to be done to improve the support available and ensure that helping people with cancer and other vulnerable customers is at the heart of banks’ culture.

Today, I would like to reflect on the experiences of one of my constituents, Jacci Woodcock, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer a number of years ago. Despite a desire to stay in work, she was treated very badly by her former employer, SMD Textiles in Preston, Lancashire, and was pushed out of her job soon after her diagnosis, even though she had no time off during her chemo and her sales figures never suffered. Subsequently, Jacci has campaigned tirelessly for the Dying to Work campaign, which she began. It is a cross-party campaign for additional employment protection for terminally ill workers who are able to and want to work. I implore all colleagues in the House to support the campaign and encourage businesses in their constituencies to follow suit. Many very large businesses have already done so, and I would like to see employment law strengthened to help people like Jacci.

After leaving her job as a result of pressure exerted by her employer following her terminal diagnosis, Jacci could no longer afford her mortgage repayments. She was therefore faced with a further concern that her home would be repossessed—the home where she wishes to stay until she sadly dies. Jacci had a joint mortgage with her ex-partner, Mr Andrew Bradley, which they held with Santander. After Jacci’s diagnosis, Mr Bradley left Jacci and their home because he could not cope and, from October 2015, stopped paying the mortgage. He told Jacci that he thought she would be dead and wanted his equity from the house.
An official offer was presented to Mr Bradley to continue to pay the mortgage until her death, and then he could recover all the payments from her estate. Thankfully, in Jacci’s case, Santander dealt with the situation extremely well and a mutually agreeable conclusion was reached. When the situation was flagged up to the bank, it agreed to discontinue all collections and litigation activity relating to the mortgage. Jacci was therefore not required to make any more payments on the mortgage. It remained at the standard variable rate, repayable through equity from her home upon her death.

I was impressed by how understanding Santander was in handling Jacci’s case. It is a very large company and one might think that it would not be interested in one person’s problems. The process, however, was not straightforward, and the delay in reaching a satisfactory agreement was traumatic for Jacci when she was in a very vulnerable place. Red tape in such circumstances should be limited. Financial institutions should have a moral and legal duty to care. Policies need to be consistent in dealing with customers with a terminal diagnosis.

Macmillan’s research shows that people do not know what to expect from their bank. Just 11% of people with cancer tell their bank about their diagnosis. This needs to change so that banks and building societies can help their customers when they need it most. The introduction of a formal responsibility for banks and building societies towards terminally ill customers would give people the confidence to disclose their diagnosis. Customers should know they can trust their bank to act in their best interests during a time of distress. I hope that the Minister can give us some words of encouragement and that the Government will press organisations such as banks and building societies to be much more sympathetic towards people such as Jacci.

6.20 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). I particularly welcome her comments about the Dying to Work campaign, which I am supporting in my constituency, too.

Crippling personal debt is a huge problem. The stress of not knowing what a letter contains and never being sure whether it is the bailiffs at the door can sour relationships, destroy families and make people ill. On this Government’s watch, household debt is now higher as a percentage of disposable income than at any time since 2008, and figures show that nearly 4,000 families in Hull live with problem debt. I therefore welcome the opportunity the Bill affords us to discuss such an important issue, and although it is a wide-ranging Bill, I will confine my contribution to clauses 7 and 8 on the statutory breathing space scheme.

Guy Opperman: I want gently to take issue with what the hon. Lady just said: the overall level of household debt is actually lower than it was in 2010 and 14 percentage points down in relation to quarter one of 2010, compared with quarter three of 2017. I am not sure therefore that her original comment was correct.

Emma Hardy: I do not mean that debt is higher as a proportion of income; I meant that it is higher as a percentage of disposable income, which the Minister will find it is.

The Government need to do three things with the scheme if they are properly to grant the breathing space people need. First, the scheme must be applicable to all relevant debts, including central and local government debt. To take one example, I recently met the organisation Every Child Leaving Care Matters, where I learned about the problems some care leavers face with things such as council tax obligations. After years of having these bills paid for them, they can often find themselves with mounting debt and without the support, including family support, that many of us here take for granted. That is why I was delighted when Labour-led Hull City Council announced recently that nearly 350 youngsters leaving the care system in the city would not have to pay council tax in Hull until they turned 21.

The scheme will be one of the first policies of its kind in the country when it starts next April and could mean that each of these people saves at least £900 a year. That is fantastic news for Hull but unfortunately not for the rest of my constituents in the East Riding of Yorkshire Council. We can end this unacceptable postcode lottery by supporting the Bill today. It is not just care leavers who are affected either—many people owe money to central and local government—and by ensuring that these debts are included in the breathing space scheme we can help care leavers and many others keep their heads above water.

Secondly, the scheme must make sure that the Government’s consultation, while thorough, is carried out as quickly as possible. There is a danger that the words “As soon as reasonably practicable” in clause 8 will allow the Government to drag their feet in deciding whether to introduce this breathing space scheme. That must not be allowed to happen. The Secretary of State must act quickly to make sure that a scheme is put in place and that support is offered to those who need it now.

Thirdly, the scheme must ensure that the breathing space is long enough to provide time for families to stabilise their finances and that support is in place to allow them to pay their debts in a manageable way. It is no use holding back the creditors from the door for a randomly chosen six-week period if, at the end of those six weeks, the family can still not pay. If we are to set a breathing space, we must get the period right.

We must get this right. Not to do so would not be in the interests of our economy, which already struggles with high personal debt; it would not be in the interests of creditors, who, according to statistics from Scotland, collect more of what is owed to them when a payment plan is followed; and it would definitely not be in the interests of the many families in my constituency drowning in an ocean of personal debt. On clauses 7 and 8 at least, the Government find themselves in the rare position of enjoying cross-party support and with a rare opportunity to make my constituents’ lives a little easier. On their behalf, I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State to act quickly and, further to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) from the Front Bench, to take on board my points and grasp the opportunity being offered to help so many people.
The creation of a single financial guidance body is being welcomed not only across the House but among charities and industry. At present, according to Which? and as was alluded to earlier, only 36% of consumers use Government advisory bodies as an information source about their financial options. I hope that the creation of this body will help to increase uptake, particularly among those who have most to benefit. The Bill sets out the objective that guidance be available to those most in need of support. In the Adjournment debate, I raised issues faced by the disabled, lone parents and single pensioners, while my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has just referred to the terminally ill. I hope that the Minister will agree that, as we measure the success of this body, we will scrutinise its ability to direct support to the hardest-to-reach people who need it most.

More broadly, I hope that the establishment of this body will serve as an important step towards a culture change and a situation where guidance is sought as a norm at key points in one’s life. Pension Wise was a significant step towards this goal, but given the importance of pension saving earlier in life, I am keen to see this service available to all, rather than restricted to the over-50s.

I appreciate that the terms of the body are yet to be specified, but I would be interested to hear the Minister’s view on the accessibility of pension guidance earlier in life. Unlike the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who made a good contribution earlier, I was pleased to learn that the name of the body had not yet been announced. We will therefore not have a bunch of imposters setting up rival sites. I welcome the specific offence being established in the Bill. The last thing any of us would want is for those who are seeking help to find themselves victims of scams.

In any event, in common with the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), I urge caution about too much reinvention of the wheel. Originally, the intention was for the single financial guidance body to be purely a commissioning body. We are all aware of trusted and well-established organisations in our own constituencies, such as Citizens Advice, at national level, and many more organisations at local level. In my case, that includes the Horsham Debt Advice Service. The new body will be most effective as an enabler, a director of resource and an upholder of standards. I trust that that is but the first of many steps to enhance individuals’ ability to manage their finances effectively, and I have sympathy with the points raised earlier about financial resilience and financial education.

I look forward in particular to the report on the pensions dashboard that, as I understand from the Secretary of State’s words at the Dispatch Box, will be produced in March. The dashboard will be of significant benefit to consumers and will help to drive cultural change in the industry and among savers. I know that I am not alone in thinking that, alongside the pensions dashboard, more visibility for other forms of saving would be advantageous.

Finally, I want to touch on the debt respite provisions that have been incorporated into the Bill. I welcome them, and I hope that the guidance body’s report and the Government action that follows will be accelerated as swiftly as possible, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle has said, consistent with
[Jeremy Quin]

effective legislation. Although the provisions are useful and appropriate, they will not solve the problem of debt. The nature of the debt providers matters. I hope that I am allowed, as the chair of the all-party group on credit unions, to make a small plug in favour of credit unions. The amount that they lend has doubled since 2006, and they now have 1.3 million members across the country. That is to be welcomed. The more people save with and borrow from responsible providers, the better.

For all who get into difficulty, a breathing space is a practical and essential measure. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.31 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the chance to speak in this debate. I will make a short speech on a topic that has been touched on by Members on both sides of the House. We seem to agree that the introduction of a duty of care for financial service providers would be a good thing. That is not currently in the Bill, but the Bill gives us a vital opportunity to take steps towards introducing such a duty of care and, in doing so, transforming the support that customers receive from their financial service providers.

As is recognised in the Bill, ensuring that people have access to the right help and advice as soon as possible is essential to stopping financial problems escalating. For people who are ill, or who are considered vulnerable in other ways, it becomes even more important. It is well known that being diagnosed with a health condition such as cancer can come with a huge and sudden financial impact. Research by Macmillan Cancer Support found that four out of five people with cancer are impacted financially by their diagnosis, which makes them, on average, £570 a month worse off. That impact, as one would expect, leaves many people struggling to keep up with their financial commitments.

Banks, building societies and other financial services providers are in a unique position to step in. They could offer short-term measures, such as flexibility on mortgage payments or interest freezes on credit cards and loans, as well as ensuring that customers are signposted early to financial help, which can help them to avoid problem debt. Some banks have made progress on that. For example, Lloyds and Nationwide have worked in partnership with Macmillan to deliver specialist support to customers who are affected by cancer. However, the overall picture is still mixed. Only one in nine people with cancer tell their bank about their diagnosis. Many people do not think that their bank can help them, or, worse, they worry that disclosing their diagnosis will have negative consequences. Of those who did tell their bank, nearly a quarter were dissatisfied with the support they received. That, to me, seems like a huge missed opportunity.

When someone is living with a long-term health condition such as cancer, the last thing they should be worrying about is money. But if people do not feel comfortable accessing support, or the support is not there when they try, their financial worries can quickly escalate. If financial service providers had a legal duty of care towards their customers, they would be given the confidence to disclose their diagnosis, knowing that they could trust their bank to act in their best interests.

For banks and other providers, that would mean being ready to respond to their customers’ needs, and designing the vital products and services that would help people focus on their health. Of course, the duty would not just help people with cancer. It would have wide-ranging benefits because it would ensure that the banking sector played its part in helping customers, particularly those who might be vulnerable, when they needed it most.

As Members may be aware, the Financial Conduct Authority has committed to publishing a discussion paper on the duty of care. Although that is welcome, I and many other Members have significant concerns about the timescale. The discussion paper will form part of the FCA’s handbook review, which will not take place until after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU is clear. What that timeframe means in reality is not yet clear. What we know is that a discussion paper would be only the start of a long process of consultation and legislation, so it could be many years before a duty of care came into effect. Meanwhile, during that time, nearly 1,000 people every day in the UK will receive the devastating news that they have cancer.

This is key. Often when we discuss such issues to do with financial regulation, the debates are technical and can feel removed from the general public. The duty of care is different. The public are starting to take a real interest in the issue, and those who see the terrible impact on people of conditions such as cancer are demanding that we take action. Take Miranda, a Macmillan nurse. In her role helping patients, she sees the financial impact of cancer at first hand. I want to share a couple of quotes from Miranda with the House:

“It’s enough to cope with the effects of the treatment and the psychological effects of the diagnosis, without having to worry about money as well”.

She continues:

“To relieve the pressure of not having to pay your mortgage for six months or so…will be a tremendous help to people.”

Supported by Macmillan, Miranda has written an open letter in support of a duty of care. It has been signed by nearly 20,000 people—that is 20,000 people who want action. They do not want to wait years for change. What would the Minister say to those people? How would he justify any delay to them?

Of course, we all appreciate that Brexit will have significant implications for the financial services industry and that they will need careful thought, but that is not a valid reason for delaying the duty of care. Action is needed now, so that future changes are built on the foundation that financial services firms have a duty of care to their customers.

I urge the Minister to listen to what is being said today and to commit to working with the FCA to deliver faster action on the duty of care. He should listen to the cross-party concerns that have been set out here and in the other place. He should listen to the numerous organisations that have supported the call for a duty of care, to the Lords Select Committee on Financial Exclusion, which recommended its introduction, and to the 20,000 people who have called on the Government to take action. I thank Macmillan Cancer Support for its parliamentary briefing, which has contributed in a big way to my speech. Finally, will the Minister meet representatives of Macmillan Cancer Support to discuss the introduction of a duty of care?
Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in support of this Bill, which is of real significance to my constituents, given the demography of East Renfrewshire. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Prior to coming into this place, I spent nine years as a specialist pensions advisory solicitor and I was a member of various fun organisations such as the Association of Pension Lawyers—it is, I assure Members, as exciting as it sounds.

Part 1 of the Bill creates a single financial guidance body to replace three existing services. It is a much-needed move to make public financial guidance more accessible and more integrated. The services offered by the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise are somewhat disjointed, and there is a lack of communication and co-ordination between the three services. That is why only 3% of Pension Wise users say that they first heard about the service from the Money Advice Service, for example. As we are talking about public financial guidance services, those figures should be much higher.

That is why it is important that the three services are replaced with one body. Instead of having to contact two or more services for different aspects of financial guidance, people will be able to access one integrated and holistic service. It is absolutely critical that people across the UK can access independent, impartial and high-quality financial guidance.

It should go without saying that the ultimate measure of a guidance service is whether the guidance it provides is useful. I would, therefore, like the single body to be subject to rigorous evaluations based on consumer outcomes, not just outputs, to ensure that it is fulfilling its role. Much of the anticipated success of the new SFGB assumes that the new body publicises itself effectively. According to Which? around two thirds of people are aware of each of the three existing bodies. It is crucial that the single financial guidance body quickly achieves and then surpasses those levels of awareness, so that as many people as possible can access its services. Linking in with the pensions dashboard to give users a prompt would be a simple step.

Pension freedom and choice was mentioned earlier in the debate. It has changed the pensions landscape, but the debate. It has changed the pensions landscape, but it should go without saying that the ultimate measure of a guidance service is whether the guidance it provides is useful. I would, therefore, like the single body to be subject to rigorous evaluations based on consumer outcomes, not just outputs, to ensure that it is fulfilling its role. Much of the anticipated success of the new SFGB assumes that the new body publicises itself effectively. According to Which? around two thirds of people are aware of each of the three existing bodies. It is crucial that the single financial guidance body quickly achieves and then surpasses those levels of awareness, so that as many people as possible can access its services. Linking in with the pensions dashboard to give users a prompt would be a simple step.

Pension freedom and choice was mentioned earlier in the debate. It has changed the pensions landscape, but while Pension Wise is sensible Government policy, it is predicated on individuals becoming engaged investors, so it does not mitigate risks for most people. Research by the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association found that only 22% of individuals used the Pension Wise website. That is nowhere near good enough if we are serious about ensuring people are going to provide a sustainable retirement for themselves.

In its comprehensive Financial Lives survey, the FCA identified further detail on the shockingly low levels of guidance usage among key age groups, with only 7% of all 55 to 64-year-olds using the service in the last 12 months. Perhaps it is not surprising that the PLSA found that, of the 3 million individuals between the ages of 55 and 70 with defined-contribution pots not yet in payment, 300,000 had taken no action whatever. Of those who had, 15% had used the new freedom to take more than their 25% tax-free cash lump sum. When they took that cash, 20% spent it all—what is sometimes colloquially known as the Lamborghini option.

Freedom and choice is great. I like it, but it brings with it the inherent risk of life-destroying choices, and the role of the SFGB has to be to provide guidance to try to prevent people from making those mistakes. Individuals face really complex risks when selecting how to use their pension savings. The language, concepts and risks are all unfamiliar to most people. How we use our retirement funds is one of the most important decisions we will make in our lives, and impartial, independent support to help us to make an informed decision is absolutely vital. It is clear to me at least that the new SFGB is integral to the success of freedom and choice. It has to be the anchor in terms of accessing high-quality guidance, so that people can evaluate their options and make best use of what they have saved.

Given everything I saw and experienced before coming into this place, I remain hugely attracted to the principle of default guidance, mirroring the approach taken to auto-enrolment, with statutory opt-out provisions. Clause 5(2) could be strengthened, as was recommended by the Work and Pensions Committee. The Minister has made some positive noises about that, but if we are looking for something as close as possible to a silver bullet, default guidance is probably it.

I would also question precisely how the SFGB is going to work alongside the new pensions dashboard. The dashboard is long overdue. It is a tool that brings together an individual’s pension entitlements—state, workplace and personal—and it will be really widely used. However, I have a slight worry that providers will be, and indeed are, setting up their own branded variations.

Guy Opperman: In contemplating my hon. Friend’s outstanding speech, let me help him with a couple of points. The dashboard is being proceeded with, and I will be making a statement to the House before the end of March, giving an update on the process by which these things are taking place. I will address some of the other remarks in his speech at a later stage.

Paul Masterton: I thank the Minister for his intervention. On that basis, I will move on to clause 4 and pensions cold calling.

Losses from pension scams rose to £8 million in March last year, and over £40 million has been lost to pensions liberation—something I dealt with a lot in practice—with individuals being tempted to transfer out of generous final salary schemes to access their pension pot prior to age 55, with the 55% tax charge that came with that.

Though big steps have been taken, the scammers are clever, and their approaches are becoming more sophisticated. Citizens Advice believes that around 2.4 million 55 to 64-year-olds received unsolicited contact about their pension in the year after pension freedom and choice was introduced. A cold call ban will narrow the scope for scammers, but if we have a default guidance requirement, there is more chance of the individual being alerted, before they take the option to transfer, to the risk they are facing.

Other Members have been through clauses 7 and 8 in detail. Like all things, the debt arrangement scheme we have in Scotland is not perfect, but it is a good place to start, as I think the Government recognised in bringing forward the provisions they did on Third Reading in the other place. A statutory debt management plan is a good thing, not least because it should avoid insolvency.
Under Clause 11, arrangements are introduced for the funding of debt advice in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The delivery of debt advice will be devolved, but raising a levy to fund the provision of that advice is reserved. I do have some concerns here. While I completely understand the rationale for devolving debt advice, given the other advice and guidance services commissioned from Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, I am not precisely clear how this is going to work in practice.

The functions of the new single body fall into two categories: the debt advice function, under which it will provide members of the public only in England with information and advice on debt; and the strategic debt function. That strategic function is UK-wide, so we will have a situation where the single body’s functions in relation to financial capability, money guidance and the strategic debt function are UK-wide, but the debt advice function is not. That debt advice function really does have to dovetail with the UK-wide elements of the SFGB, irrespective of its delivery by the devolved Administrations, if this is going to work. I am not entirely clear how we are going to ensure that that happens.

Clauses 10 and 11 require the SFGB to set and enforce standards across the debt advice partners it commissions, because debt services are predominantly provided by service providers, many of whom operate cross-border. However, with the procurement and provision of debt advice services devolved, that role sits not with the SFGB in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, but with the devolved Administrations. As was pointed out by many bodies in the consultation, that could raise issues. Of course, the devolved Administrations may want to tailor services to meet particular requirements, but there really is a strong case for ensuring that standards are aligned, both for providers who operate cross-border and for UK consumers. I ask the Minister to outline how he intends to work with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the commissioning of debt advice services is joined up as far as possible to ensure we get the dovetailing I mentioned earlier.

I am conscious of time, so I will not go into part 2 in much detail, other than to say that I am pleased that the Scottish Government have changed their position from not wanting part 2 to extend to Scotland to agreeing that it should now extend to Scotland. That, combined with some of the measures going through the Scottish Parliament at the minute, particularly around no win, no fee solicitors, will make a big difference on some of the issues around claims management companies north of the border.

The Bill has two pillars, both of which are much needed. Although the provisions allowing for a single, integrated financial guidance service are not the end of the story, they are important advances. I am absolutely delighted to support the Bill, and I thank the Minister and his team for bringing it forward. This is a really difficult area, and he has grasped the nettle—or, as we are in Burns season, the thistle—and brought to this House legislation with real intent and purpose, which will, along with the Government’s other initiatives on pension saving, make huge positive changes to how people monitor and manage their finances.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I rise to speak specifically in favour of the amendments tabled in the other place in respect of the debt respite, or breathing space, scheme for those struggling with personal debt.

However, before I do, I wonder whether, in summing up, the Minister can clarify the to and fro we have had on whether consumer debt is increasing in this country. When I say “clarify”, I do not mean giving us a statistic that supports the Government’s answer, as against the statistic given by Opposition Members; I mean giving us a simple answer on whether consumer debt is higher or lower. My understanding from Bank of England and Office for Budget Responsibility data is that consumer credit—unsecured loans—is up by 19% since 2010. Car financing—a huge new area of secured personal debt—has added £30 billion in the same timeframe. Student debt under this Government has doubled to nearly £100 billion. In real terms, there has been a 7% increase since 2010 in consumer personal debt—the second highest figure in the G8 economies after that in Canada. Some clarification on that point would be welcome.

It is estimated that over 8 million adults in the UK struggle with problem personal debt—the issue we are debating today—resulting in bankruptcy or individual voluntary arrangements. Many people are in that situation because of unexpected life events, be that a job loss, an illness or a breakdown in relationships. The debt charity StepChange, which has been mentioned on multiple occasions in the debate, estimates that 60% of its clients were able to stabilise their financial position after a voluntary freezing of interest charges and enforcement action by their creditors, so it is clear that a breathing space scheme can make a real difference to the lives of people struggling with problem personal debt.

We must be honest: we have a problem with personal debt in this country. Although I welcome the Bill and the technical measures to try to solve some of the symptoms of personal debt, I want to take this opportunity to speak about some of its causes. We must remember why we are in this situation in the first place. Quite frankly, it is because we have seen the lowest level of wage payments as a percentage of GDP for decades. The flattening of wages for many years—and, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, potentially for the next 17 years—when compared with the increasing cost of living, pushes many hard-working people into the red.

That is not new in Britain, but it does show the difference that Government policy can make. I remember all too well when, in the 1980s, as a child growing up in Lawrence Weston—in what is now my constituency—I had to hide behind the curtains with my mum when the debt collector came to the door because we could not afford to repay the then high cost of personal debts provided by Provident, the Wonga of its day. That was a regular occurrence in my childhood. My parents were both in work. They were hard-working, law-abiding citizens who just wanted to do the best for our family. However, in the days before the introduction of the national minimum wage, the only source of support for a working-class family earning a mere couple of pounds per hour and with no one to call upon for financial help in times of trouble could be high-interest loan providers.
I remember asking myself then—as, sadly, I do now—why my mum and dad went to work every day, but did not have enough money to feed themselves as well as me. Why could we not afford my school uniform, or the school trip on which my friends were going? Most important, I remember seeing and feeling the stress that poverty induces. When there is a bailiff at the door, and red-ink printed letters in the letter box bearing more and more charges leading to spiralling debt repayments, it causes a type of anxiety and stress that I find hard to describe in words alone. As we discuss the Bill, let us not forget the additional harm caused to the British people when we do not solve the issue of personal debt in the first place, but merely provide technical measures to deal with the outcomes.

I am reminded of why I am so deeply committed and thankful to the Labour Government. They introduced the national minimum wage and invested in public services, and we should be proud of the number of children lifted out of poverty, including me. That has meant that I can stand here today to try to improve the lives of my constituents. It saddens me greatly, however, that—although I benefited from the policies of a Labour Government, which made such a difference to my family and to my prospects in life—we are here once again talking about the same issues. The sad truth is that, after a new lost generation of misguided austerity, we are now going backwards. On the day that Oxfam has revealed that 42 people have the same wealth as the 3.7 billion poorest in the world, we must take this opportunity to pause and ask why that is, and why we let it happen.

I am a centre-ground politician. I do not want to smash capitalism, but I do wish to fix it. If we are to do that, however, we must remember that it is for us—elected representatives of the British people in this democratic Parliament—to set the rules of the game. It is no excuse to talk of globalisation, multinational companies, tax jurisdictions outside the United Kingdom, and the accumulation of wealth in assets while wages become lower and lower. It is no excuse to stand here and say that those problems are too hard for us to fix as a nation—to say, “I would rather we were a member of the European Union, trying to fix them as part of a bloc of countries.”

I should like to see much more radical reform of the economy, but this is a good first step, and I welcome the Government’s commitment to it. In a digital world, the Provident man is no longer on the doorstep writing down in his grey book how much people have borrowed, how much they have paid back, and, when he comes back next week, how much they need to repay. An app on the phone can deliver the funds to someone’s bank account within hours. Access to such services and support is very important.

I thank the Economic Secretary for his detailed response to my letter about this issue. Like other Members who have spoken, I hope he now understands—notwithstanding clause 8(2), which says that the Secretary of State may merely consider whether a breathing space is necessary—that it is indeed necessary, and that the Government should work speedily to introduce it. In response to my letter, the Government made it clear that they were willing to listen to stakeholders in designing the “breathing space” scheme, and I welcome that. I hope that they will include all personal debts, not just some. I hope that they will take account of what has been said by Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who, on this issue, is a learned Member, and who suggested a minimum period of six months rather than six weeks.

I took issue with something that was said earlier by the Secretary of State, who is no longer in the Chamber. In her opening speech, she said that people needed access to mentoring, support and education about budgeting. I agree with that, but let me make this point: to suggest that people who find themselves in very stressful, and sometimes devastating, situations of personal debt because of their ineptitude is both patronising and offensive. [HOn. MEMBERS: “She did not say that.”] She did indeed.

I am reminded of an occasion when, during my election campaign, I visited a food bank in my constituency. I asked some people why they had ended up there. One of my constituents said that she had broken up with her partner and found herself in financial difficulties, and that that had driven her to come to the food bank. I will not name names, but she then told me that a Conservative Member of Parliament who had been in my constituency in the run-up to the election had written in an article for Conservative Home that food bank users needed financial budget management skills. She broke down in tears as she told me that story, in front of her neighbours and her children in the food bank where she had wished never to find herself, because she had been told that she was there because of her lack of intelligence or ability.

The Secretary of State said that it was a core principle of this Conservative Government that the Bill empowered individuals by giving them the information that they needed. Let me make it clear that it is a core principle of the Labour party—and it will continue to be a core principle when we are in government—to empower individuals by paying them a decent wage for a decent day’s work, so that they can live as they wish to live.

I commend the Government on this technical Bill, which provides some good solutions to some of the problems that we face. I look forward to seeing the regulations that will bring a breathing space scheme into law as soon as possible. However, let us not forget what causes people to find themselves in this situation. Let us try to create an economy that works not just for the few, but for the many. Let us remind people like my constituents who become stuck, often through no fault of their own, that they are not alone, and that there are people in this place who are fighting for them and their future.

6.56 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who spoke movingly about the importance of respite and the period for the repayment of debts. However, I regret the party-political tone of some elements of his speech. In my constituency in the city of Gloucester, which is not very far from his, 6,000 jobs in business were lost under the last Labour Government. Youth unemployment rose spectacularly, and living standards almost collapsed. The hon. Gentleman talked about a Government who look after the fortunes of the many, and not the few. He should come and meet the 8,000 new apprentices in Gloucester, where youth unemployment has fallen by 85% over the last eight years.
The hon. Gentleman also accused my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State of describing people who went to food banks as suffering from ineptitude, and I believe that his remarks were completely out of order. I hope that, when he has had a chance to study the record, he will in due course at the very least withdraw that extremely personal comment, which was alarmingly in tune with something that the shadow Chancellor appeared to give air to when he referred warmly to those on his side of the House who wanted to “lynch” the new Secretary of State. I believe that all those remarks are totally out of keeping with the tone that we expect in the House.

Let me now turn to a matter on which there is cross-party consensus, namely the Bill’s Second Reading. The Bill has two parts, and I shall comment on each in turn. The first is clearly designed to rationalise three separate bodies offering Government-sponsored guidance services into a new single entity, the single financial guidance body—not the snappiest, most memorable name, but it marks an important moment in the consolidation of guidance.

I have direct experience of two of the three bodies that are being merged. The creation of Pension Wise was a very well-intentioned move by the Government, but there is no doubt that take-up has been much too low, and a different approach is therefore required. When I saw a Pension Wise adviser nearly two years ago, I was impressed by the quality of her advice. I do not think that that was a one-off experience, and I believe that those who have had the chance to access Pension Wise would agree.

I have also seen and heard the Pensions Advisory Service in action. The quality of its service and advice is powerful, and its model—like that of Citizens Advice—is one of recruiting volunteers with relevant sector experience. This represents good value for money for the taxpayer as well as giving the volunteers a great sense of purpose in giving something back. That is the secret of so much volunteering. I hope the Minister will reassure us today that that aspect of the Pensions Advisory Service model will be continued in the bigger world of the SFGB and, ideally, expanded.

The financial sector is a popular bogeyman, especially among Opposition Members, but I hope that those on both sides will join me in recognising and appreciating those who have given their time and knowledge voluntarily to the SFGB’s three predecessors, and in wishing the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who is in his place, success in working with Her Majesty’s Treasury to set up the new body. The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association has described this as absolutely integral to the success of pensions freedoms.

The Bill allows for a focus on the weak and vulnerable—something in which I know the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), strongly believes. I hope that he will say more about his definition of those terms and about how the SFGB will focus on them. Part of that will involve identification; part of it is about access.

I want to sound a note of caution on one aspect of the Bill, and my approach here is slightly different from that of the hon. Member for Bristol North West. I do not believe that we should be too constrictive about the guidance that will be given. Indeed, I differ greatly from the otherwise excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) on this point as well. We are at risk of assuming that people who wish to take money from their pension pots will spend it on things that might not benefit them or their families. At a time when levels of household debt are high, with a total of £1.9 trillion, there is a question mark over how their funds should be used. The levels are not as high as they were under the last Labour Government, when levels of household income indebtedness rose from 93% to 158%, but they are still too high.

The early evidence seen by the previous Work and Pensions Committee suggested that withdrawals were mostly being used to reduce family debts, which for most people makes good financial sense. Perhaps the Minister will update us on whether that trend is still broadly true. It was the reason why the Select Committee took the view in 2016 that we broadly supported the pension reforms, and it is also relevant to the FCA’s review of retirement outcomes, which will happen in the first half of this year, and to the proposed ban on cold calling.

There is another point to make on the savings levels of pensions. Under this Government, following the coalition’s introduction of auto-enrolment, which had cross-party support, the percentage of those working who are now saving for their retirement has risen to 78%. That is a huge step forward, but the Minister will also know that 13% of adults still have no savings. That statistic raises the question of how we can stimulate lower earners—those earning under £10,000 a year—to enter an auto-enrolment scheme, perhaps through enhanced incentives. I recognise that that is not an issue for this Bill; it is a matter for the White Paper that has been promised in the spring. It is, however, an issue relating to debt, pensions and savings and therefore part of the same general concern that we are discussing this evening. It is therefore related to the discussion on part 1 of the Bill, and anything the Minister can say to indicate that it is being closely considered will be welcome.

The second part of the Bill deals with enabling the Government to ban pension cold calling, which we all welcome. I know that the Opposition and the new Select Committee have reservations about the speed of Government action, and I hope that the Minister will reassure us that we will not have to wait until the autumn of 2020 for a decision on the introduction of such a ban. If, after three consultations and the upcoming FCA report, the Government decide that this is the right thing to do, surely we will be able to move faster. DEALING with claims management companies can be an emotional experience for many of our constituents. The proposal is to shift responsibility for them from the Ministry of Justice to the FCA and give the authority the power to impose a cap on the fees that CMCs can charge. I hope that it will vigorously implement that new power, and I suspect that that hope is widely shared.

The latter part of the second part of the Bill has been covered in some detail by several Members. It covers having a repayment plan and a period of respite to deal with accumulated debts. We know from the experience of our constituents that good debt advisers can help with these issues, and that their negotiations with creditors on extending repayment periods have made a huge difference to many people. So why not look at this more
institutionally, in just the way that the Bill allows? That will be an excellent step forward, and I look forward to hearing more from the Minister on how that will be taken forward.

The Bill has been widely welcomed by charities and the financial sector, and it has cross-party support. That is a strong position to start from, and I strongly welcome the reforms I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will be able to shed some light on the questions that I have raised on the role of volunteers in the single financial guidance body; the identification of and approach to the weak and vulnerable; an analysis of what pension withdrawals are being used for; how we might expand the reach of auto-enrolment to increase the savings level in the nation; the introduction of a pensions dashboard, which he mentioned tantalisingly briefly; and an early decision on how and when to ban cold calling. These are all extremely important issues, and I believe that they offer the Government an opportunity to go yet further in helping many of our constituents, through the Bill’s twin aims of reducing scams and improving guidance in order to enable better financial decisions to be made.

7.7 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to contribute to today’s debate. The Bill deals with a range of issues, but I want to focus on pensions. The pensions market is often complicated and confusing, so any moves to make it more accessible to consumers must of course be welcomed, although we on the Scottish National party Benches are still disappointed that the Government have not championed a fully independent pensions commission to look at all aspects of pensions. We want a pensions system that is fair for all, but the opportunity to achieve that has not been presented today. However, we will continue to argue for it.

We know that there is a challenge in addressing consumer confidence on pensions. Too many people feel that pensions are complex, are over-complicated, and that can create inertia and inaction. That can have a profound effect on pension outcomes, as the decisions that consumers make can have serious financial consequences for their future. The Bill offers a perfect opportunity to introduce a legal duty of care on financial institutions and to put the most vulnerable members of our communities at the heart of decisions and services that can be used to protect them. It is disappointing that that has not been enshrined in the Bill, but I am confident, given what I have heard today, that the Minister is paying close attention to that point.

We need to be sure that consumers have access to the best independent advice, especially those who are vulnerable. Pension matters are confusing and can be complicated. We need to be confident that, whatever decisions people make about their pensions, they are properly and independently informed. I wonder how many consumers are even aware of Pension Wise, which offers free independent advice on pensions. What more can the Government do to promote such services? I heard the Secretary of State talking earlier about the service’s reach being improved as it is amalgamated with other services, but sadly I did not hear any details about how that might happen. We have to remember that those most in need of independent financial and pension advice are often the hardest to reach.

The Financial Conduct Authority pointed out that consumers may be choosing to draw down their pension instead of shopping around for what may be a more appropriate pension product because they find choosing between the alternatives simply too challenging. The challenge for those of us trying to understand pensions and how to get the best deal has been complicated by the introduction of pension freedoms and new savings products. There is nothing wrong with introducing such freedoms to allow people more say and choice about financial options in retirement, but vital safeguards for older people who may choose to free up funds were missing or not prominent enough when such schemes were introduced. More work needs to be done to ensure that those who choose to free up funds get the financial advice about the long-term implications of making such choices that is correct for their particular circumstances, especially as so many of us can expect to live long lives in retirement. We need to be careful that we are not living longer simply to live in poverty and that the vulnerable are not easy prey for those who would take advantage.

Poor advice on pension decisions can lead to years or even decades of lost benefits and a much reduced quality of retirement. I understand that the aim of merging the current services into one is to create a more efficient service, but I want more detail on how that will be done in practice. What specific measures will be put in place to ensure that the new service will actively engage with people of pension age? Australian research into that issue shows that a substantial minority consume their pension pots quickly, with around 25% of people exhausting their pot by the age of 70 and 40% by 75. That really should give us pause for thought.

As we heard earlier, accessing pension pots early has become the new normal, but the FCA has expressed alarm that many who do so do not access independent, impartial advice. Indeed, only about 20% of those who accessed their pension pots in the third quarter of 2016 had a Pension Wise appointment, either by telephone or face to face. As for the other 80% who accessed their pension pots, one has to wonder what advice they received—if any. Did they get the best advice as they made that important decision? Were they vulnerable consumers? How can the interests of such people be best protected? I am sure that the Minister remembers the fallout from consumers taking out endowment mortgages because the advice they were being given was not always the most robust. We do not want to be looking back at this debate in 10 years’ time and saying the same about those who accessed their pensions early.

If we do not address the complexity and confusion around pension information and the difficulty of reaching some of the most vulnerable consumers—those who are arguably the most in need of robust independent advice—we shall only see younger generations feeling alienated from the whole concept of long-term saving for retirement. The SNP welcomes the fact that clause 2 includes a recognition of the need to bear in mind the needs of those in vulnerable circumstances, but I cannot impress it strongly enough on the Minister that we need more detail of how that will work in practice. What statutory weight will it be given? Much more detail is needed on how free independent pension advice can extend its reach, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.
The Bill does seek to address the need to protect vulnerable consumers, but more robust measures are needed. We know that scam calls are a huge issue in our communities, with 10.9 million consumers receiving unsolicited contact about their pension since April 2015. I continue to wait for the UK Government to deliver on their promise to adopt into legislation my ten-minute rule Bill on unsolicited marketing calls. Despite enthusiastic initial support, the dates mooted for bringing it in—April 2017 and October 2017—have passed without incident or explanation from the Government despite my best efforts to elicit some kind of response via umpteen written questions, questions on the Floor of the House, a point of order, about half a dozen letters to the relevant Secretary of State, and other ingenious ways. Support for that Bill has clearly waned somewhat and that is a real cause for concern, especially given that I have heard warm support from Government Members for measures in that area.

The new plan to bring forward proposals to tackle cold calling must focus on director-level responsibility if any such measures are to have the required strength to deal with this blight on consumers. Such proposals ought not just to be about pensions—although they are a very important area—because all consumers in all industries and all sectors must be protected, and I am keen to hear whether that will be the case. I realise that not all areas are within the scope of the Bill or for the Minister to decide upon, but I know that he will take that point back to his colleagues with great enthusiasm. I am becoming increasingly impatient with the delays, as are my constituents, people across the UK and, I expect, Members on both sides of the House. So when I hear that action on unsolicited marketing will be taken in “early 2018”, if the Minister is being kind, he will understand my scepticism about yet another deadline and what this “action” will be. Will there be any measures to deal with director-level responsibility? If not, why not? Perhaps the Minister can address that in his closing remarks.

If we are banning cold calling to protect people’s pensions, that is an admission that cold calling is a problem. If it is problem with pensions, it is a problem for all consumers in all areas. We need to protect people, and cold calling causes fundamental problems. I am extremely disappointed with the shilly-shallying around extending the recognition of the need to protect people outwith the pensions sector. The UK Government committed to considering director-level responsibility, even going so far as to put it on their website for well over a year. It is therefore a bit curious that they have gone suspiciously quiet on that despite, as I say, my best efforts to use every means available to me in this House to elicit some kind of response.

For consumers who want to access their pension early and to do so based on sound advice, we need to ensure that they are making the correct decisions, and I say good luck to them. However, our concern must be for those who do not have access to robust independent advice that safeguards their long-term financial interests and who will find themselves in financial difficulties as a result of poor advice or a lack of advice. I want the Minister to put some flesh on the bones of how the reach of financial advice will be extended, particularly to vulnerable consumers. I remind the Minister that there are thought to be around 800,000 people living with dementia in the UK. Even conservative estimates suggest that by 2030, that figure could be as high as 1.2 million. Their interests must be protected with demonstrably robust measures and a genuine duty of care. Policy making in this area must be mindful of and guided by that notion, and a new approach is essential to improve guidance usage among non-advised customers. The SNP sees the Bill as a positive step forward, but there is more to do, and a few minor legislative changes could save consumers now from many potential difficulties in the future.

7.19 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

I rise to support the Bill. It is a key part of our Conservative philosophy to back responsible financial management, and the Bill contains measures to help individuals manage their finances responsibly, which is something we all support. It is important to acknowledge the great strides this Government have already made. As a small employer in my previous life, I saw the impact of auto-enrolment. The Government were very successful in encouraging people—particularly younger people, who often fail to save for their pension and their retirement—to take part in an auto-enrolment scheme. The statistics are positive. We now see 16.2 million people saving for their pension in that way, up from 10.7 million in 2010.

I have a few remarks and a couple of suggestions for the Minister, and I seek a few assurances. I promise that my speech will be short.

First, I have touched on my experience as an employer. Will the Minister consider the impact on small businesses? The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned the self-employed. Small businesses and small employers have to think about the right auto-enrolment system for their staff and for themselves. Will the single financial guidance body have the remit to cover that issue for employers and employees?

Secondly, how will the new body seek to target advice at young people specifically? Young people are often at risk of poor financial planning and of falling prey to some of the worst debt issues. They are most likely to be at risk of being influenced by social media and of inadvertently falling into debt, sometimes because they are not engaged with the financial system.

We have heard much in this Chamber about students and student loans. When students consider their future, it is important that they get accurate advice on student loans. Unfortunately there are many myths out there in the public domain, and it is important that that misinformation is addressed so that students have accurate advice, outside the heat and light of the political spectrum, when undertaking that significant step to secure their future.

Will the body cover credit unions? I have a pertinent issue right now with a credit union in my constituency. Concerns are being raised about people who are dealing with credit unions and about how those people will seek advice.

Many people have mentioned cold calling, and I wish to add my voice. I am the daughter of an over-80-year-old dementia sufferer, and I have seen at first hand how...
many calls she receives. These companies are completely flouting the Telephone Preference Service regulations. There is no recourse for people in that situation to take action, and why should they have to? It is completely unfair that companies are preying on them.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Lady correctly says that there is no recourse for people who are plagued by cold calls. Does she agree that cutting the problem off at source by having director-level responsibility would be a very effective way forward?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She made some excellent points in her speech, and I hope the Minister will consider them. Getting this right so that we treat the most vulnerable in our society well is at the heart of what this Government are doing, and we need to go further in this Bill, as well as through other measures.

I urge the Minister to work closely with the Secretary of State for Education. We have seen the introduction of financial education in our schools, and the previous lack of financial education is part of the root cause of some of the issues we seek to address. We are seeing people getting into debt, sometimes through no fault of their own, simply because of their lack of financial education and their lack of capacity to manage their finances at an early age.

People are now so influenced by the world of social media, and it is all too easy for them to think that many of the positive things they see on social media could be within their grasp, if only they took out a loan or got into debt to afford holidays, clothes, cars or whatever it is—it can seem very easy to people. I call on the Minister to work with colleagues in the Department for Education to introduce education on financial responsibility at an early age so that people get into good habits early.

I finish by welcoming the measures in the Bill. At our surgeries we have all seen the suffering that getting into debt and a lack of advice can bring. I am glad that there will be advice and support for the people who need it most.

7.24 pm
Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

Even though my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) has left the Chamber, I thank him for his very honest speech. I, too, remember the anxiety that filled my childhood home when the Provident came knocking. Both my parents also worked. Perhaps the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) could listen and learn from people who have experience of living through hardship, rather than moaning about something that is political being political—after all, I thought we were all politicians.

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Smith: No, sorry.

The town of Crewe, in my constituency, has in recent years been identified as one of the most indebted places in our country. The problem has not gone away. Last year, statistics published by the Money Advice Service suggested that average consumer debt per person in Crewe was more than 20% higher than in the rest of the UK, and we know the problem is permeating beyond the most deprived areas. Problem debt is creeping into every corner of our communities, and if the bubble bursts, the effects are likely to be profound and lasting.

That is why I want to talk about one aspect of the Bill: the clauses that enable the Government to introduce a debt respite scheme. With falling wages, the rising cost of living, housing problems, insecure work, childcare costs, welfare cuts and rampant inequality, no single Act of Parliament will fix all the underlying causes of rising household debt. At the same time, the people who voted for us literally cannot afford to wait for the Government to fix our broken economy. That is why I stood on a manifesto that promised to introduce a debt respite or breathing space scheme to help those working families who have been struggling to keep their heads above water. It is the provision to introduce such a scheme that makes the Bill such an important priority for my constituency.

The debt charity StepChange reports that 70% of its clients fell into debt because of an unexpected negative event, such as job loss, reduced income, illness or a relationship breakdown, and 60% of clients told the charity that their financial situation stabilised once creditors agreed to freeze further interest, charges and enforcement action. Without the protection of a statutory breathing space scheme, pressure to repay debts at an unaffordable rate and threats of enforcement can leave households cutting back on everyday essentials, such as food and heating, and falling further behind on bills.

This Bill, in itself, does not provide the solutions, but it does provide an opportunity for the Government to make a massive difference to the lives of many ordinary working people. How the debt respite scheme is set up is crucial. For example, the initial period must be long enough for people to seek debt advice and agree a long-term plan to resolve their debts. On top of that, regulated debt advisers should also be able to extend the period, where that is deemed necessary.

The Government’s proposal of a six-week initial period is nowhere near long enough. According to StepChange and the evidence in Scotland, where a comparable scheme already exists, shows that on average it takes four months to activate a plan after the first debt advice session. In any case, the Government should also commit to reviewing the length of the initial period after the scheme is introduced, and to extending it if there is evidence to support doing so.

Statutory repayment plans must also be a feature of the scheme, with the flexibility to ensure that the most effective plan for each family’s circumstances can be put in place. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. A scheme that does not meet those needs will be a huge missed opportunity for the Government and could cost us all dearly in the not-so-distant future.

The link between debt and mental health is well established. Picture the parent who is filled with dread and anxiety every time they answer the phone or open an envelope. The Royal College of Psychiatrists tells us that half of adults with debts suffer with mental health problems, and the Children’s Society tells us that children living in families with problem debt are at greater risk of developing mental health problems later in life. Introducing an effective debt respite scheme not only makes good economic sense, but should feature as part of the Government’s mental health strategy.
7.30 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I believe protocol dictates that I should say that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), but anyway.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), having accused me of moaning, did not wish to do so. I simply say to her: I do not do moaning.

Eddie Hughes: And I have certainly not witnessed any—nothing but good grace from my hon. Friend in the past.

I want to touch briefly on the name of the single financial guidance body, when we get it. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) was right to highlight this point, because what we call it is critical. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) suggested that we will need a good marketing strategy to go with it because, let us face it, we have to reach out to a broad section of the population, from the very youngest to the very oldest. I want to discuss predominantly the youngest.

We cannot start too soon in engaging young people in financial business. I know that HSBC operates a school bank service where it goes into primary schools for seven to 12-year-olds to introduce them to the concept of banking and explains the different roles of people within the bank. It also explains how someone setting up their own business might go about obtaining a loan and funding that business.

Right from the earliest age, we should engage with young people. Why is that important? The Money Advice Service released a report this month following some qualitative and quantitative analysis during which it engaged with 470 young people. What did it find? It found that 61% of those young people felt that their lives would be better if they had better financial management skills, but 85% felt that they had not been given sufficient financial guidance when they were at school. That puts them in a precarious position because, all of a sudden as young adults, they are exposed to the opportunity of debt. Indeed, one of those taking part suggested that credit cards should be treated in the same way as cigarette and tobacco packets: there should be photos on a credit card that in some way convey the danger associated with them, because young people with access to cheap debt can easily get into difficult financial positions. That is not a question of ineptitude, as referred to by the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones); it is just that if people have not had that financial education and training, they can find themselves in a difficult position.

For example, at the weekend I spoke to a young man of 26 in Walsall. He had been down in London and he somehow managed to get on the bus without the fact that he had used his card to pay for the ticket being recorded. When the passengers were checked, he was asked to get off the bus and prove that he had paid for his ticket. He could not do so. He was fined. I believe, £80 and given a short period to pay, otherwise the fine would double. He did not pay as he did not have the money at the time. He did not prioritise that debt, so he did not pay it. The fine increased to £180. By then, it was Christmas and he could not afford to pay, so he procrastinated further until the bailiffs were knocking on his mother’s door at the weekend, seeking £750 because he had not paid a £1.50 bus fare. Sometimes, it is not just that people do not have the money; they do not understand which debts must be prioritised to prevent further hardship down the line.

It is incredibly important that we increase the financial capability of everybody across the UK, from the very youngest, when they set out as young adults with access to credit cards, to the very oldest, who will be drawing down their pensions. They all need our support and this Government are on the side of them all.

7.35 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a true pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes); I just have to shout that much louder to be as shiny as him.

On pensions, I want to continue along the lines set out by a couple of speakers, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). My background was similarly—I will not say dull, but to some it might appear so. I am still nominally in practice as a chartered accountant and chartered tax adviser, so I am most interested in the tax benefits of pensions as part of personal planning.

I also served on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions from July 2015 to May 2017, where I had the enormous pleasure of overlapping with the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) before she was promoted. I am delighted that she supports the Bill receiving a Second Reading this evening.

I very much welcome the new oversight body—the single financial guidance body—which my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) said had such a snappy title, but I think that we know what it will be there for. Previously, the advice has always been out there, but I agree that it has been fragmented and not part of the inculcated knowledge of the public that help is out there and it is free. I hope that the Bill will help.

On pensions, there have been two arms. The first is the Pensions Advisory Service, whose main focus I see as advice on what pensions are and their benefits, plus online tools describing the saving needed to estimate future retirement income. It serves a useful educational function. The second is Pension Wise, which I am more interested in. It gives advice on what to do when approaching pensionable age, which is becoming ever more important.

All this represents a real issue—a welcome issue—for an increasing number of people across the country as auto-enrolment plays more and more of a role. The Government website suggests that 10 million employees will be enrolled across close to 300,000 employers by 2020. I see that as one of the real success stories of this Government and it is supported across the Chamber by
all parties. That represents a savings rate in the future of up to £17 billion per year, so we could be looking at many hundreds of billions of pounds likely to be saved over the decades to come.

I was particularly pleased to serve on the Committee that considered the Pension Schemes Act 2017, which laid the framework, at the right time, for master trusts. Beforehand, there was a weak statutory framework—just approval from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for many schemes that I think had some dubious background. That has now gone, which is welcome.

What interests me about Pension Wise is what people will do with what is potentially their primary asset in life, their pension pot, as they approach older age. The average pension pot is £50,000—slightly more for men and less for women. There is an historical background to that, which I am sure will be put right as time goes by. The time of defined-benefit schemes is very much behind us, for obvious reasons—unknown liabilities for companies.

The pension freedoms of April 2015, however, were one of the best kept secrets of the 2014 Budget and they came as a surprise to me—I certainly did not see them coming. The freedom to take lump sums of 25% has been with us for a while, but people then gained complete flexibility over what to do with their defined-contribution pensions. They could also get rid of the traditional annuity purchase, or indeed could do nothing at all if that suited them.

With interest rates low, it has to be recognised that, although they are still right for some, the time of traditional annuities is perhaps over. With freedom, though, come dangers, including from scams. In this data age, it is not difficult to find out when anybody is approached the age of 55, and with that comes the potential danger that people will be preyped on by scammers.

This afternoon, I searched on Google for “pension advisory service”. I was disappointed that the official Government Pensions Advisory Service was only the fifth result. Ahead of it came four other services that were perhaps good, perhaps bad, or perhaps somewhat indifferent. I am pleased that Pension Wise is found favourable by 88% of those who have used it, but, as the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth said, few have used it—perhaps no more than 10% of those planning to retire. That does not mean that people are not seeking and accessing advice. Those with larger pots will undoubtedly go to their independent financial advisers to get proper independent advice on their options and what might be best for them.

I wish to put on record that, during my time on the Work and Pensions Committee, I raised the limitations and bureaucracy that the FCA requirements impose on IAs and suggested lighter-touch regulations, so that IFAs who deal with smaller pension pots could advise on a “no liability to the adviser” basis. That way, those with smaller pots could at least get good professional advice, which must be infinitely better than none.

Clause 4, on the regulation of cold calling, is hugely welcome. Many Members have mentioned their experiences with PPI, banking scams, claims for flight delays—the list goes on and on. Because of that, there is a serious problem with databases, so the Information Commissioner needs to be rather more robust on that.

I hope that the Bill will mean that more people will become aware of their options, seek genuine advice and get wise to the scammers. Over the past few years, the Government have laid good foundations for pensions, as people are making greater provision for themselves. The Bill is welcome, coming at the right time to strengthen the available financial guidance framework, and I have no hesitation in supporting it.

7.42 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I shall keep my comments relatively brief, Madam Deputy Speaker, mainly because I have a chest infection and I do not think my voice will hold for too long.

The Government’s decision to move ahead with a much-needed overhaul of the financial guidance system is welcome. Likewise, it is important to put in place protections for pension savers. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) mentioned £8 million being lost to scamming in one month. That is just the tip of the iceberg, because that is just what is reported. Scamming is a serious and ongoing problem, so I really welcome the moves in place to help to alleviate it.

As a former personal finance journalist, I have seen at first hand the terrible consequences—not only financial but social and even medical—that can follow when people fall into problem debt or are preyed on by fraudsters. Bringing the various money advice services together will help to ensure joined-up support, and to make sure that fewer people fall through the cracks in the system.

The Bill represents welcome progress, but more needs to happen through the financial services and financial advice sectors. They need to step up to the plate. Unfortunately, in recent decades the market has not properly served what I call middle earners. It is right that this debate has focused on the most vulnerable, as the Minister said earlier and has said on other occasions. However, the financial advice wasteland that has been created serves our society very ill indeed.

Insurance and advice products used to be sold on a commission basis. Going back in time, we can remember the man from the Pru, who would effectively mass sell financial products. Companies had a clear incentive to cat on to everybody. There are good reasons why we moved away from that system. As a young man, after leaving university, I worked at a now-defunct organisation called the Joseph Nelson group. As part of that job, I had to fill in client ledgers. I had no idea what their personal circumstances were, nor their particular business was, but I noticed that, no matter whether they were in their 20s or their 80s, every client was being sold the same product. The thing that linked it all was the level of commission, which was many percentage points.

I saw at first hand organisations such as the David M Aaron group, which is also now defunct, selling swaps and other very risky investments to people to whom they should not have been sold. I have seen these high-cost, high-margin products being pushed on customers, regardless of their personal circumstances. As a personal finance journalist, I covered the implosion of Equitable Life, which saw thousands lose their life savings. It is not acceptable that a huge part of the population has subsequently been left without access to affordable advice.

Advisers have effectively migrated upwards to cover what they call high-net-worth clients. It can now be very expensive indeed to get good independent financial advice. The sector has a responsibility to step up and to find new ways to serve customers. Modern technology,
from data-sifting algorithms to remote advisers, offers ways to provide personalised and accessible advice that were unimaginable when I was filling out hand-written ledgers at the Joseph Nelson group many years ago. We need more life-event advice, because the break-point of annuitisation no longer applies to most people.

The Bill is not an end in itself; it is a challenge to the financial services advice industry to do more. The huge increase in the number of self-employed people has profound implications for the personal finance landscape. For a sole trader, the line between personal and business finance is not nearly as clear-cut as it is in larger, more traditional companies. Many self-employed people who fall into personal debt do so while trying to support their business. According to the Money Advice Trust, fully seven in 10 of its business debtline clients had taken out a personal loan and were using at least part of it to prop up their enterprise.

Finally, I wish to touch briefly on my work as chairman of the all-party group on financial education for young people. School offers an unparalleled opportunity to navigate today’s fast-changing and complex financial landscape. The development of key skills and knowledge about money matters helps pupils and, indeed, their parents to make wise choices in later life, when innovations in financial technology and online consumer tools—not to mention the march towards a cashless society—will make previous experience and the advice of their elders an unreliable guide.

7.47 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): A heavy duty falls on us in Parliament to ensure the security, dignity and financial wellbeing of the British people. On the one hand, we must help our citizens to realise good habits and vital life skills to the next generation, but we still have a huge distance to travel to ensure that young people are properly equipped to account for their lamentable failure and the failure of governance in respect of Carillion. However, it would be absolutely churlish of me not to reflect on the fact that this is a welcome Bill, establishing the single financial guidance body and also the more effective regulation of claims management companies, including regulation under the auspices of the FCA. I was intrigued by the notion proposed by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) of fit and proper tests being applied to those who work for claims management companies—a powerful argument that we might return to in Committee.

It is a welcome Bill, which was strengthened in the Lords—particularly by Lord Sharkey and Baroness Drake—and informed by the Select Committee on Financial Inclusion and its deliberations. I must say that the Minister has been in genuine listening mode. He has a personal history of financial inclusion, including in his own constituency with the establishment of the Tyndale Community Bank. We support this important Bill, but we will seek to strengthen it further and to inject in it a sense of urgency.

May I turn now to some individual measures in the Bill? On the issue of funding more generally, the Government’s impact assessment says that a high proportion of people need help but are not currently getting it. One in five of those in debt receive advice. The Bill aims to bring together the pre-existing three bodies under one roof to give better and more efficient advice. However, if the Government are looking to make a financial saving, that would be wrong. There is growing demand for good financial guidance, and the Government should be looking to increase funding in that area, not to decrease it.

The new body must be adequately funded to fulfil the multiple roles that it will be tasked with carrying out. There were some very powerful contributions during the debate. We heard about the importance of effectiveness from the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and about the importance of high-quality advice, particularly for working people in dire straits, from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). I will return to that point later.

I have these questions for the Minister. Does the Government expect to make savings from the merger, and, if they do, how much? Have the Government considered what resources the new body will need to identify and to support those who do not currently access advice or guidance? If the body is a success, there will be many more who will want to access it. How will the Government guarantee the adequate resources to ensure greater uptake of services?

Let me turn now to cold calling. The Government committed to banning cold calling in their 2017 manifesto and we did, too. Cold calling preys on some of the weakest in society, and particularly the elderly. I am not sure whether I was completely convinced by the argument of the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) that, somehow, it is axiomatic that poor people are more likely to find it difficult to manage their finances. Actually, very substantially, my experience is the reverse.

There are 2.6 million cold calls made every month in the UK. What they do is put at risk those who are the recipients of those calls. The hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) was absolutely right when he pointed to the evidence from the Association of British Travel Agents. He said that, effectively, what was happening...
was that the public were being encouraged to commit a crime by reporting bogus illnesses, and he also mentioned the driving up of the cost of holidays. The Government have stated that they wish to ban cold calling, specifically calls and texts on pensions. The Bill is the perfect opportunity to put that into practice.

A prime example of the vulture-like nature of these companies has come in the tragic case of the collapse of Carillion. Those people who may have just lost their jobs and are unsure of how they will cope financially are being preyed on by those wishing to trick them into transferring their pension immediately, usually charging extortionate transfer fees. A similar practice was carried out after the massive redundancies at the steelworks in Port Talbot.

More generally, the evidence from Citizens Advice is powerful. Some 10.9 million consumers have received unsolicited contact about their pensions since 2015. It found that almost nine in 10 had difficulty in identifying the scams, not least because the scams are clever and constantly evolving. It rightly argued that a ban on pension cold calling is a crucial part of the consumer protection framework, which should help to reduce the disgraceful targeting of consumers.

The Government must seek to put in place a ban on cold calling as soon as possible. They indicated in the other place that they would bring forward an amendment or new clause to introduce such a ban, and that it would not be linked to the establishment of the new body. Will the Minister do so, and, assuming that he does, what will it cover? Will he also listen to the powerful contributions in this debate from the hon. Members for Croydon South and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and bring forward new provisions at Committee stage to put in place, in their words, an immediate ban on cold calling and to introduce default guidance to assist people accessing or seeking to transfer their pension assets?

Let me turn briefly to the self-employed. In its current guise, the SFGB will provide advice for the self-employed only on their personal finances and debts, not their business finances or debts. The Money Advice Trust, which helped more than 38,000 people last year, said that for many self-employed people there is simply no distinction between their personal and business finances. As the shadow Secretary of State said, to exclude business finances and debts from the SFGB’s remit is a missed opportunity, particularly given the significant growth in self-employment in recent years. Will the Government respond to the arguments that have been put, including by the National Federation of the Self-Employed and Small Businesses?

We heard a number of powerful contributions on default guidance during the debate. This is a key pillar of the Bill and moves to improve financial awareness for those looking to undertake transactions. Anyone wishing to transfer a pension must be automatically provided with the minimum amount of information possible to try to force them into transferring their pension. This would be of use to many workers who were let go by Carillion last week and who may be faced with the choice of transferring their pension, but who should, by default, have access to independent financial guidance to help them to make their decision.

What consideration has the Minister given to removing the exemption of “introducers” from the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001—a specific point on top of that to which I have already referred? A default guidance scheme guidance would be very helpful, but what else has he given consideration to on that front, and what consideration has he given to allowing the FCA to keep the financial penalties that it receives so that it can increase its enforcement work?

On the breathing space scheme, there is cross-party support, including from the other place. This is about granting a freeze on interest charges, fees and enforcement action for six weeks so that a person can receive guidance on the next steps that they can take to relieve the debt burden. UK household debt in 2017—I know that this was an issue of some contention during the debate, but the facts speak for themselves—reached £1,630 billion. Consumer credit has increased 17% since 2012, and UK household debt is now 140% of UK household disposable income. That is why it is all the more necessary now, with the sheer scale of the pressures being generated—this was very powerfully described by the hon. Member for Chippenham when she talked about the agony that is debt—that the Government, having committed to this in the past, act now at the next stages. The commitment is in the Bill, but the timescale for implementation is too slow. It is vital that the Government get it right and act quickly to have this measure in place as soon as possible. This is a vital change to lift the burden of debt from millions of people across the country, including those who may be suffering from mental health problems as a consequence. Therefore the Government need to act as quickly as possible.

As the shadow Secretary of State has made clear, we support the introduction of universal credit on its premise of simplifying the benefits system. However, a number of reports have shown that, in its current guise, it leads to increased personal debt, including rent arrears. Has the Minister considered the impact of universal credit on personal debt and the implications for resourcing the new body?

The Bill gives the FCA the power to cap fees for claims management companies when dealing with PPI claims. However, the proposed cap would limit the average fee to only £340 plus VAT, which is not much different from the current cap. The Government could ensure that firms that are at fault for PPI claims are charged the fee and that the consumer receives 100% of their compensation. Why are the Government not also prepared to act on the mis-selling of packaged bank accounts—bank accounts that charge a fee and are sold with added benefits—many of which were mis-sold over the past 15 years without sufficient information? Why have the Government not introduced a provision to cap fees for these claims in the Bill? The justification given thus far is unsatisfactory.

On the duty of care, I do not want to add in any detail to the powerful contributions made by the hon. Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Gloucester. We have received a number of constituency letters about the amendment proposed by Macmillan. The Lords Financial Exclusion Committee has advised that the Bill should include a provision requiring the FCA to make rules setting out a reasonable duty of care for financial services providers. The evidence given is powerful,
particularly from Macmillan, as four out of five people with cancer are affected financially by their diagnosis, as a result of increased costs and loss of income. The Government and the FCA have said that they must wait until after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU becomes clear. However, our strong view is that this issue should not wait any longer. I urge the Minister to consider it carefully and bring forward suitable proposals in Committee.

Financial inclusion is absolutely critical. Will the Secretary of State use this opportunity to address the scourge of financial exclusion in our society, including the proposal from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) that this should now be set out in statute? The pensions dashboard is a welcome proposal, but will the Secretary of State bring forward legislation to ensure that pension providers liaise with the scheme and give all savers a clearer picture of their savings?

In conclusion, there is a heavy duty on parliamentarians to ensure the security, dignity and financial wellbeing of our citizens, and that is all the more important in these tough times, seen at their most dramatic with the collapse of Carillion. There is substantial consensus on the proposals that this should now be set out in statute? The pensions dashboard is a welcome proposal, but will the Secretary of State bring forward legislation to ensure that pension providers liaise with the scheme and give all savers a clearer picture of their savings?

I have had many dealings with the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who offered a graphic illustration of the difficulties experienced by her constituent, Jaci. I endorse her comments. Having had cancer and recovered from it, I very much accept the points raised by Macmillan. However, there are provisions within existing legislation, and within the capabilities of the FCA—between the FCA’s principles of business and the work of Santander, which she rightly identified—that address these points and which really address the point about the duty of care.

We want people to be able to access the right guidance as a first step towards taking control of their finances. Part 1 of the Bill, which sets out the new body, will give people the opportunity to move in the right direction. It will continue to fund debt advice as well as to fund and evaluate financial capability programmes, including financial initiatives aimed at children. In this way, it will help people of all ages and backgrounds to manage their money better and make the most of the financial services and products available.

Part 2 of the Bill is equally important. It will enable the transfer of claims management regulations from the Ministry of Justice to the FCA, and it ensures that we have the transfer of complaints handling responsibility to the financial ombudsman and the introduction of new fee restrictions, with the 20% interim fee cap that my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), in an outstanding speech—keeps doing that—brought his professional, specialist knowledge to the debate, and I pay tribute to him for all the work he has done. Let me address the point that he and others have raised about the Work and Pensions Committee. We are certainly considering the Committee’s report in relation to clauses 4 and 5.

We support the need for default guidance for people wishing to take advantage of pensions freedoms. That is why the new body is specifically required to meet the
Government’s guarantee to make free and impartial guidance available to those considering accessing their pension pots. The existing signposting regime already provides individuals with important information and encouragement to take advantage of guidance and advice before accessing a pension pot. However, the Government accept that there is merit in providing for people to receive a further nudge, and that this is the right direction of travel. To this end, my officials are reviewing the proposals put forward by the Select Committee, and we will respond to the House and to the Bill Committee in due course. On the pensions dashboard, we will respond to this House before the end of March. It is absolutely the case that we wish to take this forward.

The only discordant note in the entire debate was the speech by the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who attacked my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and sought to find out the current situation on debt. Households’ financial positions can be assessed by a number of criteria. However, the ratio of net wealth to income is at a record high, while debt interest as a proportion of income is at a record low—at 4.2% in quarter 3 of 2017 compared with 10% in quarter 1 of 2008. Total household debt as a proportion of income is down by 14 percentage points, comparing quarter 3 of 2017 and 2010, and further down compared with quarter 1 of 2008.

On breathing space, there is an endorsement from all parties that this is the right way forward. I entirely accept that there is still work to be done. However, I remind the House that there is also a statutory repayment plan, which was also in our manifesto. This Government made clear our support for breathing space in our manifesto and in the House of Lords.

With regard to the outstanding matters, a variety of points were brought before the House, and I will address them by writing to individual Members before the Committee sits.

We believe that this Bill is a sustainable legislative framework for public financial guidance. It will help to tackle a range of conduct issues within the claims management sector by ensuring a tougher regulatory framework that enhances consumer protection and professionalism. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and look forward to the opportunity of further discussion as the Bill progresses. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE AND CLAIMS BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)). That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords]:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 6 February 2018.

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

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE AND CLAIMS BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)), That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred in consequence of the Act by the Secretary of State or the Treasury; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any Act out of money so provided.—(David Rutley.)

Question agreed to.

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE AND CLAIMS BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)), That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the levying of charges under the Pension Schemes Act 1993 and the Pension Schemes (Northern Ireland) Act 1993 for the purpose of meeting expenditure relating to the single financial guidance body’s pensions guidance function;

(2) the levying of charges under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 for the purpose of meeting expenditure—

(a) incurred (or expected to be incurred) by the Secretary of State or the Treasury in connection with the single financial guidance body;

(b) incurred (or expected to be incurred) by the Scottish Ministers, Welsh Ministers or the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland in connection with the provision of information and advice on debt to members of the public in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and

(3) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(David Rutley.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5, 6 and 7 together.

Ordered,

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

That Mr Robert Goodwill and Mr Philip Dunne be members of the Environmental Audit Committee.
PROCEDURE COMMITTEE
That David Evennett be a member of the Procedure Committee.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE
That Adam Holloway be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Damien Moore be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

North West Ambulance Service
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David Rutley.)

8.14 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): As you will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, I applied for this Adjournment debate on North West Ambulance Service some time ago. By coincidence, I had a phone call today from my constituent, Ron Gerner. Ron and his elderly wife, Pat, had to ring for an ambulance on Boxing day at 9 o’clock in the evening. It was 5 o’clock the following morning before the ambulance arrived to take a very sick lady to Fairfield General Hospital. She arrived at Fairfield not very long after 5 o’clock in the morning. It was about 2 o’clock in the afternoon before she was finally admitted to a ward. Since that time, sad to relate, Pat’s health has deteriorated and she is now due to move to Springhill hospice. She was due to be picked up by an ambulance at 11 o’clock this morning. The ambulance did not arrive. We are now told that it will arrive at 8 o’clock tomorrow morning.

I say to the Minister and to the House that an elderly couple like Ron and Pat who are going through a very difficult time in their lives should be treated massively better. They should be cosseted, not face the kind of outrage that has now affected their lives. They are happy for me to talk about this because, not unnaturally, Ron is livid on his wife’s behalf. I am livid on Ron and Pat’s behalf, and indeed on behalf of the whole of their family.

It is something of an irony that when I wanted to illustrate the failings of North West Ambulance Service, that phone call, totally unsolicited, came into my office this evening. The sad reality is that North West Ambulance Service is a shambles. That, of itself, underlies something much more serious—as a shambles, it is of course putting people’s lives at risk. This is simply unacceptable in modern Britain.

It is worth recording that for the highest category of calls, of which 75% should be answered within eight minutes, the mean time in the north-west is 11 minutes. For the second category, for which central Government and the NHS nationally decided to lower the limit so that there is now an 18-minute tolerance for 75% of calls, the mean time in the north-west is 44 minutes. Those are calls that are serious and certainly cannot be dismissed as trivial. If the mean time is 11 minutes for the most serious cases and 44 minutes for the still very serious cases, what happens with the cases that are massively worse than that? Something is going very wrong.

It would be tempting to say that this is something to do with the winter crisis, but it is not. North West Ambulance Service, apart from a brief flurry of activity, has not hit its targets since 2014. Just very briefly in the summer of 2015, things seemed to have got back up to the norm, but at the moment, in about three out of four of the most serious cases, it is missing the target that has been established at national level. That is putting people at risk.

What is going wrong? We can say some fairly straightforward things. I am bound to point out that the national health service has made decisions that themselves make it more likely that the ambulance service will
come under pressure. The decision to close the Rochdale accident and emergency facility some years back inevitably means that instead of being taken to the local hospital, people in my constituency have to travel that little bit further afield. That of course puts pressure on an ambulance service that is already under pressure elsewhere.

It is a matter of practical fact—the Minister may want to confirm this, or he may have different figures, but everything I have seen indicates it—that the North West Ambulance Service is the worst performing ambulance service in England in terms of its ability to hit its targets.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): A lot of things the hon. Gentleman is talking about in the north-west appear to be reflected also in the east of England. Does he share my view that it is really important for Ministers to send out the clear message to staff in these organisations, first, that they are valued and, secondly, that they must feel able to speak out—in other words, to whistleblow—if they are worried about patient safety? The last thing we want is for pressure to be put on staff to make them feel that they are unable to speak out about such concerns.

**Tony Lloyd:** The right hon. Gentleman is of course absolutely right on both counts. First and foremost, we must value the paramedics and the technicians who make our ambulance service work, and nothing whatever of what I am saying is critical of them. They joined the service to help save lives and to get people into our national health service, but this is of course the reality, and I am grateful to people who have spoken privately to me about what is going on. Whistleblowers are really important.

To make another point briefly, I wrote to the North West Ambulance Service about its failings—I will come on to the particular failing later—in the middle of August, but I had to raise the issue on the Floor of the House to get an answer two and a half months later. Quite frankly, the answer is almost not worth the paper on which it is written because the climate of secrecy—the climate of “Mind your own business,” which is said even to Members of Parliament—is very unhealthy. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

**Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I agree very strongly with my hon. Friend’s comments. I recently wanted to get a transcript of some calls—harrowing calls—in cases where people had died because of the inefficiency of the ambulance service. Last year, for example, my office got a call about a family waiting 90 minutes for an ambulance to arrive for somebody who had had a heart attack. The management of the organisation several times missed an opportunity to send an ambulance, and there is no excuse for this. People are depending on this service. We need whistleblowers and we need people telling the truth, but for such an organisation not to make transcripts readily available is a disgrace.

**Tony Lloyd:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend’s point speaks for itself. We need a climate of openness and one in which people who work in the service and care about it can feel emboldened to speak out. The law actually protects them, so it is outrageous that a public service should put people under such pressure, and it is outrageous that a Member of Parliament should struggle to get transcripts relating to her own constituents. There is a lot going wrong.

The reality—the Minister may want to reflect on this—is that over the past six years, the demands in the highest category in the north-west have gone up by some 50%. We can discuss what that means, but at the same time the number of paramedics has increased by only 16% and the number of those in technician grades by some 28%, so the staffing simply is not keeping pace with the change in demand.

There is something worse. I have already mentioned the fact that we have seen the closure of A&Es and the increased pressure that those closures inevitably bring, but on top of that we face the daily reality—again, this is not part of the winter crisis—that our ambulances and our skilled paramedics are having to wait outside our hospitals in some cases for hours on end. Let me give an example. At one of our local hospitals, Royal Oldham—an important hospital for my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and me—an ambulance had to wait for three hours and 46 minutes before it could discharge one of its patients on 7 January. At North Manchester—again, one of the hospitals that Rochdale borough depends on—an ambulance took eight hours and 50 minutes to do so on 3 January: somebody waited in the back of an ambulance for four hours, or nearly nine, hours. At Fairfield, which is also one of our local hospitals, a figure of over 10 hours was recorded in December.

Something is going fundamentally wrong when people are waiting in the back of an ambulance for the care that they ought to be getting inside our hospitals. However, something else is going wrong, because such cases mean that the skilled staff in those ambulances cannot be out on the road going to the next job where they are needed and to the one after that. One of the paramedics—a whistleblower, as it were—with over two decades of service in our ambulance service told me that when he started, he typically went to nine different jobs during a working shift. It is now sometimes as few as three or four jobs a night, because he and his colleagues spend their time waiting outside hospitals, for reasons that have already been identified.

I know from the different roles I have had that things have been going wrong for years with the quality of our ambulance services. When I was a police and crime commissioner, the police would complain to me that, when attending a situation, they would often be forced to wait because there was a clear need for an ambulance, and sometimes they would have to deliver people to hospital because the ambulance could not arrive in time. The police certainly do not say that critically of their colleagues in the ambulance service, but they know that they are not the right people to be charged with carrying sick people to hospital.

The Minister has probably been told that one of the palliatives in the system is the series of green cars staffed by paramedics who are first on the scene. If we had a properly funded, properly staffed system of ambulance provision across the north-west, that might be a very intelligent design, but it is a very stupid design when paramedics are in short supply, because if the job the paramedic attends turns out to be really serious, they cannot operate as a paramedic, because the green cars are not ambulances; they are simply a means of transit. The paramedic then has to ring for an emergency ambulance. A paramedic told me that he attended a
cardiac arrest where the patient was in a serious condition, but he had to wait with them for 45 minutes, without being able to give more than basic attention, before the ambulance arrived. Such situations should not be routine, but paramedics tell me that they happen regularly, so we know that things are going wrong.

I want the Minister to consider one issue particularly seriously. When Rochdale A&E was closed, a commitment was made to the people of my constituency that there would be a paramedic on every ambulance coming from Rochdale. We have found out that that is simply an illusion. My constituents were lied to—I think I can use that term, Madam Deputy Speaker—because there was no circumstance under which that promise could ever have been delivered. We were told at the time, “Don’t worry. You’ll have to travel a little bit further, but you’ll be travelling with highly skilled paramedics.” One in four of the most serious category calls across the north-west do not have a paramedic in attendance, because we do not have enough paramedics in the service.

The story I am telling is a seriously unhappy one. It would be unhappy if this were some kind of intellectual game, but as the experience of Ron and Pat Gerner shows, this is about people’s lives. It is about people, sometimes at the most difficult point in their lives, who are anxious and concerned about what will happen next at a time of individual and family crisis. This does matter and it matters enormously that something is done about it.

I say to the Minister that certain things that need to be done are almost leap off the page. First and most obvious, we need a better handover system from ambulances to A&E units. It is not beyond the wit of health professionals to come up with something better. If we are saying that one of the skills shortages in the health services is that of paramedics, we must use them intensively. That is what the paramedics want. They do not want to be sat in stressful conditions outside a hospital. We need to better deliver the service. Ministers have to drive that through. They have to seize this important opportunity.

Norman Lamb: I think what the hon. Gentleman is saying is that the way in which the system works at the moment is a grossly inefficient use of highly skilled people. They are left waiting with and caring for patients outside a hospital before they can hand them over, and sometimes they have to wait with a patient for an ambulance to arrive. If we look at the total time during the day that paramedics are left waiting with patients, rather than doing what they are skilled to do, we will see that it is an extraordinarily inefficient use of that skilled resource.

Tony Lloyd: Absolutely. If this is one of the skill shortages at the crisis end of our health service, let us begin to use the paramedics much more intelligently than we do now. The Minister will be delighted to know that I will come on to money, but this is not about money; it is about intelligence. I am bemused by the incompetence of the management of the North West Ambulance Service, who do not seem able to give me even semi-credible answers to this crisis. Ministers now need to seize the opportunity—and possibly even seize the throats of those who manage the process—to make them begin to deliver.

Nothing I have said tonight is meant in anything other than absolute admiration for the people who are in our ambulances, trying to make the service work. They live very stressful lives. The Minister will know that across the country—the north-west is as bad as many places—the amount of down time because of paramedics and ambulance technicians being off work from stress-related sickness is high and growing. That is symptomatic of a system going terribly wrong. Let us reform it. Let us make sure that we put the quality of life back into their jobs, so that they can put the quality of their jobs back into those they care for.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I share the same area, covered by the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, and we have very similar experiences. I used to work at the North Manchester General Hospital and at the Royal Oldham Hospital, and I am well aware of the issues. Is he aware of the latest Care Quality Commission report, which was published last year, on the North West Ambulance Service? It identified safety and leadership as “requiring improvement”. From the story that he is telling, it sounds as though those two issues have not been addressed, and that report was produced a year ago.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend makes a really interesting point. The Minister needs to look seriously at the consequences of that kind of report. I have looked at different aspects of this issue over a number of years. I find leadership mainly in its absence. Safety is more difficult for me to comment on, except that if we have such high sickness rates among the staff, it very much indicates that the working environment is not safe for the people we want to work there.

My final point to the Minister is that we have a shortage of paramedics nationwide. As I said, we have had an uplift of something like 50% in the most critical cases in the north-west and an increase of some 16% in the number of paramedics. We are simply not keeping pace. Of course this is about money, but we have to put the resources into that kind of training. However, training is between two and four years. The Minister has to look at whether there is something in the intelligent transfer of people in the health service who already have the equivalent skills. With the right kind of incentive, they may be prepared to move across from different occupations in the health service to the paramedic and ambulance service. However, they will only do that if they believe there is a quality of job that would allow them to enjoy their work, as they are entitled to.

We have a crisis that is putting people at risk, whether that is in the east of England or in the north-west, as I and my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) have said. It is dangerous and in the case of my constituent, Pat Gerner, it is unacceptable for an elderly lady, needing to be in hospice care, to be treated in the way that she has. I look to the Minister to give not simply sympathy, but some credible belief that he will seize the day and make sure that we have the quality and determination to drive through the kind of management change that will make a difference. As well as that, he has to say to his colleagues in the Treasury that we need to see some transfer of resource into our ambulance service, if we are not going to face this crisis not simply in the winter, but every day of every week of the year.
8.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) on securing this debate. I know that he visited the North West Ambulance Service Trust in 2017 and has a long-standing interest in this area. He comes to the House as one of its most senior and experienced Members and a former chair of the parliamentary Labour party. I am happy to meet him to discuss his remarks in more detail in order to work collaboratively to take this forward, given the concerns he has set out, particularly concerning the delays that Ron and Pat experienced, and how we can address them.

I absolutely agree with the sentiment expressed by the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) about the need for an open culture, and I am happy to work with her, as I have done in the past, in fostering such a culture.

Norman Lamb: The Secretary of State has been very good, post Francis, at being very clear that there has to be an open culture and that staff must feel free to speak out when there are patient safety risks that concern them. Will the Minister use this opportunity to re-emphasise the message to the management of trusts, including ambulance trusts, across the country that they must allow their staff to speak out when they have genuine and legitimate concerns of this sort?

Stephen Barclay: I certainly will take this opportunity to do exactly that. As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, like him, I myself, during my time in the House, have frequently spoken out on behalf of whistleblowers, particularly in my former role as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. I know he has other concerns that, with the leave of the House, I might touch on at the end of my remarks, but, as I am sure he will appreciate, I want to address the issues of the North West Ambulance Service in particular.

As Members on both sides of the House will know, the NHS is busier than ever. The ambulance service is dealing with unprecedented demand, with 11 million calls each year and almost 7 million face-to-face responses in 2016-17, which was a 14% increase on the previous five years. Overall, it is worth noting, on the concerns about workforce that the hon. Member for Rochdale set out, that the North West Ambulance Service has a strong record on recruitment, having recruited an extra 167 paramedics in 2017. As a result, its vacancy rate, at just 2.4%, is now one of the lowest in the country.

The hon. Gentleman is right, however, that on performance there is an issue and that the service does need to improve. As I will set out in my remarks, that is why work is under way with NHS England and NHS Improvement, working with the commissioners and the trust, to address that, as part of the wider national initiatives. It also needs to be set in the context of the pressures within the health service. About 3,000 patients are currently in hospital beds with flu and about 700 with the norovirus, so there are clearly winter pressures affecting handovers, but he is absolutely right that how we address the delays in handovers is a key area, and certainly a key ministerial focus of mine, as I will come on to in due course.

The hon. Gentleman set out several concerns about the trust’s performance. It is worth drawing the House’s attention to the fact that six ambulance liaison officers are now in place at A&Es across Greater Manchester to support handovers and address delays. The Treasury is investing £100,000 in the trust in February and March to boost operational capacity, and procedural solutions are being introduced to improve the efficiency of call handling. Under Sir Bruce Keogh’s review of the NHS urgent and emergency care system, ambulance services are being transformed to increase the use of “hear and treat” and “see and treat” and ensure the better prioritisation of patients so that those with the highest need are seen most urgently. The aim is to avoid what we all recognise was an issue in the past—where, in order to meet targets, often two, three or four ambulances were being sent in response to the same call. People had concerns about that across the House, but that is one of the improvements that has been brought in.

In 2016-17, the North West Ambulance Service treated and discharged over one quarter more patients at the scene and 92% more patients over the telephone compared with 2011-12, so although I recognise that there are challenges and areas that require improvement, it is important, in the interests of balance, also to recognise the progress the trust has made in recruiting more paramedics—as part of the 3,000 more paramedics nationally—its low vacancy rate and the steps it has taken to treat more patients at the scene.

Additionally, in July last year, the Secretary of State approved a revision of the operational performance standards for ambulances. Those improvements have been rolled out to all mainland ambulance trusts, which will mean better prioritisation of calls. The framework brings all patients under a national response standard for the first time and improves the efficiency and resilience of the ambulance service in the face of rising demand.

We recognise that the performance of the North West Ambulance Service against those standards is not good enough, and that is why NHS Improvement, NHS England and commissioners are closely engaged with the trust to ensure that it adapts successfully to the new performance framework. If the hon. Gentleman has specific concerns about the openness of the trust, I will be very happy to discuss those points and take them forward with him in a collaborative spirit.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman has raised concerns about workforce directly with the trust. As I said earlier, 3,000 more paramedics have been recruited nationally compared with 2010—an increase of more than 30%—so there are more paramedics than there were.

Tony Lloyd: I know that the Minister is trying to be helpful, but one thing is bound to concern constituents. At the time of the A&E closure in Rochdale, a commitment was made that there would be paramedic cover as routine, but that is being breached regularly. Even if there has been some increase in the number of paramedics, and I concede that there has been, it has not kept pace. Nor has the North West Ambulance Service even tried to honour the commitment that was made—perhaps it should not have been made—in order to deliver the closure of the A&E. The phrase “sleight of hand” comes to mind, and we have to do better.

Stephen Barclay: I take that concern seriously, and I discussed it with officials earlier today. Compared with 2010-11, when the local “Healthy Futures” reconfiguration took place, there has been a 33% increase in vehicle
hours assigned to the Rochdale and Bury area, with an associated staff resource increase of 43 full-time equivalent. So there has been improvement.

The North West Ambulance Service also aims to include a paramedic on board every ambulance. Although there are seven paramedic vacancies in the Rochdale area, nine paramedics are due to be assigned over the next 10 weeks and the trust is confident that the area will have a full complement of paramedic staff by April this year. I hope that that brings some comfort to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents about the direction of travel.

It is worth bearing in mind that, alongside those paramedics, the North West Ambulance Trust has recruited 24 graduates to operate as emergency medical technicians, and they are awaiting registration as paramedics. That will further improve the position. The trust has made it easier for emergency medical technicians to embark on paramedic training courses and worked with local universities to increase the rate of paramedic qualification. Where emergency medical technicians crew ambulances and respond to calls, they are heavily supported to do so safely, with direct access to advice from advanced paramedics and the trust’s clinical hub.

Handovers were mentioned in several interventions. We recognise the challenge of delayed patient handovers to emergency departments. Delayed handovers tie up ambulance resources and adversely affect the trust’s capability to respond quickly to new calls. We are clear that handovers must take place within the agreed timeframes, and NHS England and NHS Improvement are supporting hospitals to ensure that improvements are made. Such work includes improved monitoring and daily review by national and regional winter operations teams, targeted assistance to challenged hospital trusts to improve their performance and the issuing of revised handover guidelines that focus responsibility on the wider system to address handover delays, including a clear escalation process. Locally, there are initiatives in place such as the placement of hospital ambulance liaison officers within emergency departments.

The trust is implementing a number of procedural solutions to improve the efficiency of the call-taking staff, including the use of post-dispatch scripts, which inform callers of the expected arrival time of a resource. In other trusts, that has minimised duplicate calls and reduced ambulance attendances by 4.6%.

To conclude on the comments of the hon. Member for Rochdale—with the leave of the House, I will then address the concerns of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—his concerns about performance are pertinent, and there is work ongoing to address that issue as part of the wider initiative. However, it is also important to recognise the progress that has been made, which has seen the recruitment of additional paramedics and the training of staff, with the progression of which the hon. Gentleman spoke, which allows people to progress their career into the role of paramedics. There are also further measures in terms of prioritisation, which will address a number of the concerns he set out.

On whistleblowers, that is an issue on which I, as a constituency Member of Parliament, have long campaigned. I hope my record on that speaks for itself, and the issue is something the right hon. Gentleman and I have previously discussed.

The right hon. Gentleman has also raised concerns, as has the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), regarding the East of England Ambulance Service. On receipt of the right hon. Gentleman’s letter, I instructed officials in my Department to share copies with the Care Quality Commission—the independent regulator of all health and social care services in England—to ensure that it is fully aware of the issues being raised. I discussed these concerning allegations directly with the chief executive of NHS England and the chief executive of NHS Improvement this morning, and asked them to confirm to me the actions they will be taking. They have subsequently confirmed that they will be holding a joint risk summit regarding the trust in the next week. The CQC will be in attendance.

Norman Lamb: First, I am really grateful to the Minister for addressing these issues this evening, given that this is a debate about the North West Ambulance Service. Would he be willing to meet me, given the level of concerns in the east of England?

Stephen Barclay: I would be very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman. As a fellow east of England Member of Parliament, but also as a former Health Minister, he brings great experience to these issues, so of course I will.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rochdale for raising this issue this evening. I am happy to work with him in our common interest to address the areas of performance that need to improve. However, at the same time, it is important that we recognise the progress that has been made on recruitment and reducing the vacancy level by the North West Ambulance Service, which gives a positive sign of the progress that is being made as we address the challenges being faced across the NHS.

Question put and agreed to.

8.47 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU: Legal Systems

1. **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the operation of the legal system in each legal jurisdiction in the UK.

2. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the operation of the legal system in each legal jurisdiction in the UK.

3. **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): What plans the Government have to ensure that the UK legal system continues to operate effectively after the UK leaves the EU.

4. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): The Government have made it a priority to ensure that there is a smooth legal transition both in our negotiations with the EU and in our domestic implementing legislation. I fully appreciate that Scotland and Northern Ireland have distinct legal systems, and that is why my Department has been working closely with the devolved Administrations, looking at how our legal and justice systems are affected by EU exit. The Government are clear that a good deal with the EU will be one that works for all parts of the United Kingdom.

5. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his position, having shadowed him for a few months when he was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

6. **Mr Gauke**: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words. It is pleasing to know that, wherever I go, he follows.

7. **Neil Gray**: I welcome the new Secretary of State to his position, having shadowed him for a few months when he was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

8. **Mr Gauke**: Regarding the hon. Gentleman’s question, we are ambitious—we want to get the best deal. I appreciate that, in the course of negotiations, it is possible that our interlocutors will express an adverse opinion, but we will continue to engage and to be ambitious.

9. **Drew Hendry**: The Secretary of State has acknowledged Scotland’s distinct legal and judicial system. The role of Lord Advocate in overseeing the investigation and prosecution of crime means that, in Scotland, there is direct co-operation between Scottish law enforcement agencies and their European counterparts. Will the Minister give details of the consultations between his Department, and the Scottish Government and Scottish Law Officers in that regard?

10. **Mr Gauke**: We continue to engage with the Scottish Government across the board, including on that implementation matter.

11. **Ben Bradley**: Will the Minister update the House on plans in relation to foreign criminals in UK prisons and on whether, after we leave the EU, we might be able to return those who break our laws to their country of origin, rather the UK taxpayer footing the bill for their stay at Her Majesty’s pleasure?

12. **Mr Gauke**: Since 2010, we have removed more than 40,000 foreign national offenders from our prisons, immigration removal centres and indeed the community. There is a range of removal mechanisms that enable the return of foreign offenders to their home countries. The Government are now considering future criminal justice arrangements with the EU with the aim of continuing our close working relationship.

13. **Kate Green**: The Secretary of State will be aware that in family law there are mutual and reciprocal arrangements between EU countries to ensure that judgments are recognised and enforced. How does he envisage the interests of children being protected after we exit the EU and are no longer able to rely on those mutual arrangements?

14. **Mr Gauke**: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Having satisfactory arrangements with the European Union in that and other matters is important. It is right that we are ambitious so that the interests of children are put at the heart of what we do.

15. **Robert Neill**: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post—it is nice to see a lawyer there. I hope that he has a lengthy tenure, if not quite as long as that of the last lawyer from Ipswich who was Lord Chancellor, and with a better ending.

16. **Mr Gauke**: Much of the debate has been concentrated on criminal justice co-operation. In his speech on being sworn in, my right hon. Friend rightly referred to the importance of the UK as a jurisdiction of choice in civil and commercial litigation. Will he make sure that that aspect is not lost in our negotiations, in particular the importance to London and the UK’s financial services sector of having contractual certainty?

17. **Mr Gauke**: I thank my hon. Friend. Given that the last Lord Chancellor from Ipswich was Cardinal Wolsey, who ran into some difficulties in negotiations with a
powerful European supranational body, I should tread carefully. It is important that in our negotiations we try as best we can to provide the certainty my hon. Friend seeks.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I welcome the new Secretary of State for Justice to his place. Sir David Edward, a distinguished former judge in Scotland and at the European Court of Justice, has said that so far “the UK Government has overlooked the significance of the separate Scottish legal system, the Scottish judicial system and the Scottish prosecution system in relation to justice and home affairs issues” in their negotiations with the EU. Will the new Secretary of State undertake to meet me to discuss how those oversights might be rectified?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure that I would accept the hon. and learned Lady’s characterisation of the position as one of oversight. I made it clear in the very first answer I gave in this role that I fully appreciate that Scotland had a distinct legal system. However, I would certainly be delighted to discuss the matter with her further.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for agreeing to meet me, but that was not my characterisation: it was the characterisation of a senior judge in the Scottish courts and in the Court of Justice. The judge went on to describe the UK Government’s paper on enforcement and dispute resolution as “an undergraduate essay which would have failed”. He says that those who are writing the papers are not aware of the problems posed by the separate Scottish legal system and that they do not want to hear from the experts who have offered to help. This is a serious problem. Will the Secretary of State, in his new role, undertake to listen to those who know about the Scottish legal system and to take on board their concerns in his negotiations on these matters?

Mr Gauke: I want to ensure that we end up in a position that is good for the legal system and legal services in every part of the United Kingdom. That certainly includes Scotland, and of course I will want to engage with representatives and representatives from all parts of the United Kingdom to ensure that we get the best possible deal.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): After Brexit, can we do something that we cannot do now? In other words, if an EU national is found guilty of an imprisonable offence, will we be able to deport them to serve their sentence in prison in their own country and ban them from ever returning?

Mr Gauke: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), we are considering future criminal justice arrangements with the European Union. We want close working relationships, but we also need to work together to ensure that foreign national offenders can be removed when possible.

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

2. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress he has made on implementing his duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. [903484]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I should like to begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. With the agreement of colleagues from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Act should come into operation in April. It is absolutely vital that every prisoner leaving custody has a home to go to.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend and welcome him to his new position. As he rightly says, it is in our best interest that ex-offenders leaving prison do not reoffend. One of the key issues is to ensure that prison governors honour their commitment under the Homelessness Reduction Act to ensure that people are prepared for life outside prison. What action will he take to ensure that prison governors train offenders who are due to leave prison so that they do not reoffend?

Rory Stewart: There are two key things to do: first, to empower governors so that they have real flexibility and control over education budgets and career advice; and, secondly, to connect that to housing. There is an obligation under the Act that my hon. Friend has championed, and co-ordination with local authorities will be essential.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Why has the number of women who become homeless on release doubled in only a year? Is this not more evidence of the Government failing prisoners and probation policies?

Rory Stewart: There are a number of complex issues relating to homelessness, but we absolutely agree that this is unacceptable and shocking. We need to work much more closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, with local authorities and with prisons to ensure that we cut those numbers.

Legal Aid

3. Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that legal aid is available to people who are entitled to that aid. [903485]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The provision of legal aid to support the most vulnerable is an important part of our justice system. We spend £1.6 billion a year on legal aid, which is more than a fifth of the Ministry of Justice’s budget. In terms of accessing legal aid, there is an online tool at gov.uk to help people to check their entitlement to it.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that answer, but people in my constituency in west Cornwall find it hard to access the legal aid that they are entitled to. In fact, there is only one office there that holds a legal aid contract, and it deals only with family law. Will the Department assess how the changes in legal aid funding have affected rural people, and consider measures to address the shortage?
Lucy Frazer: Maintaining access to justice is extremely important, which is why the Legal Aid Agency regularly reviews the capacity of the legal aid market to cope with demand and takes action when regional shortfalls develop. Those in need of urgent advice in Cornwall and elsewhere can always use the civil legal aid specialist telephone service. In autumn 2017, the Legal Aid Agency began national tendering for new civil contracts to start in autumn 2018.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have received hundreds of emails from people in my constituency who face eviction, live in overcrowded conditions or rent properties that are in dire need of repair. Does the Minister agree that early legal advice in housing matters needs to be restored urgently, and that it is unacceptable that large parts of the country have no housing legal aid providers at all?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Lady will know, the previous Lord Chancellor committed to a review of legal aid later this year, and I also commit to reviewing the situation later this year. Legal aid for housing is always available and can be accessed through the telephone gateway.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Judicial review is a key tool for ordinary people to challenge unjust and unlawful decisions by the state and other public bodies. Deep cuts to legal aid have undermined that ability, so will the Minister commit to reviewing the legal aid market to cope with demand and take action when regional shortfalls develop?

Lucy Frazer: As I have already mentioned, a legal aid review is taking place later this year. As a matter of principle, legal aid is available for judicial review in certain circumstances when certain conditions are met.

Oakhill Secure Training Centre

5. Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of standards at Oakhill secure training centre in Milton Keynes.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): The findings of a recent Ofsted inspection report on Oakhill secure training centre are completely unacceptable. We took urgent action to address Ofsted’s concerns. The Ministry of Justice’s monitoring team has been carrying out further scrutiny to investigate Ofsted’s findings.

Iain Stewart: The young people held in the centre often have complex, challenging needs and require considerable intervention to help their rehabilitation. By when can we hope to see some tangible improvement in that intervention?

Dr Lee: My hon. Friend is spot on. These vulnerable children require the very best care, particularly for their mental health. In negotiations with the main contractor, I rule out absolutely nothing if the contract obligations are not being met.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The children being held at Oakhill can sometimes be extremely challenging, and the staff have to be able to control them to protect not only themselves, but other children and staff. With reference to Sodexo and the report into Peterborough Prison, the situation is not acceptable. We have already engaged with Sodexo, particularly around strip searching, and I expect and have demanded improvements.

Victim Impact Statements

6. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people who make a victim impact statement.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): It is critical that the voice of the victim is heard in the criminal justice system. The victims code is clear that victims are entitled to make a victim personal statement to explain in their own words, to a court or to the Parole Board, how the crime has affected them. We are spending £36 million this year to fund critical support services for victims of crime. Under the code, all victims are entitled to a needs assessment to determine what emotional and practical support they need.

Tom Pursglove: I know from a family in my constituency that making a victim impact statement, and having to do so regularly, is a very stressful and nerve-racking experience. What steps is he taking to ensure that in those situations the victim, rather than the offender, is the priority?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend has raised this with me before. We are committed to making sure that practical and emotional support is in place for victims throughout the criminal justice process, such as by providing independent sexual violence and domestic violence advisers. If victims wish to attend a parole hearing to present
Mr Gauke: I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend. I am not in a position to comment on that particular case, but I am of course willing to engage with him.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his post. Victims must be at the heart of our justice system, but we have seen failings in enabling victims to give their impact statements in the Worboys case. We have seen the police failing victims, and victims are asking why there were no further prosecutions. In fact, victims feel let down throughout the process. I ask the Secretary of State once again to support victims, and to help to restore their faith and that of the wider public in our justice system. Will he hold to account those in the senior echelons of the process and that the most stringent conditions are applied.

Mr Gauke: First, I express my sympathy with Mr and Mrs Mullins, who have experienced the most horrendous situation. In the context of another case, I have already made it clear that we need to look again at how the victim support process works. We want to look at that specific case and, more generally, at how we can improve the situation of victims. In this particular case, of course I am willing to meet the hon. Lady and Mr and Mrs Mullins to see if their concerns can be properly addressed.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Friend to his post. In 2009, my constituent Mr Samuel was acquitted of the Worboys case. We have seen the police failing victims, and victims are asking why there were no further prosecutions. In fact, victims feel let down throughout the process. I ask the Secretary of State once again to support victims, and to help to restore their faith and that of the wider public in our justice system. Will he agree today to an independent end-to-end review of the whole handling of this case?

Mr Gauke: As I announced to the House on Friday, Dame Glenys Stacey has agreed to undertake a fact-finding review of what happened with regard to victims in the Worboys case. It is important that we get to the bottom of precisely what happened and whether processes were followed. I am aware of conflicting evidence on that point, so it is important that we pursue it. I quite understand why the hon. Gentleman suggests an end-to-end review, and indeed there are questions that need to be considered about what happened in 2008-09 and so on. As I have said before, at the moment I want to focus on the immediate questions in front of us in terms of support for victims and the Parole Board process.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The proposed release of John Worboys has absolutely horrified and terrified his many, many victims. Like me, they are appalled to learn today that he has been moved to London's category A Belmarsh Prison. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that he will do everything in his power to ensure that Worboys is released with strict licence conditions that keep him out of Greater London?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend has been tireless on this matter in recent weeks. The precise conditions are operational matters that are decided at operational level, but let me assure him that nearly a fortnight ago I wrote to the relevant authorities and stressed the need to ensure that the concerns of victims are at the heart of the process and that the most stringent conditions are applied.

HMP Liverpool

7. Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the condition of prisoners' accommodation at HMP Liverpool.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I visited Liverpool prison yesterday. The inspector's report was genuinely disturbing, and of course that is reflected on the ground. There are some very good prison officers working there, but unfortunately the conditions are really shocking, particularly basic sanitation, with piles of garbage. We now have a new governor in place, millions of pounds are going into the infrastructure, and 172 places have been closed so that we can begin a proper refurbishment and maintenance programme. Most importantly, we must not allow this to happen again.

Rosie Cooper: These appalling conditions did not emerge overnight. Who will be held to account locally and nationally for failing to implement the recommendations of the many critical reports about the prison? How in 21st century Britain could this national disgrace be allowed to happen? Lack of adequate healthcare meant that lives were lost. What happened to the regulators and the leadership? Were they being paid while asleep?

Rory Stewart: Those are important questions that we will look at closely. We have published an action plan for Liverpool prison. There are two key things we need to do. The first is about leadership. The governor has now been replaced. The second is that we have put in place a new urgent notification process, so if anything like this happens again and inspectors raise it, we will be forced to reply within 28 days. But that is only the beginning, because this requires a complete change in culture that focuses on getting back to basics: cleaning the prison, reducing the violence, reducing the drugs and making sure the healthcare provision is in place.

20. Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his new post—the whole House knows of his passion for prisons and prisons policy. Will he hold to account those in the senior echelons of the Prison Service for the disgraceful and appalling conditions in the prison?

Rory Stewart: This is a big question of management. There are many very hard-working people at Liverpool prison who take their jobs very seriously and work very long hours, but we have to balance that with a recognition
that clearly there have been fundamental failings. People will be held to account. Above all, we need to work with the team at the prison to ensure that in future it is a clean and decent place, both to protect the public and to reduce reoffending.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s prompt visit to HMP Liverpool in his new role, and to Altcourse prison, which is in my constituency. His action plan states that there will be a full conditional survey and investment proposal for medium-term refurbishment. Given that Walton prison was built in 1855—some 15 years before this Palace was completed—is that the most realistic outcome for the future of the prison?

**Rory Stewart**: It is certainly true that there are challenges with older buildings, as we see with this place, but it is possible to keep them going—Westminster Hall was built in 1080. Stafford prison, which was built in the late 18th century, is a clean and decent prison. We will look carefully at the fabric, and in some cases there is reason to build a new wing. But in Liverpool prison we can make a huge difference simply with £2.5 million for new windows and for refurbishing individual cells.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): The inspectors described the conditions at HMP Liverpool as the worst they have seen, citing rat infestations and filthy conditions. Prison maintenance at Liverpool was outsourced to Amey. This shows that the problems with outsourcing go way beyond Carillion, which mismanaged maintenance at 50 different prisons. Will the Secretary of State commit to a review looking at bringing prison maintenance back in house, in Liverpool and at all prisons, as Labour has pledged to do?

**Rory Stewart**: We will look carefully at the maintenance issues in Liverpool, but sadly the problems are not only to do with Amey; they are also to do with relationships between management and the contractors and how prisoners were, or were not, used to clean the estate. We have made a huge amount of difference in just the past five weeks by changing not the Amey contract but the management approach and the focus on cleanliness.

**Richard Burgon**: I thank the Minister for his answer on Amey and contractors, but it is hard to have faith that he will address the problems at Liverpool or, in fact, any prison, because it has recently come to light that his Government handed £40 million to Carillion in 2017, even after the then prisons Minister had expressed concern in Parliament about Carillion’s performance in prisons. Will not poor maintenance in Liverpool continue to contribute to inhumane conditions while responsibility is left in the hands of private contractors who, in reality, put profit first?

**Rory Stewart**: We do not believe that this is fundamentally an ideological fight between the private and public sectors. Most of those people working for Carillion—70% of them—were public servants just three years ago, and most of those people working for Amey were public servants in the prison service. Most of the problems have been solved through basic management and leadership. There has been a deep clean, the yard units have been increased from five to 18, and the conditions have improved rapidly. In the end, a lot of this is about management, not a private/public debate.
and take them to education and training classes? Does he now accept that the Government’s dash to reduce the number of prison officers has seriously hampered the chances of preventing prisoners from reoffending?

Rory Stewart: Among the many challenges that face education in prisons is the issue of numbers, which is why we have now committed to having 2,500 more prison officers on the estate, and we are delivering that ahead of target. That will allow us to have in place the key-worker programmes, in which each officer will be paired with six prisoners to guide them through the process.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that there are some good examples of literacy classes in prisons and reoffending rates thereby reducing? Will he undertake to ensure that best practice from throughout the United Kingdom is replicated so that reoffending rates fall across the UK?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely true. An enormous number of programmes have huge success in reducing reoffending. For example, in Brixton prison, the Clink programme has reduced reoffending by 43%, but we can do much more to learn the lessons and have a proper standardised document that takes what works elsewhere and drives it through the entire system.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): In order to encourage more businesses to take on ex-offenders, the Government need to lead by example and not just by exhortation. The Ban the Box initiative was brought in across Government a few years ago to encourage that. How is ex-offender employment going within the prison system. One thing that consistently goes wrong is the lack of consistency in education and training between different institutions and in institutions once the prisoner leaves. The Minister has talked about power to the governor, but governors must work within the construct of the wider environment. What will he do to ensure that we have that consistency?

Rory Stewart: First, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who did this job far better than I will be able to do. One of the things that he introduced, which is going very well at the moment, is working with the Ministry of Defence. We are providing basic supplies for British military troops. It is something that is providing not just employment to prisoners, but the training and vocational skills they require for future employment.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Prisoners move round the prison system and, in the end, they come out of the prison system. One thing that consistently goes wrong is the lack of consistency in education and training between different institutions and in institutions once the prisoner leaves. The Minister has talked about power to the governor, but governors must work within the construct of the wider environment. What will he do to ensure that we have that consistency?

Rory Stewart: This is of course a balance between empowering the governor so that they can have a tailored programme that is flexible and works for the prison and having decent national standards. That will mean setting the curriculum at a national level, having the area managers engaged over the governors and also giving the governors the ability to have education that is relevant to their areas—skills that are relevant to the jobs outside the prison gates.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What steps has he taken to ensure that the Parole Board takes account of public safety in its decision on releasing a prisoner.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): Public safety is the primary consideration in Parole Board decisions on releasing a prisoner. The law requires that the Parole Board may direct release only if it is satisfied that continued detention is no longer necessary for the protection of the public. Parole Board members are selected on account of their experience and ability to assess risk. Their decisions are based on a comprehensive assessment of the ongoing risk posed by the offender, using detailed reports produced by risk management professionals. More broadly, I have already announced that my Department will be carrying out a full review of the relevant processes and procedures in place for victims relating to Parole Board decisions, and we will consider whether they should be improved.

Alberto Costa: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post. Both of us worked in the same City firm—Richards Butler—at different stages over a number of years. In light of the recent John Worboys case, my constituents have raised similar concerns with regard to the release of Colin Pitchfork who brutally raped and murdered two teenage girls in my constituency and pleaded not guilty. He was only found guilty as a result of DNA evidence, which was a first at the time. What assurances can my right hon. Friend provide for the safety of my constituents and others who have not been fully considered in this matter? Will he assure us that the Parole Board will take into account the safety of our citizens in regard to Mr Pitchfork’s release?

Mr Gauke: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. The safety of the public is the Parole Board’s overriding concern in considering whether a prisoner should be released, and that will be the Board’s concern when it comes to reviewing Pitchfork’s detention. I can confirm that the families of Pitchfork’s victims are receiving regular contact under the Probation Service Victim Contact Scheme. Specifically, they have been given the opportunity to submit a victim personal statement to the Parole Board and to make representations regarding licence conditions for any upcoming parole hearing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the special protections in place for the release of sex offenders, does the Minister believe that releasing them to the same area that the attacks took place re-traumatises the victims and stirs up community anxiety?

Mr Gauke: Ultimately, these are operational decisions. A number of factors have to be taken into account in deciding what licensed conditions exist, but, clearly, the views and concerns of victims are an important part of that process.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): In relation to the Parole Board’s review of public safety, for those of us with deeply concerned constituents, can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will at least co-operate with the judicial review now being brought by victims?
Mr Gauke: In my statement to the House on Friday, I set out that I would not be pursuing a judicial review on behalf of the Government in this case, but I also made it very clear that I did not want to say or do anything that would in any way stand in the way of others who may have different routes into a judicial review. I maintain that position.

Victims of Crime

10. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to introduce new legislative proposals on enshrining rights for victims.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): The Government want victims to get the support they need to cope with, and as far as possible recover from, the effects of crime. We are spending £96 million in 2017-18 to fund critical support services for victims of crime. That includes £7.2 million for nationally commissioned rape support services.

Neil Coyle: John Worboys lived in Rotherhithe in my constituency and is not welcome back. He has not served the sentence he was given and was not prosecuted for the vast majority of his crimes. How are the Government working with victims, police authorities and the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that sex attackers are prosecuted for their crimes, and how is the Ministry of Justice better ensuring that victims’ rights are upheld in future parole decisions?

Dr Lee: The case of Worboys has troubled us all; it has troubled me personally—of course it has. In this particular case, Dame Glenys Stacey is investigating the review from a probation point of view. As the Secretary of State has already said, there are operational responsibilities with regard to where he is transferred to and the directions when he is released and where he can go. The Department is engaged with that on a daily basis.

Gareth Johnson: The biggest insult that can be given to a victim of crime is the imposition of a derisory sentence on the offender. Will my hon. Friend update the House on his plans to widen the scope of the unduly lenient sentence scheme, as set out in the Conservative party manifesto?

Dr Lee: As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, the Government committed in their manifesto to consider the extension of the scope of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General is reviewing that.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): We all know that, too often, victims are failed by the criminal justice system. That is presumably why, in 2015, the Conservatives matched Labour’s manifesto commitment to enshrine victims’ rights in a victims’ law. It is three years on. Can Ministers give me a single good reason why it has not happened?

Dr Lee: After Easter my victims strategy will be published, as promised, and within it there will be recommendations on legislative and non-legislative measures, part of which will be the legislative underpinning of the victims code.

Drones

11. Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to stop the use of drones over prisons.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I first pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), for his extraordinary work on drones. We have done a range of work, ranging from Operation Trenton with the police, which took place in 2016, through to the conviction of over 28 individuals for drone-related offences.

Jeremy Quin: What particular extra support is given to those prisons with a high incidence of drone attacks? Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss potential improvements to the relevant legislation?

Rory Stewart: We have established specialist teams for prisons that have particular vulnerabilities to drone attacks. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss some of the legislative issues. I also believe that there is much more we can do on basic issues such as netting and grills, as well as focusing on high technology.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Drones are one of the ways in which mobile phones are got into prisons, where they can be used for criminality alongside drugs. What measures are being taken to use technology to limit the use of mobile phones in prison?

Rory Stewart: Two types of technology can be used on mobile telephones. One is jamming technology, and the second, which is more commonly used in prison, is a wand to detect mobile telephones. An astonishing number of phones—at over 20,000, there are far too many—are detected in prisons. We should be addressing this in two ways. The first is by making sure that they do not get in: these are closed environments and we should be able to massively reduce the amount coming in. The second is that, by putting phones in cells to allow people to talk to their families, we can monitor the calls and control the need for phones in the first place.

Court Improvements

14. Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the court experience for people who work in the justice system.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The Ministry of Justice has plans for a £1 billion modernisation programme for the courts. This will streamline and simplify processes using technology, helping those who work in the courts and those who use them.

Andrew Lewer: Will the Minister give an assessment of the Department’s recent work in improving the performance of the alternative dispute resolution scheme,
which is intended to help consumers resolve disputes with traders but also to ease the volume of work in the courtroom?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance and value of alternative dispute resolutions. Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service already runs a small claims mediation service to help parties resolve claims worth under £10,000 before a hearing. We are also working to offer an online mediation service for those who begin their claims online.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Under this Government hundreds of courts have closed, and I now see that Fleetwood court is on the latest consultation list. How do these court closures contribute to a positive experience for “those who work in the courts and those who use them”?

Lucy Frazer: Last year, nationally, court and tribunal services were used at only 58% of their available hearing capacity. Moreover, as I have outlined, we are planning to spend £1 billion on modernising the courts service by using technology to put some processes online and employ video evidence more effectively. In those circumstances, it is appropriate to consider the best use of the money that we spend on the legal services system, as we are doing through a consultation that will include the hon. Lady’s local magistrates court. We will listen closely. It is important to remember, however, that all the money saved through any court closures will be put back into the justice system, making sure that it works effectively for everybody in it.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising what certainly appears to be an extremely distressing case. We are looking at options to strengthen our response to domestic abuse and hope to bring forward proposals soon. I cannot comment on individual sentencing decisions, and prosecution decisions are made by the CPS. I will, however, look at the role that my Department had in this case and write to her in response to her specific questions.

T2. [903474] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Kim Mitchell was the victim of child sexual abuse in 1990 when she was only eight years old. Kim had to suffer the trauma of growing up with the authorities not believing her, yet after a long battle her abuser was eventually charged just last year. Sadly, Kim has been denied criminal injuries compensation due to a minor unspent criminal conviction. Does the Secretary of State think this is fair?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): It sounds like an appalling case. I ask the hon. Lady to write to me about it and I am happy to meet her.

T4. [903476] Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Constituents repeatedly complain to me that dangerous criminals do not as a matter of course serve the sentence given by the courts. What action is the Department taking to ensure that sufficient prison places are available so that dangerous criminals can serve the sentence deemed appropriate by the courts?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): We focus on making sure that we have a proper capital investment programme in place, so additional money has been allocated for the building of new prisons, two are currently being commissioned, and we currently have spare places in our prisons. To reassure my hon. Friend, it is absolutely vital that we have the places so that people can serve their sentence. Sentences should not be driven by availability of prison places.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): The Worboys case has made it clear to me that there are some aspects of the Parole Board’s decision-making process that need to be examined and improved. It is crucial that we preserve the independence of the Parole Board, but equally important that these decisions can be scrutinised and, in some circumstances, reconsidered. That is why I announced on Friday the expansion of the scope of the review of the Parole Board to include not just transparency of decision making, but whether, in what circumstances, and how outcomes can be challenged. I will not rush to conclusions. This is a complex area where the rightful concerns of victims will be considered but also balanced with the legal rights of offenders. We will have completed the review by Easter, and I will report thereafter.

Priti Patel: The Lord Chancellor will be aware of the case of my constituent who was left blinded in one eye and unable to work because of her abusive ex-partner. The offender was sentenced by our court to a pathetically small 22 months and released early, and the Crown Prosecution Service could not be bothered to pursue a compensation order. Will he personally review how this case has been handled, the soft sentence given, and the failures of the criminal justice system to support the victim?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is very important that those who are most vulnerable get access to legal aid, and legal aid is available where there is homelessness or where disrepairs to the home seriously threaten an individual’s life or health. We are reviewing legal aid, and we will update the House accordingly.
Mr Gauke: First, as I said a moment or so ago, we are looking to say more about domestic violence in the near future. This is a matter that the Government take very seriously across the board. On legal aid, as the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire, has already pointed out, we are currently undertaking a review.

Dr Phillip Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am aware of the situation, having met representatives of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Muslim burial representatives in October 2016. Coroners are independent of the Government, but I do recognise that there are some sensitivities around this issue and that there have been some difficulties in communication between the coroner and certain parties. That is why I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and, indeed, those representatives again in the Department.

Dr Phillip Lee: This is a hugely important issue for Members on both sides of the House. We know absolutely that extremism—we can see this in France, and we of course saw it in Iraq—can be driven in a prison setting. W e are working very hard with colleagues in the Home Office on this issue, and it will be a priority for the Secretary of State and me during our time in office.

Rory Stewart: This is a hugely important issue for Members on both sides of the House. We know absolutely that extremism—we can see this in France, and we of course saw it in Iraq—can be driven in a prison setting. The problem is not simply the 230 prisoners arrested for terrorist offences, but others who can be influenced when they are in a prison setting. We are working very hard with colleagues in the Home Office on this issue, and it will be a priority for the Secretary of State and me during our time in office.

Eleanor Smith: Healthcare in prisons was a priority for me when I took over in July 2016: it was the first thing I started to ask about. The Ministry of Justice now has a much closer relationship with the Department of Health with regard to the provision of healthcare. We have made advances in the transfer of patients’ information—when prisoners come in, their patient data follow them—which was a problem in the past. I am under no illusions about the healthcare challenges still faced within the prison system, and that is why I will continue to work actively with the Department of Health, which is ultimately the Department responsible for the provision of those services.

Mr Philip Dunne: I was pleased, along with other Shropshire and Telford MPs, to see last Friday that Telford magistrates court was not included in the list of courts to be consulted on, but will the Minister meet me and other Shropshire MPs to understand how important it is to retain the last magistrates court in our county?

Lucy Frazer: As I have outlined, there is a £1 billion modernisation programme, which is very complex and which we need to get right. It involves a number of aspects that need scrutiny. PwC is replacing a number of smaller providers and fulfilling an important service.

Robert Neill: As I have outlined, there is a £1 billion modernisation programme, which is very complex and which we need to get right. It involves a number of aspects that need scrutiny. PwC is replacing a number of smaller providers and fulfilling an important service.

Mr Philip Hollobone: Pakistani nationals make up one of the largest national groups in our prisons, but the prisoner transfer agreement with Pakistan has been suspended for the last eight years. As a matter of urgency, can we get it up and running again?
Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend will be aware that the prisoner transfer agreement was suspended because of the corrupt release of prisoners from Pakistani prisons. We are addressing that at the moment with the Government of Pakistan, and we continue to work very closely with officials in the Foreign Office, the Department for International Development and the Home Office to make sure that we continue to return a record number of foreign national offenders—4,000 last year—to the places from which they came.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): In the 18 months prior to May 2017, three openly transgender women took their own lives while they were in custody in England. What is being done to ensure that staff have the right training and, critically, that prisoners have the right mental health support to head off such tragic events?

Dr Phillip Lee: The hon. Lady is right that such events are tragic. We are working extremely hard on training staff to recognise the particular needs of transgender offenders. The challenge for the system is that they are a relatively small number of people spread across a number of prisons. We are making some progress, but there is more to do.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is good to hear the Minister offer to speak to Members around the House about the courts in their patch. When she does so, will she explain to them about modernisation and digitisation, and how those changes may improve access to courts?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. First, this is a consultation, and I am very happy to engage with any colleagues who would like to discuss it, because we are listening. Secondly, the future of our courts is exciting, and transformation will take place through technology. Interestingly, in a document entitled “Transforming Our Justice System”, the then Lord Chief Justice, the then Lord Chancellor and the Senior President of Tribunals highlighted the fact that as our courts and tribunals are modernised, we will need fewer buildings.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. and learned Lady, my neighbour, on her appointment. She will have noticed the very strong and universally hostile reaction in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire to her plans to close the magistrates court. Can she reassure us that local people will be properly listened to, and better still, will she withdraw those plans today?

Lucy Frazer: As I have highlighted, these plans take place within the context of a £1 billion modernisation of the court system, and in circumstances where, nationally, courts and tribunal services are not used at capacity. As I have said, I will listen properly in the court closures consultation, although the Lord Chancellor will make the ultimate decision. I would like to point out that five sites identified in the last consultation on court closures remain open following the review. When strong cases are made, we will listen.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): When a prisoner is released, they are not even at base camp in their rehabilitation unless they have accommodation. Some local authorities actively discriminate against ex-offenders—for example, by claiming that they have no local connection because they have been sent to a prison a long way away. Fairness is what is required. Will the Minister challenge that behaviour with his counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his knowledge of this issue. There are three things we are doing to address this issue, but we can do much more. The first is having a statutory duty on governors to identify prisoners who are at risk of homelessness. The second is investing more in bail accommodation support services to provide temporary support and accommodation. The third is working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that, through the Housing First pilots, we can actually have homes available even for people with severe mental health needs. Housing is essential.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): One of my constituents has a young son who is serving a very long prison sentence. He often spends 23 out of 24 hours locked up in his cell. How does the Minister think that is affecting his mental health and his chances of rehabilitation on release?

Rory Stewart: Clearly, this is not good. Prisoners need decent, purposeful activity. If they are locked up in their cell for too long, they are obviously not having educational opportunities. We should aim, as the chief inspector of prisons made clear, to make sure that people are spending eight or 10 hours a day outside their cells. That is partly about numbers of staff, which is why we have brought 250 more staff into the Prison Service. It is also about better scheduling of educational and vocational provision. However, the situation the hon. Lady describes is not acceptable.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Following campaigns by victims’ families, the Government announced in October last year that they would bring in tougher sentences for those causing death or serious injury by dangerous driving, but still nothing has happened. Why the delay?

Mr Gauke: We will be reporting to the House in due course.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I would like to put on record my role as co-chair of the justice unions parliamentary group.

When north Wales’s only prison, HMP Berwyn, partially opened on 28 February last year, its regime of skills development and rehabilitation was lauded as pioneering, yet we now learn that, in its first six months, 27 staff members left, and I am told by the Prison Officers Association that morale is at rock bottom. I understand that, in the early months, prisoners assaulted staff on nine occasions, and only one was referred to police. How will the Minister improve offenders’ rehabilitation when recruitment, retention and, critically, staff safety at HMP Berwyn are in crisis?

Rory Stewart: I am very happy to speak in detail with the hon. Lady, who has put an enormous amount of passion and energy into studying issues in prisons in Wales. We believe there are some very positive signs now at HMP Berwyn, but we can talk those through.
Recruitment figures have actually been very positive—we are ahead on the recruitment of 2,500 people across England and Wales—but I am very happy to sit down and talk about Berwyn in particular.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: While the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) was ploughing through her question, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) was doing his customary knee exercises, from which I hope he greatly profits. I call Mr Andrew Slaughter.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Has the Secretary of State seen the investigation published at the weekend by The Sun into new allegations of misconduct by the west London coroner, including bullying, sexism and homophobic conduct towards staff? Despite previous findings of serious misconduct, three-year delays in issuing death certificates, secret inquests being held at night and important case papers being lost, he has been cleared by the Secretary of State to return to work. Will the Secretary of State meet west London MPs and council leaders to discuss this crisis?

Mr Gauke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is responsible for coroners, will be happy to meet him.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The number and percentage of women given custodial sentences has dropped in many areas of the country. In north Wales, the figure has increased by 57%. Will the Minister look into the reasons for this huge increase?

Dr Phillip Lee: I am very happy to. Will the hon. Gentleman please send me the information?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Some women in York have been taken to the family courts on multiple occasions by former partners. This process is clearly being used as a form of emotional abuse, and is highly costly to constituents and the state. What steps is the Minister taking to recognise court abuse, and what actions will she take now?

Lucy Frazer: Using the court process to further any abuse is completely unacceptable, particularly in relation to domestic abuse. The court can already take actions if it thinks that there is abuse of process, by restricting litigants’ ability to continue with further applications and further claims. New family court rules were introduced in November to make sure that vulnerable court users get the support they need in courtrooms.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Individuals with autism spectrum disorder are some of the most vulnerable inmates in prison and are often subject to bullying, abuse and victimisation, with high rates of suicide. What progress is being made on autism accreditation in prisons?

Rory Stewart: This is a hugely important issue. I would very much like to sit down with the hon. Lady, because the Scottish Prison Service has a lot that it can teach us. It is doing a very good job on many of these issues, and I think we can learn a great deal from it.
Personal Independence Payment

12.35 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the recent ruling by the High Court over the judicial review on the application of personal independence payments to persons with mental health problems.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): After careful consideration, I took the decision not to appeal the High Court’s judgment on this case. I informed the House of my decision immediately by tabling a written statement on Friday last week. The written statement set out my decision and the steps that my Department will now take to implement that judgment, although I welcome coming to the House today in addition to that.

I repeat once again my commitment to implementing this judgment in the best interests of our claimants and through working closely with disabled people and key stakeholders over the coming months. The Department for Work and Pensions will undertake an exercise to go through all affected cases in receipt of PIP and all decisions made following the judgment in the MH case to identify anyone who might be entitled to more as a result of the judgment. We will then write to the individuals affected and all payments will be backdated to the effective date in each individual’s claim.

In accepting the outcome of the High Court judgment, the Department does not agree with some of the details in it. The 2017 amending regulations were introduced in response to an upper tribunal case that broadened the interpretation of eligibility for mobility 1—the ability to plan and follow a journey. Our intention has always been to deliver the original policy intent through clarifying how symptoms of overwhelming psychological distress should be assessed. We are not appealing the outcome of the recent High Court judgment to provide certainty to our claimants.

Our next steps will build on the positive work that the Government are already undertaking: spending on the main disability benefits—PIP, the disability living allowance and the attendance allowance—has risen by £4.2 billion since 2010 and real terms spending on disability benefits will be higher every year to 2020 than in 2010. The Government have commissioned two expert-led reviews and invested a record £11.6 billion in mental health services. Access to Work’s mental health support service has been expanded with a two-year trial of targeted support for apprentices with mental health conditions. We have also accepted all the recommendations in the independent review by Lord Stevenson and Paul Farmer, including establishing a framework for large employers to voluntarily report on mental health and disability within their organisation.

With regard to the next steps following this judgment, the DWP will write to those who may be entitled to a higher rate of PIP. Where relevant, all payments will be backdated to the effective date in each individual claim.

PIP is a modern, dynamic and fairer benefit than its predecessor, DLA, and focuses the most support on those who are experiencing the greatest barriers to living independently. At the core of PIP’s design is the principle that awards of the benefit should be made according to the claimant’s overall level of need, regardless of whether they suffer from physical or non-physical conditions. The Government are committed to furthering rights and opportunities for all disabled people and we continue to spend over £50 billion a year to support people with disabilities and health conditions.

Peter Grant: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for attending the House today and welcome her to her recent appointment. It seems that Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions change with astonishing regularity, but the Government’s callous and chaotic attempt to attack the rights of the poor, sick and disabled continues unabated. Although the Secretary of State said that she is pleased to come to the House to make this statement, she did not take the two or three opportunities she had over the past few days to do so, without waiting for an urgent question. Instead, she waited for a month after the High Court decision and then submitted a written statement on a Friday morning, when she knew nobody would be here to read it.

The High Court has ruled yet again that the Government have been acting unlawfully in their incessant attack on the very people the DWP should be seeking to protect. We know that up to 164,000 people will get higher disability payments—or, to put it another way, that the Government have unlawfully been seeking to withhold benefits from up to 164,000 people who are not only entitled to them but who need them if they are to have anything like the normal life that the more fortunate among us take for granted.

This is not the first time the Government have been overturned in the courts. We have previously seen the courts ruling against the Government on the imposition of benefits sanctions, where the Government were acting unlawfully, and before that on the iniquitous bedroom tax. That one is particularly poignant for my constituents just now because the man who stood up to the DWP over the bedroom tax and won, Davie Nelson, a Glenrothes man through and through, sadly died very suddenly last week. His family and friends will be pleased that others are continuing the campaign for social justice that Davie fought so bravely.

The Secretary of State has promised that her Department will now seek to identify anyone who should be receiving higher benefits. My office has estimated, on the basis of preliminary constituency casework, that there could be 71 people in my constituency alone not getting the money they are entitled to. Will she update us on how many people she now thinks have been underpaid? How long will it take to carry out the review? How much longer will these people have to wait to receive the money that they rely on and which is rightfully and lawfully theirs? Will she explain why her Department is amassing such an appalling record of defeats in the courts? Does that not tell the Government something about how they are making these cuts to benefits? Finally, will she now commit to delivering a social security system whose fundamental principle is not to work down to a budget but to protect and respect the dignity of those who rely on it, and not continue to punish people for having disabilities?

Ms McVey: There have been changes in the DWP. Some people have come back, having previously worked here and seen what the changes were, and I am back here, several years later, and hence was probably a good person to say that we would not be appealing the court case.
Established the Centre for Social Justice. The change many years working on social issues and cases, and more people, including those with mental health conditions, is now spent on disability benefits year on year, and the decision to make those necessary changes. More money was our predecessor Labour Government who put off the post, and I welcome her knowledge in making this decision and look forward to establishing closer working relationships and making plans for its implementation.

There has been massive change, and also massive understanding, in terms of what is going on. When I stood here all those years ago in 2013 talking about what the budget would be, people said we were cutting it. I explained the matter very clearly, though it fell on deaf ears, and I was often vilified. People still said it was being cut, but it was not. When I arrived, the budget was just over £13 billion, and it has gone up every year since, and will continue to go up. That is in real terms. Much of the vilification, therefore, was not only unnecessary but deeply untrue, and that again is why I welcome the opportunity to come to the Dispatch Box to explain what is going on.

Changing benefits is not always easy. Expanding support is not always easy. We knew at the time we were taking on a very difficult change and that there would be doubt be legal challenges. When there are legal challenges, however, we must look at them, make a true and fair judgment and carry on along that path, and I believe that in this instance I made a fair judgment.

Today, the Glasgow Herald welcomed the decision—although I accept that the piece in question picked on various other issues—and it was also welcomed by Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind. My hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has met her Scottish counterpart; they, too, welcome the decision and look forward to establishing closer working relationships and making plans for its implementation.

I hope that what I have said explains what we have done, and I hope that what we have done is welcomed by Members on both sides of the House. If the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) would like to talk to me about a specific case or constituent, my door is open, and I will meet him.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post, and I welcome her knowledge in making this decision. In supporting her, I remind the House that it was our predecessor Labour Government who put off changes in disability living allowance deliberately before the election and that afterwards we were faced with the decision to make those necessary changes. More money is now spent on disability benefits year on year, and more people, including those with mental health conditions, will receive them. DLA never delivered that to those people before.

Ms McVey: I thank my right hon. Friend. He spent many years working on social issues and cases, and established the Centre for Social Justice. The change that he brought about was not just about changing the benefits, but about reaching out to people who are sometimes left alone. Some of those people did want to be helped to get back into work. They did want to talk about their hopes and aspirations. There are now over 600,000 more disabled people in work, because they chose that path towards self-determination and the fulfilment of their ambitions and hopes.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

Any disabled person who listened to what was said by the Secretary of State will have been gobsmacked by the suggestion that there is a commitment to disabled people. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has described the Government’s action as a “human catastrophe’. The cuts that they have wrought on disabled people are an absolute disgrace.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said when she raised a point of order yesterday, the Government sneaked out a written statement on Friday, announcing that they would not appeal against the High Court judgment of 21 December, in effect reversing the emergency PIP regulations that they had introduced in February last year. Those regulations were introduced without a vote or a debate, despite two urgent questions and an emergency debate, and despite widespread concern about their impact. The Government’s own Social Security Advisory Committee was not consulted.

I warned at the time: “The move to undermine and subvert independent tribunal judgments is unprecedented, and... marks very troubling behaviour by the Government on cases they lose that could weaken such social security tribunal judgments’ reach, influence and effectiveness in making independent decisions.”—[Official Report, 28 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 145.]

I am pleased that the Secretary of State and her Department have finally seen sense, but there are a number of questions that the Secretary of State must answer—questions that have already been put by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). How many people does her Department estimate have been affected? How quickly will her Department be able to identify affected claimants, and by what process? Given the issues relating to letters from that Department, it is a little worrying if that is the only means.

How soon after identification will the Department make back payments? Will there be an appeal process for PIP claimants who are not contacted by the Department and who believe they should receive such payments? Will the Department compensate claimants who have fallen into debt and accrued interest charges? Will applicants be entitled to a reassessment if they were given the standard rate of the PIP mobility component after the February 2017 changes to PIP regulations, when the cause of the claim was “psychological distress”?

Finally, just how much public money has been spent by the Department on lawyers and legal advice seeking to defend the indefensible in the initial tribunal and the more recent court case?

This sorry debacle should serve as a warning to the Government of the dangers of seeking to undermine and subvert the decisions of our independent judiciary and the House of Commons.
Ms McVey: Can we start the dialogue on a firm and factual footing, which I seek to set out before, and dispel the myth about the spend on disabled people? The facts speak for themselves: in real terms, the money has gone up. In this place, we are supposed to have the definitive facts of an argument, so I seek to give those here.

This was not about a policy change: it was about implementing the correct regulation after a court case. It came about after taking advice from and working with experts in the field on how to help people with severe psychological disorders. It was about support by prompting and by aid and assistance; at the time, it was not deemed to be something for people with severe learning disabilities, who might want a constant companion. That was how the regulations were set down, after advice was sought on the best approach, because this is a tailor-made benefit. However, the judgment in the case went the other way. We will work with MIND and with charities and stakeholders in the field to implement this as quickly as possible, but it is not just about speed; it has to be right and effective and to work for the people it is made for. That will take some time, but we will do it as quickly as possible.

Up to 220,000 people could be affected. That is why we are taking the process very seriously. We as a Department will reach out to those people, once we know exactly what we are doing. I reiterate that, according to figures from 27 October, 66% of PIP recipients with mental health conditions get the enhanced daily living component, compared with 22% who received the highest DLA care component; and 31% of PIP recipients with mental health conditions get the enhanced mobility rate, compared with just 10% of DLA recipients. Those facts speak for themselves. We know that this is a highly emotive issue, but it would be helpful if all MPs when working with their constituents offered them the help and guidance they need, and not ramp up some of the rhetoric and incorrect information we have heard here.

Finally, I was asked about legal costs. The cost in these cases was £181,000, but a Department as big as the DWP expects the costs of court cases to be that high, and they are comparable with those of other Departments engaged in similar judicial review cases.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am so pleased the new Secretary of State has decided to accept the court ruling, and I thank her very much indeed. As I and colleagues said last year, we should have listened to the message the courts were giving us. Accepting their ruling will be a significant step forward in achieving parity of esteem for mental and physical health. The Select Committee on Work and Pensions, of which I am a member, is about to publish a report on PIP and employment and support allowance. Will the Secretary of State seriously consider our recommendations on how to improve both those benefits? We all want the same thing—the best possible support for people who need it.

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a vocal champion of people with disabilities, as is every other Conservative Back Bencher—and Members in all parts of the House. That is why this is sometimes such an emotive issue—everybody wants to be heard. I will indeed listen to her and take on board the recommendations of the Select Committee.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this important urgent question. I congratulate my hon. and assiduous Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) on securing it.

The High Court ruled that the UK Government’s PIP regulations were “blatantly discriminatory” against people with mental health impairments. That follows the damning report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which found “systematic violations” of disability rights. Although I welcome the Secretary of State’s acceptance of the High Court ruling—a position I hope the Government will adopt more regularly in response to High Court defeats on social security policy—I was worried by an aspect of her written statement, which was sneaked out on Friday. She said on Friday and again today that

“Although I and my Department accept the High Court’s judgment, we do not agree with some of the detail contained therein.”—[Official Report, 19 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 30WS.] Will she clarify that she will implement the ruling in full? Will she make an oral statement on the Floor of the House, so that we can consider whether the response follows the High Court ruling? Will she answer the pertinent questions put by my hon. Friend regarding the timescales—a matter she has not covered? Finally, in the light of the ruling and other external interventions, will the Government admit that their policies are causing harm and commit to widescale review of the social security system in the United Kingdom?

Ms McVey: We will implement the judgment in full, but we will work with stakeholders and charities to understand and implement what was said. When we said we did not agree with the detail, it was a reference to the language and terminology that went above and beyond a legal ruling and judgment, but we saw through that to the facts and that is why we decided not to appeal.

I reiterate that I am not the kind of person who sneaks anything out. I have come to this House and answered every question. I set out the timetable. The matter had to go to the Court for a decision on Friday. The House was not sitting by the time I made the decision, so I put out a written statement. I hope that all hon. Members understand that it is better to get a decision right than to rush just to answer in a different way. Nothing was sneaked out.

Again, I reiterate the support the Government give and have said they will give to people with mental health conditions. The Prime Minister has made that a key issue that she wants to deal with, and she and I came to that decision to do so.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State’s decision, which will benefit a lot of disabled people. We all know that DLA was a far worse benefit for people with mental health problems than PIP. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, even before the ruling, far more disabled people were receiving PIP than had ever received DLA?

Ms McVey: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about this subject and is also a member of the Work and Pensions Committee. He has given the correct facts. We as a compassionate Conservative Government will do as much as we can to help people who need our help.
Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Lady to her place and I welcome her statement. Given the size of the task before her, with up to 220,000 people affected, may I again press her to give some sort of timetable for meeting that objective? Might she start by writing to the oldest claimants first, and might she put a monthly report in the House of Commons on progress to that end?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Gentleman is another champion for these causes. As he suggests, this is a mammoth task, and I will be working with experts in the field and doing things as sympathetically and effectively as possible. I will listen to all the advice that he has offered me.

Frank Field: And can we have a monthly statement?

Ms McVey: I will do the best I can to adhere to the right hon. Gentleman’s requests.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I very much support the Secretary of State’s decision, and I am sure that she is delighted that the Opposition parties called for an urgent question so that they could tell her how much they support her decision on the court case. Or at least I think that is what they were saying. I also very much welcome the fact that we are now spending far more money on people with disabilities than the last Labour Government did, which probably explains the anger with which the shadow Secretary of State gave her performance. Will my right hon. Friend look at measures to try to get the decision making on PIP right first time? In too many cases, the right decision is not made the first time, and I hope that she will look at that urgently, and early in her time in office.

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for his comments. He always likes to see things in his own inimitable way, and he is quite right. Both sides of the House are meant to be supporting this decision, but listening to the tone and the noises coming from the Opposition Benches, it is difficult to believe that. He makes a fair point about getting the decisions right first time and helping the decision makers to get it right. There was an independent review—the Gray review—and we will be taking its advice on board.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I, too, welcome the right hon. Lady to her post. I also welcome the decision that she has made. Bearing in mind the fact that many disability benefit claimants with mental health issues struggle to get out of the house, does she share my concern and that of the Work and Pensions Committee about the great discrepancies between contractors and between regions? There are discrepancies relating to the number of people being allowed a home visit for their benefit assessments. Will she please review this, to ensure that those people can get the benefits they deserve and not be sanctioned because they cannot leave their house?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady has raised a good point about how some people are visited while others have to go in for assessment and support. That was part of the freedoms of contracting, so that we could get best practice. Were some people better seen at home? Were other people better seen in their local community? We constantly gauge and value that, and we will continue to do so.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Building on this very positive announcement, we all need to do more to support people with mental health conditions, and one of the biggest challenges is identifying people with those conditions. The PIP process can play a crucial role in that. Will the Secretary of State therefore bring forward plans to enable us to signpost those identified for the additional targeted support that is available across all parts of the Government, so that they can get the maximum amount of help?

Ms McVey: That is another good offer of support and advice from our side of the House from someone who knows his brief very well. We will look at the suggestion that my hon. Friend has put forward.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): How many staff in the Department for Work and Pensions will be directly deployed on the rectification process? I ask because the evidence is that the number of staff in the DWP used to complete any kind of task involving a complaint or a rectification is directly relevant to how long it takes them to complete the process.

Ms McVey: Again, we have to consider these key practical points. We are actively recruiting hundreds of staff for this at the moment.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As for the comments from the United Nations, how do the figures that my right hon. Friend has given compare internationally?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend raises another good point. The UK is one of the most generous countries in the world when it comes to supporting its disabled people. In the G7, only Germany spends more. We spend what is deemed appropriate and available, which is more than £50 billion. I reiterate that we are one of the most generous countries in the world.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Vulnerable people with severe mental health problems in my constituency have had to resort to a distressing appeals process in order to secure the support they are entitled to. This is wholly inappropriate. Pursuant to the answer that the Secretary of State gave to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), may I ask when we can expect to see some progress from her Department to ensure that individuals are assessed for psychological conditions by mental health clinicians in the first instance?

Ms McVey: We are constantly reviewing the numbers to support who is coming forward if we need further decisions or clarifications for people. That is part of the ongoing day-to-day process to make sure that we get this benefit right.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place. We are all right behind her, whatever some people might say. From my experience as an MP in South Dorset, I suspect that the main problem relating to people slipping through the net is...
the lack of home visits. I agree with the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on this point. I suspect that such visits are more expensive, but I think that they would save money in the longer term because the assessment would be more accurate. Will my right hon. Friend look into this, to ensure that we hit the targets smack on, first time?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and support. Anyone in need of a home visit can have a home visit, and I will be looking at the communications relating to this, because perhaps people, including MPs, do not know that. This is something else that we need to work on.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We on the DWP Select Committee heard some alarming evidence and unconvincing answers from contractors about the number of staff who had specialist knowledge of mental health. Can the Secretary of State confirm that she will take this up with the contractors and carry out a review of the assessment process?

Ms McVey: I have indeed got a date in the diary to be on a PIP decision-making process. I met the contractors last week. I had obviously done that when I was last in the House, but I need to be updated to see exactly what is going on. I have had meetings on this, but the hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that there is nothing quite like going through the process myself.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement. I recently visited my local jobcentre in Stockport and met the great work coaches there who are doing so much to help people back into work. Will she join me in congratulating them, and perhaps explain how this is going to help us in our quest to help a further 1 million people into work?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend and neighbour rightly acknowledges the work that the work coaches do in her constituency and right across the country. The aim of the Government in carrying out this transformation was to get a tailor-made benefit service, whether through PIP or universal credit, so that the work coaches know who they are dealing with and therefore how they can help and support them in the best possible ways. The Government should be proud of what they are aiming to do.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): This was an ill-advised attempt to reduce the amount of benefit payable to people with mental health problems, and I am glad that it has been abandoned. Will the Secretary of State take steps to ensure that, in future, her Department complies with its obligations under the Equality Act 2010?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Gentleman is very knowledgeable on this subject, and we spent hours debating these issues across the Dispatch Box when I was last in the House. He knows as well as I do that we always aim to fulfil all obligations. If we do not, this is what happens: we get a court case and we have to deal with the consequences. I hope that I have dealt with them correctly today and received support across the House. I will not be seeking leave to appeal, and that is right on this occasion.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her post. I am visiting my local jobcentre in Poole on Friday, so will the Secretary of State set out how our new jobcentres will support my constituents and others across the country with mental health challenges into work?

Ms McVey: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), this is about tailor-made and flexible support. We are putting in place more training so that people understand mental health conditions, and we are giving our work coaches and mental health assistants as much support as possible. As I say, this is about tailor-made and flexible support.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the unnecessary vilification of her policies, but her Government were responsible for the vilification of so many mentally disabled people by presenting them as applying for benefits to which they were not entitled. I have seen the misery that such decisions caused many of my constituents, including those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of sexual abuse. Will the Secretary of State now confirm the maximum amount of time that they will have to wait to have their cases reviewed?

Ms McVey: It is unfortunate when Opposition Members try to ratchet up the level of emotion in the Chamber, especially when the situation is as emotional as it is. Nobody has ever sought to vilify anyone, and we should get it on the record now that this is not about vilifying anybody—it is about giving the right support to those who need it. Surely all of us want to focus resources and money on the most disabled people and on the disabled people who need that money. I hope that I can end on that note. The facts speak for themselves: we have spent more than Labour ever did.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision. Does she agree that it is simply nonsense to suggest that the Government are not interested in this agenda? More money is going into the programme than ever. The life chances agenda, which has significantly challenged the welfare state that previously kept a lot of people out of work, is fundamentally changing our country, including communities such as Plymouth, for the better.

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend hits on an important point. The Conservative party and the law that it is bringing in are all about life chances. That is how we view the world. Social mobility, life chances, a foot on the ladder and a career ladder are what we aim to provide all the time.

This will sound like a bit of an advert, but I want to highlight the fact that the Minister for Disabled People holds PIP sessions that all MPs can attend. If anybody has anything that they want to bring to her, they can go to one of those sessions. The sessions take place regularly, and she is holding one today.


**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What we are hearing about today is a court judgment that found the Government’s policy wanting, but the Secretary of State has come to the House seeking plaudits for now not appealing that decision, and that is frankly unacceptable. While it is right for those who were not given the help and support that they needed to get a backdated payment, that payment does not remedy the trauma that they faced during the years when they did not have support. Will the Secretary of State offer an unequivocal apology from the Dispatch Box for the consequences of her Department’s policy? Whether intended or not, it was her Government’s decision that led to people struggling at home, and that is simply not right.

**Ms McVey**: That was another reason for making a written statement, as well as the time constraints and what we had to do to adhere to the legal ruling. I have not come here today for plaudits. I have come here to do what is right and to explain what is right. That is what I have done, and that is the key thing for all our constituents and the people who are watching this closely at home. We have made a decision. I believe that it has been accepted on both sides of the House, and we are going to get things right.

**Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): I warmly welcome this decision, and it is worth noting that this new Secretary of State made it after only eight working days in her role, which represents a decisive course of action. Is it not the case that the entire focus of the Department, which I know well, is on ensuring that those with mental disabilities and challenges have opportunities to access the workplace and lead independent lives? In making this decision, the Secretary of State has shown that that is her focus.

**Ms McVey**: My hon. Friend puts his point so eloquently that I do not think that I can add much to it, but I reiterate that this is about opportunity and allowing everyone to lead an independent life.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for securing this urgent question, but I also thank the Secretary of State for her response and promise of action. In my office, transfers from DLA to PIP occupy a large proportion of my staff’s time. For people with severe anxiety, depression and emotional and mental health issues, some of whom are suicidal, the system has pushed them to the very edge, even when there has been copious evidence and information from consultants, GPs and family members. I ask that the staff who process applications do so with more knowledge, more understanding and certainly more compassion.

**Ms McVey**: I said that the Minister for Disabled People holds meetings for MPs, but she does the same for caseworkers, so MPs’ staff can attend those sessions, meet the Minister and ask relevant questions.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State said that she was gobsmacked by my right hon. Friend’s response. I am gobsmacked by the vilification of my right hon. Friend on social media and by the threats from Opposition Members to string her up, which are more unacceptable. Just for clarification, will she let the House know precisely by how much disability payments have risen since this Government came to power?

**Ms McVey**: I am glad that “gobsmacked” has become part of the language of the House. My hon. Friend is gobsmacked, but I was obviously greatly dismayed by the comments from the Opposition and by the personal attacks that I have suffered. However, I know that people make personal attacks only when they do not have workable policies to put forward, so that shows that the Opposition have no workable policies. We do not need to link politics with violence.

In answer to my hon. Friend’s question, the increase has been £4.2 billion.

**Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question, and I also thank the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for requesting it. The Government have decided not to appeal only now, after putting many claimants with mental health problems through a year of hell. Does the Secretary of State really believe that that was a kind or fair way of treating people with mental health issues?

**Ms McVey**: This is a key issue for the Government. The Prime Minister has made supporting people with mental health issues a key pledge, and we have put in an extra £11 billion. Coming to the House with this decision is a step in the right direction towards helping people as best we can.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s appointment, and my constituents, including those who come to my weekly advice surgeries, will welcome her announcement. Will she update the House on what steps are being taken to disseminate information about what all this means to local advice services so that they can best advise their clients about the next steps and the way forward?

**Ms McVey**: I thank my right hon. Friend, because the point really is about the practicalities of getting this right. It is about engaging with stakeholders and charities. It is about working with our Department to get this right. Mind has welcomed the decision, as have other charities, and it is working with us. Once we have worked through that, obviously we will disseminate it through the whole system.

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that the Department will now be identifying the 164,000 disabled people who were wrongly denied the help to which they are entitled. Her Department also recently announced it is scrapping a target it previously denied existed—that of upholding 80% of initial decisions. When will the DWP be contacting the 83,000 disabled people who were potentially wrongly denied help under that equally dodgy practice?

**Ms McVey**: We will do everything systematically and coherently. We will get to people affected by any incorrect decision as soon as possible.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post and congratulate her on her response to the urgent question. My constituents in Kettering would like to know whether there are more or fewer disabled people in work in 2018 than in 2010.
There are considerably more people with disabilities in work than ever before, and particularly more than in 2010. That is true not just for people with disabilities but for all sorts of people, including young people and women. This Government have fundamentally achieved what we set out to do on life chances, social mobility and opportunities.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I welcome both the judgment and the response. However, this process has been extremely stressful for my constituents, many of whom have been plunged into poverty and absolute despair, with their mental health problems exacerbated along the way. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that cognisance is taken of the opinion of professionals such as psychiatrists, who know what people are capable of doing and what support they need? How will she ensure that any further process does not add additional stress to those who have already been affected?

Ms McVey: As I have said in reply to many questions, we are actively recruiting more people, and we are doing more training on mental health conditions with our caseworkers. We have to make sure that we understand the judgment and that we work with partners to make sure that we can help people who come forward. I have heard the hon. Lady and, again, I would be happy to meet her if she would like to speak to me about anyone in particular.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It must be through gritted teeth that the Opposition have to rely on citing the views on human rights of Saudi Arabian, Russian and Chinese members of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Meanwhile, Conservative Members do not want bluster; they want action and support. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the proportion of PIP recipients with mental health conditions who receive the higher rate of benefit compared with the figure under the DLA regime it replaced?

Ms McVey: I reiterate that 66% of PIP recipients with mental health conditions got the enhanced rate of the daily living component in October 2017, compared with 22% who were on the highest rate of the DLA care component in May 2013. Some 31% of PIP recipients with mental health conditions got the enhanced rate of the mobility component in October 2017, compared with 10% who received the higher rate of the DLA mobility component in May 2013. I hope that that is clear.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Two hundred sufferers of motor neurone disease have been interviewed by the Department in the past 18 months alone. In addition to their physical disability, many will have mental ill health, which is increased by the stress and anxiety of the interviews. Some MND sufferers die within a year of diagnosis. Will the Secretary of State prioritise this group of sufferers when reviewing those cases?

Ms McVey: We will absolutely go via the people who are most in need.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) rose—

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Julian Knight.

Julian Knight: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I had a one-in-two chance.

I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her place and welcome her talk of engagement. Will she commit to providing specific guidance to MPs’ offices and council contact centres at the earliest possible opportunity?

Ms McVey: That is another good point about how people are going to know about the changes. We will indeed take that suggestion forward.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Many disabled people in the highlands, particularly those with mental health conditions, are often refused PIP appeals, despite overwhelming evidence from their doctors. Does the Secretary of State agree it is wrong and discriminatory—[Interruption.]—Does she agree it is wrong—[Laughter]—to accept a private company’s decision over that of highly trained medical professionals who know their patients, and their conditions, well?

Ms McVey: I will keep to the word “discriminate”, and obviously we do not want to do that. Ultimately we will be making the decisions, but it is imperative that we get them right.

Mr Speaker: I call Jeremy Quin.

Jeremy Quin: And finally, Mr Speaker.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that PIP claimants, including those who will benefit from her decision, which I warmly welcome, will not be subject to the benefit cap in respect of these payments, and that payments will continue to be untaxed and, indeed, will rise by the rate of inflation?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right that PIP is not subject to the benefit cap. A person will get PIP irrespective of whether they are in work. PIP is also not means-tested.
Sky/Fox Update

1.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): I am here in my capacity as the quasi-judicial decision maker on the proposed merger between 21st Century Fox and Sky to update the House on the interim report issued today by the Competition and Markets Authority.

The decision-making role is one that my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) discharged, having met her commitment, which was given many times in this House, to the greatest possible transparency and openness allowed by the process. Although I come fresh to this, I intend to follow that approach of being as open as possible while respecting the quasi-judicial nature of the decision.

As the House well knows, after the proposed acquisition was formally notified to the competition authorities last year, my right hon. Friend issued an intervention notice on media public interest grounds, namely of media plurality and the genuine commitment to broadcasting standards. That triggered a phase 1 investigation, requiring Ofcom to report on the specified public interest grounds and the CMA to report on jurisdiction.

Having received advice from Ofcom and the CMA, in September 2017, my right hon. Friend referred the proposed Sky/Fox merger to the CMA for a phase 2 investigation on both grounds. The original statutory deadline for the final report was 6 March 2018, but the CMA has today confirmed that it will be extended by a further eight weeks and that the revised deadline is 1 May.

Once I have received the final report, I must come to a decision on whether the merger operates or may be expected to operate against the public interest, taking into account the specified public interest considerations of media plurality and genuine commitment to broadcasting standards. Following receipt of the final report, I will have 30 working days to publish my decision on the merger, so if I receive the CMA’s report on 1 May, I will have until 14 June to publish my decision.

To be clear, the publication today is of the CMA’s provisional findings. I have placed a copy in the Library. On the need for genuine commitment to broadcasting standards, the CMA provisionally finds that the merger is not expected to operate against the public interest. On media plurality grounds, the CMA’s provisional finding is that the merger may be against the public interest. It cites concerns that the transaction could reduce the independence of Sky News and would reduce the diversity of viewpoints available to, and consumed by, the public. It also raises concerns that the Murdoch family trust would have increased influence over public opinion and the political agenda.

The CMA has identified three remedy approaches and seeks views from interested parties on them. The remedy approaches are: first, to prohibit the transaction; secondly, to undertake structural remedies—to recommend either the spin-off of Sky News into a new company, or the divestiture of Sky News—and thirdly, behavioural remedies, which could include, for example, enhanced requirements relating to the editorial independence of Sky News.

The CMA recognises that the proposed acquisition of Fox by Disney could address concerns set out in the provisional findings. However, the uncertainty about whether, when or how that transaction will complete means that the CMA has also set out potential approaches that include introducing remedies that would fall away subject to the Disney-Fox transaction completing. The CMA has invited written representations on the provisional report’s findings, and the potential remedy approaches, with 21st Century Fox, Sky and other interested parties, before producing a final report.

As such, and given the quasi-judicial nature of the process, I hope that the House will understand that I cannot comment substantively on the provisional report and must wait for the final report before commenting. However, I am aware of the keen interest across the House in this important matter, and I know that Members will be closely scrutinising the CMA’s provisional findings and will have views on them. The CMA’s investigation will continue in the coming weeks. It has set out the process for making representations on the remedy options outlined, and on the provisional findings, with deadlines of 6 and 13 February respectively. I am sure that today’s debate will provide helpful context for that work.

What I am able to confirm today is that I will undertake to keep the House fully informed and to follow the right and proper process, considering all the evidence carefully when the time comes to make my decision on receipt of the CMA’s final report. I commend this statement to the House.

1.31 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. This proposed merger has gone on for longer than the Murdochs ever expected, and for that I want to pay tribute to the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley). She could have done what the Murdoch family expected by clearing a path for the bid to go ahead, but she took her quasi-judicial responsibility seriously. I hope that the new Secretary of State will have as strong a regard for his responsibilities and for the public interest as his predecessor. I can assure him that if he does the right thing, he will have the support of the Opposition.

The CMA says that if the Sky/Fox merger went ahead as proposed, it would be against the public interest. It would result in the Murdoch family having too much influence over news providers in the UK, and too much influence over public opinion and the political agenda. Does the Secretary of State accept that assessment?

The CMA says that it is not concerned about the proposed merger on broadcasting standards grounds, but in order to reach a proper assessment of that we need to look at corporate governance issues through part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. The Government have not yet published their response to the consultation on that, so can the Secretary of State tell the House when they intend to do so, and will he give us plenty of notice?

The previous Secretary of State said last June that she was minded not to accept undertakings offered by Fox and Sky that were intended to safeguard the editorial independence of Sky News, which they put forward to mitigate Ofcom’s media plurality concerns. Does the
new Secretary of State share his predecessor’s view of those undertakings? In November, Sky threatened to shut down Sky News if it proved to be a plurality obstacle in its bid. Will the Secretary of State reject any attempt by the Murdochs to blackmail him or the regulator by threatening Sky staff?

Just this weekend, “friends” of the Secretary of State were quoted in the newspapers as hinting at the outcome of a separate Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport review of gambling stakes and prizes. Will he undertake, in his quasi-judicial role, not to speak to his “friends” about his views on the takeover, and to discourage them from talking to the press about them?

When the Prime Minister took office 18 months ago, she stood on the steps of Downing Street and spoke directly to the country, saying:

“When we take the big calls, we’ll think not of the powerful, but you”.

This ambitious, thrusting new Secretary of State now has the opportunity to put her words into action. He can stand up to the rich and powerful, stand up to the Murdoch family trust and in the public interest. I hope that he will do the right thing.

Matt Hancock: I think that is the most cheerful response I have had from the hon. Gentleman so far. I thank him for that. I will try to answer his questions in as much detail as possible. He asked a number of questions about the process. I am clear that we will follow due process; we will follow our statutory responsibilities and respect the quasi-judicial nature of the decision. My predecessor acted with great solidity and integrity in that regard, and I intend to do the same.

In my previous role as Minister for Digital, I was outside the Chinese walls that the Department has on this subject, and therefore not involved in the internal discussions of the earlier stages. I will therefore follow the process by considering the CMA’s final report, once it is published, and all the relevant evidence and information, and then I will make the decision.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Leveson. Although we will no doubt have debates on the future sustainability of the press in this context, this is a separate process under existing law in which I have a quasi-judicial role; it is not intertwined with the debates that we will have on the primary legislation that was just passed by the other place and received its First Reading in this House this week. Those two questions are separate. The question before us today is one in which I will operate fully in my quasi-judicial role, as I am required to do by law.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The Secretary of State rightly raised Disney’s proposed takeover of Fox. If Disney wholly acquired Sky, Sky would of course be completely separate from the Murdoch family trust and in the ownership of a completely different company. However, does he believe that the Fox takeover of Sky must first be considered on its own merits, and that the future acquisition of Fox by Disney is a separate matter?

Matt Hancock: The CMA’s report does address the fact that the proposed takeover by Disney is uncertain, and it sets out some details of potential options, given that uncertainty. Anybody can make written representations in the next three weeks, based on that interim report, and I will consider the question when I see the full report in the months to come.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I have said many times in this place that plurality and diversity are vital components of an independent media, and therefore I welcome today’s findings by the CMA, which have put on the record the valid concerns that many people have about the further concentration of media ownership in fewer and fewer hands. Although the CMA has said that the deal, as it currently stands, does not meet the public interest test, I am pleased that it references a number of possible remedies.

We have heard reports that the owners of Sky might look to close down Sky News if it becomes an impediment in the takeover deal, with the possible loss of 500 jobs. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he will not allow employees of Sky to be used as pawns in any takeover when the final decision comes before him? If the takeover deal between Disney and Fox is likely to be green-lit, what impact will that have on his final decision, given Disney’s reported lack of interest in news broadcasting?

Matt Hancock: It is a matter of law that while consideration of the proposal is ongoing, Sky News cannot be shut down in advance of a decision—I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. He also made points about his views on the report published today; I shall reserve my judgement, see the final report and come to a conclusion based on that.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s keeping the House informed, but of course he currently has no role. When the CMA presents the final report and he comes to address this matter, will he bear it in mind that, to date, no regulator that has carried out any objective assessment has found any reason to block the merger on the grounds of commitment to broadcasting standards, and also that the greatest disaster that could befall the plurality of the media in this country would be for Sky News, which is after all a loss-making enterprise, although extremely good, to be closed by its new owner?

Matt Hancock: Both those points are covered in the CMA report that was published today. If my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State wishes to make to the CMA any further comments like those he just made, he has three weeks in which to do so, after which I will consider the final report in full.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the CMA’s strong set of findings on plurality. The CMA says explicitly that the deal would give the Murdoch family trust “too much influence over public opinion and the political agenda.”

I pay warm tribute to the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), because we would not have had the guts to stand up and say that this matter should be referred to the CMA. We all owe her a debt of gratitude for having done that.

[Tom Watson]
I very much hope that the new Secretary of State, whom I welcome to his place, follows his predecessor’s lead. He can do that by doing two things. First, it is important that he and the CMA should not allow a back-door attempt by the Murdochs to get control of Sky through the so-called remedies process. The simple way to stop the deal going ahead is to prohibit it, not to have some carve out or complicated process. Secondly, it is relevant to the context, so I think the Secretary of State was wrong to attack the other place for what it did on Leveson 2, which was promised by David Cameron, by me and by people from all parts of this House to the victims of phone hacking. If the Secretary of State is to stand up to the Murdochs, he has to allow Leveson 2 to go ahead to get at the truth, because that is what the victims were promised.

**Matt Hancock:** It was enjoyable to hear a rendition of the right hon. Gentleman’s greatest hit on Leveson, but on the points relevant to today’s statement and the decision on this deal, I intend fully to exercise my quasi-judicial decision-making role by taking into account all relevant considerations, based on the CMA’s final report. It is in that straightforward and reasonable way that I intend to proceed.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** May I say to the Secretary of State that this is personal? This is basically about lefties—particularly the Labour party—who do not like Murdoch. If this involved any other media organisation, the shadow Secretary of State and the Labour party would have nothing at all to say. This is personal, and the Secretary of State should bear that in mind. After all, Ofcom is there to make sure that Sky News is impartial in its coverage, and I am sure that Ofcom can be trusted to deliver on that. In the light of this provisional judgment, can we now expect the CMA to call for the BBC to be broken up, given its dominance over news output in the UK?

**Matt Hancock:** The report does go into detail on the different level of media dominance of different parties and sets that out clearly, but obviously I will take forward the views of the CMA’s final report when it is published. My hon. Friend—the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale)—has the opportunity to let the CMA know his views in writing in the next three weeks.

**Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD):** As the CMA acknowledges the importance of Sky News to media plurality, as well as the risks and threat of a forced closure, might the Secretary of State conceivably have a role in facilitating white-knight investors?

**Matt Hancock:** The most important thing that we in the Government can do is to execute on the law as it stands. The law has clear constraints and must be operated properly, above board, with integrity, in the quasi-judicial capacity that it sets out.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** My constituents in Kettering would like to know what Sky’s audience share is compared with the BBC and ITV.

**Matt Hancock:** The BBC’s audience share is the biggest, ITN is second and Sky is smaller than that. The details of that are covered in the report, which I am sure my hon. Friend’s constituents will find illuminating.

**Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** I am honoured to have Sky and Sky News based in my constituency. Despite very serious instances of sexual and racial harassment at Fox News, the CMA has concluded that none of that, and none of the industrial-scale phone hacking at Murdoch’s UK papers, is relevant to broadcast standards. Does the Secretary of State really agree with the CMA and think that none of that is relevant to how companies that are completely controlled by the Murdochs behave?

**Matt Hancock:** My position is not to agree or to disagree with the CMA; it is to consider the final report that the CMA produces in a couple of months’ time.

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con):** Given the fact that Sky’s audience share is dwarfed by that of both the BBC and ITV, will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government are committed to the high-quality journalism and the world-class British broadcasting sector that we know and love?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) alluded to, the report does describe the market shares of the different broadcasters, including, of course, the BBC, which is the biggest. We are fully committed to ensuring a sustainable future for high-quality journalism. That is a policy question, and it is also a question of legislation that we will no doubt debate when the Data Protection Bill comes before the House, but it is separate from this decision, which is to be taken specifically within the rules and the law as it stands.

**Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab):** Five years after the phone hacking scandal broke, some civil cases regarding alleged criminality in the Murdoch empire are still ongoing. There will be victims who were very disappointed with the Secretary of State’s response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The commencement of Leveson part 2 would be in the public interest, because it would finally reveal the full scale of hacking and the relationship between the press and the police. When will the Secretary of State follow the CMA’s lead and act to protect the public interest by commencing Leveson part 2?

**Matt Hancock:** These two questions are separate. We have a consultation on the Leveson issues. In policy terms, I really care about making sure that we have a sustainable future for high-quality journalism, but that is separate from this quasi-judicial decision, which has to be done within the existing law, and that is how I will take it.

**Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):** I welcome the Secretary of State to his position and congratulate him on the transparency with which this process is being conducted. Does he agree that it was sensible to refer the merger of Sky and Fox to the CMA to avoid making it party political? Given the Government’s commitment to high standards in broadcasting, will the Secretary of State assure my constituents in Taunton Deane that the Government will continue to maintain high standards in broadcasting and journalism? I have a vested interest as a former broadcaster, but it is also what the people on the street want.

**Matt Hancock:** I am not sure that the high-quality journalism of “Farming Today” will ever be the same again without my hon. Friend. Undoubtedly, the
importance of high-quality journalism, with a sustainable business model to fund it and plurality around it, are incredibly important policy questions. We will no doubt debate that in future, but it is a commitment to which I stick firmly.

Mr Speaker: Of course, “Farming Today”’s loss has been Taunton Deane’s gain, as we are all conscious.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): In his statement, the Secretary of State said that he will consider “all the evidence carefully” in his quasi-judicial role. How is it possible for him to consider all the evidence unless he goes forward with Leveson 2—thereby honouring the promise given by a Conservative Prime Minister—and hears the evidence that remains unheard so that he can properly judge the Murdochs’ capability and competence for governance?

Matt Hancock: As I think I mentioned earlier, the question that the hon. Gentleman raises is not relevant to what we are discussing, because the latter is about exercising a quasi-judicial decision within the law as it stands. As I might have mentioned already, I intend to exercise that quasi-judicial decision-making role very clearly within the process as laid out in the law as it stands.

Point of Order

1.50 pm

Mr Speaker: We will move on, if there are no points of order. I did have an indication that there would be.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think I have effectively solicited a point of order.

Gareth Snell: Thank you for the prompt, Mr Speaker.

Last Thursday, I was made aware by the office of my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), that he was meeting the Transport Secretary in my constituency before heading to events in his own patch. Subsequently, it transpired that, while visiting Stoke-on-Trent, the Secretary of State held meetings in my constituency with the hon. Gentleman about matters that pertain to my constituency. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman did not tell me that information and I was not made aware of it by the Secretary of State himself. When I queried it with both their offices, I was told that no such meeting took place, yet the Twitter account of Stoke-on-Trent Conservatives has plastered pictures of the meeting across the social media website, saying how wonderful it was. How might I remedy the situation, Mr Speaker, and stop it happening again?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. There is a sense in which it can credibly be said that he has found his own salvation. He asks me how he can, in a sense, achieve restitution for the situation from which he has been suffering—as he sees it. He has chosen to raise the matter in a point of order, and it has been registered with Members on the Treasury Bench. I confess that I am not familiar with the Twitter accounts concerned, still less have I surveyed them, but I will take it from him that this material is there.

All levity aside, perhaps I can reiterate what I said yesterday in response to a point of order from—if memory serves me correctly—the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who was deprecating an unannounced visit by a Cabinet Minister to his constituency on, as I understand it, public business, of which he had no advance notice. Members intending to visit their colleagues’ constituencies on public business, as opposed to going to some private engagement, should give the colleague whose constituency they are visiting reasonable notice of the intention. This is not a matter of law, it is not even a rule, but it is a very strong convention in this place and I think it is a courtesy that we should observe. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) will make further inquiries, but I trust that this exchange will be heard by the Secretary of State. I hope that it will not be necessary for Members repeatedly to raise these matters on the Floor of the House. It should be possible for colleagues to operate in a mature and courteous way.
Pedicabs (London)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.52 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for the regulation of the carrying of passengers in Greater London by pedicabs and power-assisted pedicabs for hire or reward: and for connected purposes.

I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), to her place—literally, as I see that she is taking her place now.

I am pleased that enabling the regulation of pedicabs through this Bill has attracted the support of Members from all three parties represented in London in this place and from Members representing London constituencies. Support was so readily given from across the House that I was not even able to accommodate the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who has done much work in his role as chairman of the all-party group on taxis, on which I also serve. Although we do not always agree on the solutions for taxis and private hire vehicles, we both know that there is much that we can work on together to improve our hail and ride and pre-booked transport services in a way that is both fair to providers and protects customers.

Both Transport for London and the Department for Transport have been keen to see the simple change proposed in my Bill. The current and previous Mayors of London and Westminster Council also support the move. A group of leading businesses and organisations have come together to push for change under the umbrella of the Regulate Pedicabs Coalition, including the London Taxi Drivers’ Association, the Mayfair residents group, the Hippodrome Casino, the New West End Company, the London Chinatown Chinese Association, as well as many other residents associations and theatre groups representing interests across the west end, so I hope that I am pushing against an open door.

Pedicabs and pedal rickshaws are currently unregulated in London—and solely in London. As a result, there is no requirement for insurance, fares are not fixed or consistent, and neither vehicle condition nor driver quality are assessed. The behaviour of some pedicab operators causes problems for businesses, as they block highways, harass customers and cause serious risk to visitors and workers. In fact, they are the only form of public transport in the capital that is not regulated in any way.

One provider, London Pedicabs, estimates that there are around 1,400 pedicabs on the roads and pavements of London. It states on its website that it has pushed hard to get pedicabs fully licensed and accountable, so, in my mind, we have a great opportunity to make this happen in the coming months by the leave of this House and the other place.

I have said that pedicabs are not insured and that neither drivers nor their vehicles are regulated. Injuries to passengers have become frequent and lives may be at risk. One man told the Evening Standard in 2016 how he had been knocked out and left with a broken cheekbone here in London after being hit by a rickshaw whose driver allegedly spat in the face of a member of staff in Covent Garden before pedalling away in a midnight hit and run.

I am not aware of any deaths of passengers in London as yet, but the fact that an off-duty soldier died after falling out of a pedicab in Edinburgh back in 2010 shows that it is very possible. Of course, accidents can happen whatever regime exists, but even the most basic checks will reduce the likelihood.

London is a global city with a positive international reputation. Some 20 million people come to our capital—my home town—every year. It vies with Bangkok each year to be the most visited city on the planet. Although London has so much to offer visitors, we should not take our tourism industry for granted. Making sure that visitors have a wonderful experience, feel safe, get value for money and have a great time is vital to keeping those figures up and ensuring that people share positive stories about their trips with their friends and keep coming back.

In 2016, an undercover filmmaker revealed examples of rickshaw drivers boasting about charging three Chinese tourists £350 each for a 35-minute ride, and about charging £200 to £300 to go the half mile from Oxford Circus to Piccadilly Circus. Groups of pedicabs frequently block streets, increasing traffic delays and pollution, while disrupting legitimate businesses in the west end.

Many play loud music, and their drivers shout and swear in doorways and on pavements. Clearly not all do so, but, as on many occasions, there are enough to ruin the reputation of those simply trying to earn a living in a reasonable and conscientious way.

Many cities across the world have looked to regulate pedicabs. Despite different contexts, several themes recur, such as pedicabs’ legal status as bicycles, passenger safety concerns and fare transparency. New York and Rome failed in their attempts to introduce a blanket ban, but San Diego successfully introduced comprehensive regulation, which is what I am asking for today. San Diego City Council voted to strengthen regulations on pedicab operators following the death of a tourist in an accident. Pedicab operators there are required by law to display fares openly, and numbers are capped in high-traffic areas. They are banned from using metered parking spaces and drivers are required to carry proof of insurance and ensure that seatbelts are worn. Operators with criminal convictions are banned.

In 2016, the Government stated that they were concerned about passenger safety. They wanted to take dangerous pedicabs off the road and regulate pedicab drivers so that they are allowed to charge only reasonable fares and must meet minimum safety standards. They proposed that Transport for London be responsible for creating detailed rules, such as setting out what is a reasonable amount to charge for a short journey, and that the licensing scheme would operate in a similar way to the rules for taxis and private hire vehicles. In setting out the approach that TfL would take, the Mayor of London said:

“Every Londoner and visitor to our city deserves a world-class service, whatever mode of transport they use. And this move will allow us to ensure that pedicabs must make big improvements to the way they operate. They are going to need to match up to important safety standards and we will be able to crack down on any attempts to charge rip-off fares.”

I happily disagree with Sadiq Khan on many issues, but he is absolutely on the money on this one.
The Bill would enable TfL to develop a regulation system, but does not prescribe what that system should be. However, there is every indication that TfL will conduct a background check of the driver and a safety inspection of vehicles, which are usually bought or rented from a few providers; place a cap on fares or rates charged; and set out sensible rules as to where and how drivers can park and tout for business.

Under the current law, pedicabs can be licensed as hackney carriages in every part of England and Wales apart from London. In a legal anomaly, pedicabs are treated as stage carriages in London, rather than licensed hackney carriages, under section 4 of the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869. The leading court case about pedicabs in London reaches the opposite conclusion to case law relating to the rest of England and Wales, and Mr Justice Pitchford, in Oddy v Bugbugs Ltd, commented that, in his view, “primary legislation will probably be required.”

That case was in 2003. The Greater London Assembly looked at the pedicab business as long ago as 2005. The 2014 Law Commission inquiry into taxi and private hire services made clear recommendations that pedicabs should be brought into a revised regulatory regime.

It is 15 years since the court case that brought this anomaly to our attention, and successive Governments have not found a suitable Bill to which to attach the proposed change, nor have we been able to get it through the private Members’ Bill maze. I am only too aware that Members can vote this Bill down, shout “Object”, or talk it out of time, but I hope that colleagues will understand that it simply irons out an anomaly and that it is supported across the political divide at every level of government. It will allow Transport for London to give consumers, whether they are Londoners or visitors, protection against excessive fares and safety protection through driver and vehicle checks, and to give others, including pedestrians, local businesses and nearby residents, some peace through reasonable and proportionate regulation. Before they pipe up at any stage with any objection, however principled, I ask Members to consider the ordinary Londoner, who may scratch their head at the glacial progress we have made on a simple point that has near-unanimous agreement.

Some people want to ban pedicabs entirely, but looking around London in the open air on a rickshaw gives people a chance to see the city in a way that few other modes of transport allow—although the weather needs to be better than it is at present. Instead, we can help reputable pedicab drivers to develop a good, popular and sustainable business through sensible regulation.

Some Government Members may be concerned that it is a Labour Mayor who would oversee the design and implementation of the regulatory system, but I caution against taking a partisan view. London has a mature system of regulation for public and private hire, an experienced team to enforce transgression through fixed penalty notices and, in the most serious cases, an operating ban. We also have the London Assembly to scrutinise Transport for London and the Mayor, and all of its members are accountable to Londoners through the ballot box.

I hope that I can count on the support of this House to tidy up the law in scrapping this legal anomaly, and to tidy up London’s west end by ensuring that responsible rickshaw drivers ply for business by offering a safe and reasonably priced service that does not obstruct others from going about their business. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paul Scully, Julia Lopez, Stephen Hammond, Bob Blackman, Robert Neill, Dr Matthew Offord, Zac Goldsmith, Tom Brake, Mike Gapes, Jim Fitzpatrick, Ms Karen Buck and Mr Virendra Sharma present the Bill.

Paul Scully accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 154).
Nuclear Safeguards Bill
Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

New Clause 1

**Transition period**

“(1) The Secretary of State shall, upon laying any statement under subsection (3A) of section 76A of the Energy Act 2013, seek to secure a transition period prior to the implementation of withdrawal from EURATOM of not less than two years.

(2) During a transition period under subsection (1), any—

(a) conditions under which the UK is a member of EURATOM before exit day shall continue to apply;

(b) obligations upon the UK which derive from membership of EURATOM before exit day shall continue to apply;

(c) structures for UK participation in EURATOM that are in place before exit day shall be maintained; and

(d) financial commitment to EURATOM made by the UK during the course of UK membership of EURATOM before exit day shall be honoured.”.—

(3A) No regulations may be made under this section unless—

(a) the Government has laid before Parliament a strategy for maintaining those protections, safeguards, programmes for participation in nuclear research and development, and trading or other arrangements which will lapse as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from membership of and participation in EURATOM, and

(b) the strategy has been considered by both Houses of Parliament.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to lay a report before Parliament on the protection and trading arrangements that arise from membership of EURATOM, and its strategy for maintaining them prior to making regulations concerning nuclear safeguarding.

Dr Whitehead: The proposed new clauses and amendments appear in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who is the shadow Secretary of State, and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and others.

First and foremost, I want to set down a marker on new clause 2, because it represents the dividing line between us and the Government on membership, associate or otherwise, of Euratom. This purpose clause makes explicit that this is a contingency Bill. In other words, it is being enacted to deal with circumstances that may never arise—namely, that we as a country have no future association or membership with Euratom that would enable us to continue to reap the benefits of association or membership in a way that I think is almost universally agreed.

I think that it is agreed—the Minister has stated as much during the passage of this Bill—that Euratom has served well our purposes as a nuclear nation over the past 40 years, and nuclear safeguarding has worked very well in inspecting and representing our obligations to international agencies such as the International Atomic Energy Authority.

It is clear that our interests as a country would be best served by continuing our membership of Euratom, which was founded by a different treaty from that which brought about the EU. Indeed, during evidence to the Public Bill Committee, we heard strong arguments along those lines from eminent lawyers who had been called as witnesses. However, we appear to be in the position...
of assuming that our future membership of Euratom is not possible, because essentially the Prime Minister, as a matter of choice, included exit from Euratom in her letter to the Commission informing it that we were invoking article 50.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The treaty on Euratom membership is part of the set of treaties described in the treaty of Lisbon. Therefore, as we leave the European Union, we will, de facto, leave our membership of Euratom. It is as simple as that.

Dr Whitehead: I am afraid that it is not as simple as that. A considerable body of legal opinion states that, because Euratom was founded by a treaty other than the treaty of Rome—it was, in fact, founded before the EU came together—it can and should be dealt with separately. Although arrangements relating to association with and membership of various EU bodies have changed over time as a result of changes in EU regulations, that has not been the case with Euratom. The articles relating to associate membership and arrangements are identical to those that were in place when Euratom was founded. There is no case to answer as far as separate arrangements for Euratom are concerned.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a strong case for associate membership. He will recall a Westminster Hall debate that I held only last year, during which there was broad consensus on the issue, including among Conservative Members. I think that the Minister was the only Member who did not agree. The only reasons the Government have given relate to the legal position and the European Court of Justice. If Conservative Members were not whipped, they would understand the logic of the very sensible new clause.

Dr Whitehead: I thank my hon. Friend for making that strong point. I recall that even the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) suggested during that debate that associate membership of Euratom could be effective in continuing those arrangements, which have served us so well over many years.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has referred to the International Atomic Energy Authority. The Government have made it clear that we will be seeking new arrangements with it and that they will follow exactly the same principles as the current arrangements—that is, the right to inspect civil nuclear facilities and to continue to receive all the safeguards and reports. We should be confident that this Government are going about the issue in a serious, sensible and meticulous way.

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Lady makes the case for our new clause. If the Government are going about their business in a sensible and coherent way—I note the Secretary of State’s statement on 11 January on how the Government intend to go about conducting relationships with Euratom—it would be a good idea to place that procedure into the Bill, so that we can be clear about what we are about, what we want to achieve and how we will do so.

After all, it has been stated that this is a contingency Bill. We want to know what it is a contingency against and therefore how it should be framed in terms of what we should be doing in contemplating whether to bring it into operation. If we had either membership of Euratom or an associate form of membership, which might be fairly similar to that enjoyed currently by Ukraine but with a number of additional factors, this Bill would not be needed. The arrangements with Euratom would continue to be in place, rendering the Bill superfluous. We need to be clear about what we are debating.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The shadow Minister knows that he and I often agree on stuff, but I wonder whether today he might concede this point. At worst, his new clauses would merely render the Bill superfluous if we manage to achieve associate membership of Euratom, but at best we are providing the contingency plan that gives industry the certainty that it says that it so much wants. The Bill is therefore relevant and necessary in that sense, even if it may ultimately prove to be superfluous because we achieve Euratom membership.

Dr Whitehead: Yes, indeed. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman and I are going to agree substantially on this. We regard the Bill as necessary in the context of the possibility that, after Brexit, no arrangements can be brought about with Euratom, either associate membership or full membership. The Bill will then ensure that the nuclear industry is clear about its future and that the arrangements for our international obligations can be properly carried out in the absence of those arrangements. We have indeed been constructive and helpful during the Bill’s whole passage through Parliament. However, that does not detract from our thinking that a number of its procedural elements should be strengthened in relation to what we do while it is gestating and coming to potential fruition after the point at which the things that we are doing may not have had any success.

The hon. Gentleman will see that in some of our amendments we are also trying to make sure that Parliament is fully informed of what processes are under way while we get to the position that the Bill could, or could not, come into operation. That is important for Parliament’s sake. After all, we are in new territory with regard to this Bill, and we therefore have to do a number of new things in legislation that fit the bill for our future arrangements. That is essentially the beginning and end of what we are trying to do through this group of amendments.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am puzzled why new clause 1 is necessary. All its ingredients are issues that form part of the transition negotiations that our country is going through with the European Commission. It therefore seems bizarre to try to legislate that “conditions under which the UK is a member of EURATOM before exit day shall continue to apply” during the transition. On that basis, we would be legislating for all sorts of things that form part of the negotiations to continue during the transition. What would the hon. Gentleman say to that?

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman has slightly got ahead of me, because I started by talking about new clause 2, and I am about to start talking about new clause 1. He thinks that new clause 1 may be superfluous.
I would suggest that because this Bill is about procedure as much as fact, the new clause sets out a procedure that we need to undertake in the event of certain things not happening, and it is important that a number of those possible events are covered in the Bill. Should it not prove possible to remain a member of Euratom, for various reasons, it is important to consider the idea of a transition period after which we would then be in a position to fully carry out our obligations to the IAEA and other agencies separate from Euratom. That, indeed, is what the Bill is essentially trying to bring about. The Bill is predicated on the notion that membership or association with Euratom will not be possible, and it is therefore necessary to recreate the arrangements for nuclear safeguarding that have served us so well in a solely domestic form and thereby enabled us to negotiate separate voluntary arrangements with the IAEA and, indeed, separate bilateral agreements with a number of other countries, including the United States, Australia, Japan, and Canada.

2.15 pm

The proposition that the Bill is prepared on a contingency basis is not something that the Opposition have made up. On Second Reading, the Secretary of State stated explicitly that “the Bill has been prepared on a contingency basis. The discussions around our continued arrangements with Euratom and with the rest of the European Union have not been concluded, but it is right to put in place in good time any commitments that are needed in primary legislation. Euratom has served the United Kingdom and our nuclear industries well, so we want to see maximum continuity of those arrangements.”—[Official Report, 16 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 617.]

However, this central point regarding the Bill is not stated within it. That is why it is so important to have a purpose clause, and that is what new clause 2 does. It provides that the Bill is operational only in the event that other arrangements are impossible to achieve.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I accept that there was a vast amount of legal argument on our membership, or not, of Euratom. Indeed, it is not a simple point. However, we have now triggered our leaving Euratom. The treaties are uniquely joined, so it is a fact that we have left Euratom and will no longer be members. As we go forward with negotiations, putting the word “contingent” into the Bill would create uncertainty for our partners in the EU, given that the negotiations are two-sided. Those negotiations have yet to progress, so we need this Bill to be a clear signal or statement to our EU partners to achieve what we want. I fear that having the word “contingent” in the Bill will muddy the waters in our negotiations with our partners. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Dr Whitehead: I would have thought that the Bill, in whatever form it eventually emerges, demonstrates the opposite. Yes, there are a number of negotiations to be undertaken. We do not yet know the results of those negotiations. We have not left Euratom, which, it is generally agreed, has served our purposes very well. The new clause would enable us to signal, in the event of all those negotiations not working, that we are nevertheless still able to fulfil our obligations to the IAEA and to show it that we have a regime in place that does the business with regard to nuclear safeguarding from the point of view of the IAEA’s concerns. Putting forward this Bill as a contingency measure, as the Secretary of State said was the case, is important in the uncertain position we are in at the moment. Nevertheless, we will need certainty, over a relatively short period, with the bodies that are responsible for policing and organising the nuclear non-proliferation treaties and the whole arrangements relating to nuclear safeguarding. I think, if I may say so, that that is the right way to do it as far as putting a Bill before the House is concerned. The Opposition do not dispute that: we think it is right to have the Bill as a contingency. Our concern, however, is whether there are sufficient elements to the process part of the Bill to ensure that it works as well as it could. That is really the point of difference on the Bill at the moment.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman knows that this is incredibly important to him and several of his colleagues, and it is incredibly important to me, with EDF Energy’s operational headquarters for nuclear in my constituency and Horizon just down the road, so we are all coming from the same point. His specific proposal—I am talking about new clause 1 again—is very specific. It even mentions a period of two years, although the transition period that is being negotiated may well come to an end at the end of 2020. In effect, he is asking the Government to legislate on something over which they do not have control. Surely the better approach is to plan for the contingency, as he has already agreed, and recognise that the other elements—Euratom and other agencies—are all subject to a negotiation that this House cannot, by its nature, control.

Dr Whitehead: That is a little strange in that the Prime Minister referred to transition periods for the overall EU negotiations in her Florence speech, and the Secretary of State did so strongly in his written statement on 11 January. If the hon. Gentleman wants to be assured, as far as the nuclear industry is concerned, that there will be a seamless transition at the point at which we are no longer a member of Euratom, I would have thought he ought to be strongly in favour of aspiring to a transition period. As he knows and we know, the process of recreating in the UK all the things that have been done by Euratom for 40 years—we will discuss that later—will be extremely difficult, lengthy and problematic. It will certainly, in the opinion of many people, be extremely difficult to achieve in the period ahead if we corral those negotiations and are to complete them by March 2019. If he thought about it for a moment, he would recognise that the last thing we could conceivably want is a period of, in effect, nuclear shutdown, or of defaulting on our international obligations because we are not ready to carry them out on Brexit. That is why a transition period may be so important.

Richard Graham: Yes, of course we all want a transition period, which is precisely a part of the negotiations. What I struggle to understand is that the scenario the hon. Gentleman describes is in effect not within our control. The transition we are seeking is being negotiated—in fact, the Minister and other Front Benchers have made it absolutely clear several times that we want to continue the relationship with Euratom as deeply as possible—but I would have thought, in this context, for his proposed new clause 1. In fact, I do not believe it would be possible for any Government conceivably to agree to it.
**Dr Whitehead:** I repeat my suggestion that, because the Bill is about process as much as content, it is important that it is guided by the sort of considerations we want to take place in order to achieve, as we are all agreed, the best outcome.—[Interruption.] Indeed, yes, the best outcome. We must make sure that the negotiations not only proceed with the best outcome in mind, but cover the fact that it may be the case—again, this is out of our control—that if we stick to a position, with the provisions of the Bill, in which everything essentially stops in March 2019, that would be just catastrophic for our nuclear industry and our international nuclear safeguarding obligations. We must get this right, and we must have continuity of arrangements inside or outside Euratom. It is in those circumstances that a transition period is suggested.

The arrangements for the founding of Euratom and its articles suggest that a period of transition for negotiating our way out of Euratom may not be identical to the period for the arrangements for negotiating our way out of the EU as a whole. It is quite possible to conceive the circumstances in which we do not have a transition period beyond March 2019 for negotiating our general withdrawal from the EU, but we do have a transition period for negotiating our way out of Euratom. It is at the least strongly arguable that that may be the case in the future, and it is another reason why such a provision should be in the Bill.

**Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): I feel I must pull up the hon. Gentleman because he has twice referred to Euratom having been around for 40 years, but it began in 1957. It was born out of the civil nuclear industry that began in my constituency of Copeland when Calder Hall was first constructed. I thought that I should make it clear that this was from Britain and by Britain back in 1957. We have actually had it for 70 years, although there was the merger in 1967.

**Dr Whitehead:** I was referring to the length of time that we have been a member of Euratom, not the length of time that Euratom has been around. Indeed, the hon. Lady will know that when Euratom was founded, the UK was not a member of it. I am sure she will also know that the founders of Euratom, particularly one of them—Mr Spaak—wrote a substantial report at the time of the founding of Euratom that strongly envisaged, setting out in chapter and verse, how an associate relationship of Euratom with the UK could come about. The arrangements that Mr Spaak considered in the report for associate membership are identical to those that exist today. I thank the hon. Lady for reminding us that Euratom has been around a lot longer than the period during which the UK’s relationship with Euratom has existed, but I am sure she will agree that even at the outset of Euratom, an association with the UK was envisaged before the UK joined to facilitate nuclear exchange, nuclear development and—although the nuclear non-proliferation treaty was not around at the time—joint endeavours in civil and defence nuclear work.

I fear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have tested the patience of the House, particularly, given the number of interventions I have taken, because of the necessity of ensuring that I responded to them fully. I will end by telling the House that we need to remember that this Bill covers just one aspect of our relationship with Euratom over the period during which we have been a member of it. Our relationship with Euratom also includes participation in nuclear research, the transportation of nuclear materials, the development of nuclear arrangements, the trading of nuclear materials and a number of other arrangements, all of which will lapse on our exit from participation in Euratom and all of which will need to be secured for the future. They are not the subject of the Bill, but they will have to be dealt with at some stage if we are not to have a close association with Euratom after Brexit. Amendment 7 would provide for at least an understanding that we will move forward to secure working arrangements for a future outside Euratom, not just making provision for our treaty obligations concerning nuclear safeguarding.

The Opposition think that the suite of connected amendments to the Bill will strengthen it enormously so that it is a fully fit-for-purpose contingency arrangement. I therefore commend these new clauses and amendments to the House.

2.30 pm

**Trudy Harrison:** New clause 1 concerns me, because it seems to me to be a delaying tactic. As I have mentioned, Euratom and the IAEA were really formed in 1957, when Calder Hall was built in my constituency. There are now 70-something businesses operating in the nuclear industry in my constituency alone. I have spoken to each and every one of them, as well as to Sellafield, the Low Level Waste Repository and the National Nuclear Laboratory. They all say that it is absolutely critical that we get on with the job swiftly and provide certainty so that when we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, we know exactly where we are.

I come back to the point that Euratom was formed in 1957, and I find it somewhat disappointing that Opposition Members are not crediting our country with the ability to do what is necessary. I have been reassured by the Minister on several occasions about the timescales, and about the process that is already in place for recruiting new safeguards inspectors to the Office for Nuclear Regulation. There are clear synergies inherent in having the ONR, which is the overarching umbrella organisation, working on safeguarding, security and safety.

When it comes to the transition, the Prime Minister has already said that there will be a transition arrangement after we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019. Therefore, the most important thing is to get on with the job, and the Bill enables us to do just that.

**Stephen Kerr:** Does my hon. Friend agree that in the new clause, great uncertainty is built into the very thing—the contingency—that was intended to give certainty to people such as those in her constituency?

**Trudy Harrison:** That is exactly my point. This is about certainty and getting on with the job. Not having the Bill in place would be absolutely catastrophic for my constituency and the whole county of Cumbria.

**Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): I know that the hon. Lady cares hugely about this issue, because it matters a great deal for her constituency. She and I have been in meetings with the Office for Nuclear Regulation, in which it has said very clearly that it will not be able to meet Euratom standards for safety inspections by March.
2019. Indeed, even to meet IAEA standards will be very challenging. Does she not agree that new clause 1 would provide certainty; rather than the other way around, because it would ensure that in March 2019 we were in a transition period in which we could still rely on Euratom to perform the inspections that are so crucial in her constituency?

Trudy Harrison: It is not just my constituency, though; this is about the whole country. Today, more than 20% of our electricity is provided by nuclear power stations. The hon. Lady is not quite correct. My memory of the meeting she mentions is that we were told we would have sufficient aspects in place to be able to have the regime, there or thereabouts, to continue with our existing—[Interruption.]

Rachel Maclean: As the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) will know, Dr Golshan said in evidence to the Select Committee:

“My current project plan is that we establish a regime that intends to meet UK international obligations when we leave”.

That is achievable. She said that there were challenges, but not that they were insurmountable. She added that she intended to “build upon that to achieve a system that is equivalent to Euratom.”

So my hon. Friend is correct.

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend. It is important that we hold the Minister and the Department to account, and that we focus on the critical path of recruiting the right number of staff into the ONR and ensuring that the regime is in place when we leave. We need to get on with the job, and the 70-something businesses in my constituency absolutely want us to do that.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady and I were both in the evidence-gathering sitting of the Bill Committee, in which Dr Golshan said that “we will not be able to replicate Euratom standards on day one.”—[Official Report, Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee, 31 October 2017: c. Q9.]

Is this perhaps a matter of fact, rather than a question of confidence in Britain? In taking this course of action without the safeguard that my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) has proposed, we will leave ourselves without the coverage that we need.

Trudy Harrison: I have already said that I believe the transition period will happen, as the Prime Minister has indicated. New clause 1 is a delaying tactic, and that is absolutely not what the industry needs. We need certainty, and we need it today. I am pleased that the Department is already acting to recruit to the ONR safeguarding inspectors, who will also have responsibility for safety and security. That seems to me to provide vital synergies of shared knowledge and shared experience across the board in the nuclear sector.

Albert Owen: I want to speak briefly in support of new clause 1. We have debated whether there will be negotiations during the transition period, but I hope that the Minister will respond to this question when he winds up: does he intend to negotiate associate membership of Euratom? We are asking for associate membership, but we have been given no clear idea of whether he intends to seek such membership. We all want the safeguards to be in place from day one. Negotiating over Euratom standards is not in our gift, but we now have in place the highest standards in the world and co-operation with other world leaders.

Stephen Kerr: Having sat through a number of evidence sessions with me, as a fellow member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the hon. Gentleman well knows that there is no such thing as associate membership of Euratom. The Minister has repeatedly said that the Government intend to seek some form of close association with Euratom—I do not want to dwell on the semantics, but that is obviously a different thing—and to maintain a continuity of relationship with it. The new clause is therefore totally unnecessary, given the Prime Minister’s commitment to a two-year implementation period.

Albert Owen: I often agreed with the hon. Gentleman in Committee, but I think that he is completely wrong on that point. There is such a thing as associate membership—of Euratom, and of the European Union—and there are different levels of membership.

Stephen Kerr indicated dissent.

Albert Owen: Yes, there is. We need to negotiate from a position of clarity and strength, and I do not see us doing so. Without the proposed commitment in the Bill, I do not see the Government saying that they intend to go for third-party or associate membership of Euratom. We have not even seen the legal opinion that the Government were given about the need to leave Euratom in the first place. I support the need for nuclear safeguarding, and I will support the Bill on Third Reading, but new clause 1 is sensible, because it suggests that the Government should approach Euratom members and ask for associate membership, to give us the continuity and certainty that we want.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): The hon. Gentleman says that he wants continuity and certainty, but can he not understand the difficulty involved in writing into the Bill the outcome of negotiations that have not yet happened? How can Parliament effectively write into law that we are going to have a transitional period when the negotiations have not yet happened?

Albert Owen: The Government say that we need a transitional period for EU withdrawal, and it is obvious to me that we also need one for Euratom. The Government have said that we need to leave Euratom at the same time as we leave the European Union, but I stress again—I hope that the Minister will clarify the position—that nobody other than the Government has seen the legal advice that tells us that we need to exit Euratom. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) was absolutely right to say that there is universal support for the idea of our having associate membership. I have not met anyone who works in the industry who says that we should move away from Euratom. If we do, they—the workers; Prospect, the union; many of the experts who gave evidence to us; and the Nuclear Industry Association, which is the
[Albert Owen]

umbrella body—feel that we should have associate membership. The new clause therefore speaks on behalf of the industry in the first instance, and we as legislators should listen to what the industry is saying; we should not listen to the Government’s ideological grounds. The only reason why the Government want to leave Euratom is that they do not want to be under the European Court of Justice—that is the crux of it.

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman, like me, will have received the briefing from the Nuclear Industry Association. Paragraph 5, on legal implications, clearly says that the treaties are entwined—that is the EU’s position and the UK Government’s position—and that it is not possible to remain a member of Euratom while leaving the EU.

Albert Owen: Well, let us clear this up now. I invite the Minister to say on behalf of the Government whether it is his intention—or their intention, if he is not in his post at the time—to negotiate associate membership. Yes or no? Otherwise, we are just guessing that the Government will negotiate some form of associate or third-party membership. I need to know these things from the Government, because we do not have anything in front of us. What we have today is a group of new clauses and amendments that would give us the certainty that we need. The industry is crying out for that, so I want to hear from the Minister.

Richard Graham: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues are taking their current line. I can only assume that that is either because they want to try to make the political point that the Government and the Conservative party do not want to have a future relationship with Euratom, which is clearly wrong—the Minister will confirm that when he speaks—or because the hon. Gentleman wants to score a political point. Gentleman and his colleagues are taking their current line. I can only assume that that is either because they want to try to make the political point that the Government and the Conservative party do not want to have a future relationship with Euratom, which is clearly wrong—the Minister will confirm that when he speaks—or because the hon. Gentleman wants to score a political point.

Albert Owen: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Friend has a close constituency interest in this issue. Ukraine has associate membership for the research and development programme. One thing my hon. Friend and I are particularly interested in is whether we are seeking to have what Ukraine has: associate membership specifically for research and development.

Rachel Reeves: Like other hon. Members, my hon. Friend has a close constituency interest in this issue. There is an associate membership class. There is no legal category of associate membership. Some countries have agreements on certain matters—associate membership on research and development, for example, in the case of Ukraine—but there is no legal category of associate membership. Thirdly, the Government intend to seek as close an association with Euratom as is possible. If it is acceptable to the hon. Gentleman—I attended his Westminster Hall debate, and I have listened very carefully to what he has said today—I will continue my remarks at the end of this debate.

Albert Owen: I am grateful, because that is helpful, but there is associate membership—it is just in different sections, whether that is research and development or various other—[Laughter] There is. Conservative Members laugh, but when we had a debate in Westminster Hall, both sides were in agreement that we needed to strengthen our relationship through an associate or alternative membership.

Rachel Reeves: Like other hon. Members, my hon. Friend has a close constituency interest in this issue. Ukraine has associate membership for the research and development programme. One thing my hon. Friend and I are particularly interested in is whether we are seeking to have what Ukraine has: associate membership specifically for research and development.

2.45 pm

Albert Owen: That is an important point. However, let me repeat that it is not Labour Back Benchers who are asking for this; it is the industry itself. We need to listen to the industry. Its members are not stupid. They know the technical and legal differences between associate membership and part-associate membership. What they want is certainty. If someone is in a position of strength, they do not go into negotiations, one against the rest, and say, “What are you going to give us?” We have to go to the negotiations with a firm belief that we want a strong associate membership, but I have not heard the Government say that, even in the Minister’s intervention.

James Heappey: I think that we are all pulling in the same direction, but we need to be careful about the language. There is not an on-the-shelf associate membership that we can just pick up and run with. There are associated countries, and there are countries that have associate arrangements, but those are bespoke, and thus far all of them have required the free movement of people and a contribution to the EU budget. It is therefore likely that whatever our associated membership might be, it will be different from that of countries that already have an associated membership. However, those countries are not “associate members”, in the sense that there is an associate membership class.
Albert Owen: I think the hon. Gentleman is agreeing with me, but we do not know our position or what our starting point is.

I would like to hear from the Minister—he will have enough time—that the British Government, on behalf of the nuclear industry, are looking for certainty. To say that they are looking for something as close as associate membership is not good enough. Are we looking for a specific British agreement with the rest of Euratom that gives us the same certainty as we have now? If so, we should support the new clause, because it strengthens the hand of the Government, rather than weakens it.

We should look at the comparison with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and phase 1, at the 11th hour waiting for the Irish to reach some sort of agreement. We cannot do that with Euratom and nuclear, because of its nature. Let us be absolutely firm. We are all pulling in the same direction. We want the best for the British nuclear industry. The nuclear industry wants an associate membership, so let us fight for it.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Although I have not spoken on the Bill to date, I have been following its progress from afar. I rise, unsurprisingly perhaps, in opposition to the proposals that have been tabled by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead). As his county colleague, I have a great deal of time for him, but on this occasion I have to say, with regret, that I believe that the measures would delay the implementation of the vital nuclear safeguarding measures that are facilitated by the Bill and extend lobbying for associate membership of Euratom.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty, instability and safeguarding risks that these new clauses and amendments implicitly condone, the association they appear to grasp at seems to be ideologically driven. Those who still worship membership of the customs union or the single market above all else should see the impossible implications of the measures.

Euratom, which was established by the Euratom treaty, as we have already heard, is uniquely joined to the European Union. It has the same membership. Its budget is part of the general budget of the EU. Importantly, it also makes use of the same institutions and entities: the Commission, the Council and, contrary to everything that we voted leave for—to take back control—the European Court of Justice. That is why this Bill, which will create our own version of things, is so crucial. Providing certainty as we leave is crucial, whatever the deal.

I note that the measures seek some association, but that is no silver bullet. As we have heard already, there is no such thing as associate membership, and hon. Members do not have to trust me on that. If we cannot trust the views of a former president of the Union of European Federalists, who can we trust? I speak, of course, of the former Liberal Democrat MEP, Andrew Duff, and he wrote:

“Euratom is therefore a fundamental building block of the European Union and not an accessory. It cannot be separated out from the rest of the Union. Joining the EU means joining Euratom; leaving the EU means leaving Euratom... There is no such thing as associate membership of Euratom.”

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I simply say that that is not the Liberal Democrat party’s position, even though Andrew Duff may indeed at one point have been a Liberal Democrat MEP.

Mr Jayawardena: My life is greatly enhanced by that clarification. Let me turn to another source that the hon. Lady might put greater trust in—Professor David Phinnemore of Queen’s University Belfast. He agreed with the former Liberal Democrat MEP:

“Andrew Duff has been quick to point out, correctly, that there is in fact no such thing as ‘associate membership’ of Euratom or, indeed, of the EU for that matter. Non-member states can only be ‘associates’ of the EU.’

That is an academic’s view, as well as an MEP’s view.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), in an exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), considered the notion of associated country status. Switzerland has associated country status. That is different from associate membership; it covers only research and development, and as my hon. Friend made clear, it is contingent on free movement. People in this country have said in a referendum that free movement must be controlled. Given the impossibility of the deal that the new clauses seek to negotiate—to say nothing of its undesirability—it is pure folly to mandate years of uncertainty in a nuclear safeguarding transition period. I contend, rather, that the safeguards, inspections of nuclear facilities and monitoring that the amendments purport to support would be harmed more by a safeguarding transition period—especially since, once we have left the European Union, our Euratom membership cannot apply—than by moving forward immediately to new safeguards.

Albert Owen: Is the hon. Gentleman honestly telling the House that the British public do not want experts from other countries to move freely in the nuclear industry? We are talking about not just nuclear installations but research centres in this country that need international co-operation.

Mr Edward Vaizey ( Wantage) (Con): I hate to rise to disagree with my hon. Friend, but the British people did not vote to leave Euratom. It is a separate treaty and it was not on the ballot paper. We are aware that we are leaving Euratom because of a technicality. I am also aware that if the Government Front-Bench team could wave a magic wand, they would remain in Euratom. Can we please not wrap up our departure from Euratom into some kind of Brexit dream of sticking it to the continent? We want free movement of our nuclear workers, not least because we are building a multibillion-pound nuclear power station at Hinkley Point.

Mr Jayawardena: In disagreeing with me, my right hon. Friend has made my point: specific deals can be done to make sure that the people that this country needs and wants to see here in Britain can come here.

Rachel Reeves: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rebecca Pow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jayawardena: I will make some progress first.

The people we want to see in Britain—those who can contribute to our society, our economy and our communities—should be able to come here and contribute
to our national life and national industries. Indeed, that is how we will continue to make sure that our nuclear industry goes from strength to strength.

**Rebecca Pow:** Would my hon. Friend give way on that point?

**Mr Jayawardena:** Okay.

**Rebecca Pow:** I knew he would, because my hon. Friend knows that my constituency is adjacent to the enormous new nuclear power station that is being built. We will get a large knock-on effect on employment, and indeed we have the first nuclear degree at the University Centre Somerset, which is in my constituency and the adjacent constituency. Does he agree that we need to keep these brains coming and ensure that this industry is growing and booming as we go forward? We are encouraging young people to go into it, and they want to know that there is a safe future.

**Mr Jayawardena:** My hon. Friend has guessed what is coming later in my remarks. I will come on to the future, but I want to focus now on the importance of nuclear, which I think everyone agrees is of key strategic importance to the United Kingdom. I am therefore pleased that Her Majesty’s Government have been clear that they aim to seek to maintain close and effective arrangements for civil nuclear co-operation with Europe and the rest of the world.

As we leave the European Union and enter, in my view— I accept that it might not be everyone’s view—an exciting and prosperous new phase in our kingdom’s history, where we are free to do what we need to do to put our people first and seek trade deals with friends around the world, it is through the cultivation of open, willing and free global markets, interested in innovation from Britain and the revenues that that trade will bring, that we will help to stabilise and boost the UK economy. In this new industrial revolution—perhaps the fourth industrial revolution, as has been championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak)—nuclear power will form a vital part of the UK’s long-term energy mix.

In that context, I want to inform the House of how little of our energy comes from nuclear. Some 72.3% of France’s energy comes from nuclear, compared with 54.1% of Slovakia’s, 51.7% of Belgium’s, 51.3% of Hungary’s and 40% of Sweden’s. We are at less than half that percentage. I would be delighted to be told that I am wrong—I would be delighted if it were higher—but I am informed that it is less than 20%. Nuclear power, as a source of electricity to power millions of homes and businesses for decades to come, is not only clean, low-carbon energy, but reliable. It will also secure our energy, environmental and economic futures. It is therefore absolutely critical to get the regulation of it right.

We have heard about the deal to secure our first new nuclear power station for a generation. It will be built without resort to the public purse and will mean the creation of 26,000 new jobs. It is the sort of industry we want to incentivise in this country to create good new jobs for young people now and in the future. It will also mean energy security, as I have said, which is absolutely critical for our kingdom’s future prosperity, so it is critical that the right safeguards are in place.

It is important that the nuclear safeguards provided under the Bill are distinct from both nuclear safety measures and nuclear security measures. Those measures, which are respectively intended to prevent accidents and to put in place physical protection measures at nuclear sites—are not under the purview of the Bill. They are unaffected by our leaving the EU, because they are not responsibilities provided primarily by Euratom. Euratom has no role in setting security standards or in regulating or inspecting security arrangements in our civil nuclear sector.

Nuclear safety and security are regulated by the Office for Nuclear Regulation—very effectively to date. I might add—and it is the ONR that will assume responsibility for running our effectively equivalent domestic nuclear safeguards regime created under the Bill. That is why, again, I believe that the Bill should stand unamended. Furthermore—international safety and security considerations have been mentioned—the UK will remain a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, of which we were one of the founding members in July 1957 and remain one of the board members. Our leading role in the IAEA, our work developing and complying with international standards and obligations on nuclear safety and security, and our commitment to responsible nuclear non-proliferation thus demonstrate that the UK has no intention of detreting from international standards in our new domestic safeguards regime.

**Rachel Reeves:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of this, but I clarify to the House that IAEA standards are not as high as Euratom’s. The Office for Nuclear Regulation has said that it will not be able to meet Euratom’s standards on day one of our exit from the European Union, so that would mean a dilution of the standards that we have today. Does the hon. Gentleman understand and acknowledge that?

**Mr Jayawardena:** My point about the IAEA—I mean the IAEA; what a tongue-twister!—was not about the standards it provides. It was that we will remain part of the IAEA and will continue to comply fully with the international standards set out and our obligations in relation to nuclear safety and security.

3 pm

I wish to turn to some other concerns. One of the most common misconceptions is that leaving Euratom will affect the supply of medical radioisotopes. That is simply not correct. Medical radioisotopes are not classed as special fissile material and are not therefore subject to nuclear safeguards. Consequently, the UK’s ability to import medical isotopes from Europe and the rest of the world will not be affected. Further, I understand—if I am wrong, I am sure the Minister will correct me—that the Government are fully committed to supporting nuclear collaboration in our scientific and research communities, having already underwritten the UK’s share of one of the biggest EU nuclear projects last year. Such misunderstandings—and perhaps misinformation—highlight exactly why certainty is necessary. We need to enact the new rules as soon as possible so that medical isotope coverage can continue, and so that people know it continues, unaffected.

Research and development is critical, and it is underpinned by the Bill. I welcome the Government’s emphasising that the decision to withdraw from Euratom
in no way diminishes their nuclear research and development ambitions. In fact, I understand they have stated that maintaining and building on our world-leading fusion expertise and securing alternative routes into the international fusion R&D projects will remain a priority. One example is the Joint European Torus programme, a fusion project based in Oxfordshire—my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) may want to comment on it later. The contract is due to end in 2018, but I understand that discussions are already under way with the UK’s European partners to extend it to 2020. If the Government are committed to it, it is right that they continue to guarantee that they will provide their fair share of JET funding up to 2020 in order to extend the contract.

Layla Moran: My constituency lies on the boundary of the Culham centre. The point the staff there are making to me is that this is about not just funding but being able to access the crucial networks of researchers and get the right talent in the right places. Does the hon. Gentleman concede that this will suffer in the short term, unless we get certainty now?

Mr Jayawardena: I will perhaps answer the hon. Lady’s point in a roundabout way. When I visited Switzerland—I should refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—I was impressed to understand that Switzerland, despite having never been part of the EU, was one of the largest recipients of joint funding, because it had the brains to excel at driving technological innovation forward. One of the other biggest recipients of such funding was the UK. A third was Israel, which has never been part of the EU and has very few agreements of the sort that Switzerland has with the EU. Switzerland has some agreements with the EU, and we are leaving the EU. All three nations have great expertise and should continue to strive to ensure access to the networks that this technology and these innovations rely on.

Another such project is the international thermonuclear experimental reactor, a project to build a magnetic fusion device. The agreement was signed multilaterally by China, the EU, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the US. It is absolutely right that the UK continues to support such projects. I also understand that the Government have announced an £86 million investment to establish a nuclear fusion technology platform with the aim of supporting UK industry in obtaining contracts for just such projects.

We need to underpin that commitment and funding with some clarity today, however, which is why an additional transition period would be the worst of both worlds. The unique legal status of the EU and Euratom during that period would mean we would not be part of Euratom but would simply be seeking an association with it, or indeed an R&D-only association contingent on free movement and the European Court of Justice—if we are to base our position on Switzerland and refer to it in the wrong terms, as some Opposition Members have done. At the same time, however, we would be unable to enact our own safeguarding measures to underpin all that is good about our nuclear industry—the innovation we have supported and the jobs our young people deserve. I do not believe the new clause stacks up, and I will not be supporting it today.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in favour of new clause 1. As far as I could follow the argument of the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) at the end there, he was saying that it would create instability to have an increased transition period for a treaty that has served the UK well for 40 years and that we want to replicate in as much detail as possible in the future arrangements. That is Alice in Wonderland logic and not the kind of rigour we ought to bring to this incredibly serious debate.

This fellow Andrew Duff, a former Liberal Democrat MEP, has been mentioned several times in the Chamber. It is, to my mind, the first time a former Liberal Democrat MEP has been taken as a great authority on any matter by Conservative Members, and possibly by his own party as well. I want to briefly and gently warn Conservative Members on the wisdom of taking former leaders’ pronouncements as general facts. For obvious reasons, I do not seek to dwell on my own party’s predicament on the matter, or that of the Liberal Democrats, given the recent well-publicised difficulties of their former leader in matters of fact. Are we to agree, however, with every pronouncement from Lord Hague, a former leader of the Conservative party, on issues on which he remains an expert? Are we to agree without question that Brexit will undoubtedly diminish Britain’s influence on the world stage, as he has made clear? No, of course we are not, so can we please put that argument to one side and move on to the substance of the debate.

Mr Jayawardena: Hooray.

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman bored the Chamber senseless for three times as long—by my count—as was necessary.

Mr Jayawardena rose—

John Woodcock: Of course I will give way, as long as the hon. Gentleman does not go on for quite as long as he did last time.

Mr Jayawardena: I am sorry if I bored the hon. Gentleman, but he might not have been listening fully.

John Woodcock: I did try.

I would never accuse the Minister of complacency—he is not a complacent man—and I know that as Energy Minister he is giving much time to this matter, but although I do not think there is complacency from Ministers themselves, I am profoundly worried about the capacity in the system to deliver the new arrangements by the time set out. I agree with my neighbour, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), on so much by the time set out. I agree with my neighbour, the hon. Member he is giving much time to this matter, but he might not have been listening fully.

Mr Jayawardena: I am sorry if I bored the hon. Gentleman, but he might not have been listening fully.

John Woodcock: I did try.

I would never accuse the Minister of complacency—he is not a complacent man—and I know that as Energy Minister he is giving much time to this matter, but although I do not think there is complacency from Ministers themselves, I am profoundly worried about the capacity in the system to deliver the new arrangements by the time set out. I agree with my neighbour, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), on so much and we have worked together, but the idea that it is okay to be there or thereabouts in March 2019, at the time of transfer, is, I am afraid, bunkum. A level of certainty has to be written into our nuclear safeguarding regulatory arrangements.

Many Labour Members want our membership of Euratom to continue, however— it might be delivered in the future. The alternative at the moment is to rely on a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that is bursting at the seams with all the things it has to deliver on Britain’s exit from the EU. I had a conversation...
a few months ago with someone whom I knew from my time as an adviser and who remains in the system. What he had to say about the number of staff looking at the Euratom issue in particular was frightening. There is not remotely the level of assurance that the House ought to expect if it is to give its blessing to the Government and not seek to write into the Bill a commitment to a transition period, which is eminently sensible while we try to work out whether we can stay for good.

Some Members have said that there is no certainty because a negotiation is in progress, but the new clause gives a degree of strength to Ministers, enabling them to say, “Parliament has willed that there needs to be a transition arrangement. Our Act—which is, of course, a contingency Act—makes clear that there must be contingency arrangements, and that is what we require from these negotiations.”

Rebecca Pow: Might I suggest that the new clause actually seeks to confuse? It appears to specify what should happen during the transition period, but it is unclear whether it is specifying what the United Kingdom should seek to be negotiating, or whether it is attempting to mandate the terms. It seems to be the opposite of what the Prime Minister set out in her excellent Florence speech. All the Opposition are doing is confusing the issue, which is leading to a lack of clarification for the nuclear industry which wants, needs and deserves it.

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady may be confused, but we are not, and the industry is not. The industry is strongly urging the Government—as they will know, if they are listening—and all Members to get behind a transition period while we examine the position, to decide whether we can reverse the wrongheaded decision to leave Euratom that was made—in all probability, unnecessarily—when article 50 was served. The alternative is to face a dire cliff edge that could do deep damage to civil nuclear production throughout the United Kingdom.

I understand that the Minister is due to visit Sellafield for the first time later this week—

Richard Harrington indicated dissent.

John Woodcock: The hon. Lady has confused the House.

Richard Harrington: It is imminent.

John Woodcock: Well, I hope that when the Minister does come up to Sellafield, he will put his voice and the full voice of his Department behind the campaign that the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and I are shaping to improve our transport infrastructure. It will take him an absolute age to get there, but I hope that when he is there, he will listen closely to what people say. I hope that he will listen to those in my constituency and that of the hon. Lady who will be relying on the new civil nuclear jobs that will come through the NuGen project in Moorside and think again about how our Parliament can strengthen his hand in creating a seamless transition from the existing arrangements to something which we strongly believe needs to look identical. New clause 1 would do that and, even at this late stage, Members in all parts of the House ought to support it.

Rachel Maclean: I rise to speak on this Third Reading debate in the full knowledge that I am not a nuclear expert; nor do I have a considerable nuclear presence in my constituency. However, like millions of other people up and down the country, I rely on nuclear energy to keep my lights on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I should point out to the hon. Lady that this is not the Third Reading debate. We are dealing with the new clauses and amendments.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you for that clarification, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall turn directly to new clause 1. I do not support the new clause, because it seeks to introduce a transition period to delay the UK’s departure from Euratom. When the proposal was tabled in Committee as new clause 2, we engaged in detailed scrutiny. I applaud the forensic questioning by the hon. Members for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who probed the Minister in great detail. We heard numerous lengthy arguments about why the new clause was unnecessary.

3.15 pm

While I understand the Opposition’s desire for a completely smooth transition to new arrangements after we leave the EU and hence Euratom, I do not think that the new clause would achieve that purpose. The Government have made it very clear that they are already making progress on the arrangements for the UK’s safeguarding regime after we leave Euratom, and we have heard considerable evidence of the dangers of putting that at risk. The Bill’s purpose is to minimise any risk to our civil nuclear industry, to jobs in constituencies such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), and to our international treaties. It is critical that the safeguarding regimes are maintained, because civil nuclear is an essential part of our national energy strategy. We have 15 operating reactors, generating about 21% of the country’s electricity, and 36 licensed nuclear sites.

As we have heard, membership of Euratom has served us well, and the Secretary of State has made it clear that he wants maximum continuity to enable as close an association as possible to continue with Euratom after we leave the EU. This is not the place to get into arguments about whether or not we should have left Euratom; the fact is that we are in the process of leaving it, and I am sure all Members agree that we must look to the future.

The new clause is redundant, but if it were only redundant, I would accept that that was a weak argument and that the Opposition might argue that it would strengthen the Bill. However, I believe that it is not only redundant, but would be counterproductive. The Government have made a clear commitment to a transition period after we leave the EU. In the Prime Minister’s Florence speech, she committed herself to a transition period, which has been extensively debated in the House. It is widely agreed that during that period we would work within existing EU frameworks, such as Euratom, to avoid the creation of damaging cliff edges in business and in our essential nuclear industry.

On 11 January, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made a written statement in which he said that any transition period agreed as
part of the EU negotiations would include Euratom. It is surely wrong to try to implement two transition periods with EU bodies, one that would take place before we leave the EU on 29 March 2019 and one that would take place after that. That would create considerable confusion over what our negotiating stance would be. I am sure that most people would accept that with a process as complex as leaving the EU, a transition period is a sensible idea because it gives businesses and organisations time to plan. However, requiring a second type of transition period before we leave a EU-related body would leave us open to much questioning about the terms and about what the UK would be trying to achieve in negotiations.

When the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee heard from Dr Golshan of the Office for Nuclear Regulation, the body that will take on the safeguarding role after we leave Euratom, she told us that the challenges faced by her organisation in implementing a new function were not negligible, but she did not say that they were insuperable. I believe therefore that we must continue with the Bill as it stands to avoid further delay in putting in place a nuclear safeguards regime, which must be ready in good time.

Given the legal arguments, which have been well rehearsed, it is difficult to see how we could continue to be a full member of Euratom after leaving the EU, as triggering article 50 obliged us to leave associated bodies, as set out in the European treaties. If we accepted the new clause, logically we could not leave the EU on exit day, as Parliament has voted to do, because we would be bound into a form of association with Euratom. The two objectives are logically impossible.

Furthermore, placing such an obligation on the Government would create considerable uncertainty in the negotiations and weaken our negotiating stance. It would also create uncertainty for businesses and people working in the sector, when Members on both sides of the House have made it clear that what they need is certainty. By definition, certainty would be hard to come by were the new clause to be accepted. For the reasons I have given, this proposal was defeated in the Public Bill Committee, and I will not support it on Report.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am delighted to be here with the Minister, who is a genial and hard-working man. I know that he will try to answer some of my questions, and I hope his answers are clear.

When the Secretary of State launched the Bill, he said it was “straightforward”, but the amendments are required because there is nothing straightforward about leaving Euratom. The Scottish National party is concerned about the whole process. The hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) talked about us being “there or thereabouts”, but that is not good enough when it comes to nuclear safeguards. As it stands, the Bill is a safeguards Bill without any safeguards; there is no contingency for anything going wrong, yet Ministers have failed to convince not just hon. Members in this Chamber, but industry and the people. Leaving Euratom will result in more cost and less value, and the opinion of many in the industry is that it will be impossible to set up an equivalent UK authority within the timescales outlined. That is the view of industry, the Office for Nuclear Regulation, the Nuclear Industry Association and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, all of which gave evidence to the BEIS Committee. I was delighted to hear the Chair of that Committee, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), point out the great concern about the Government’s ability to do as they propose. All the nuclear industry and all those bodies do not want us to leave Euratom; either they see no benefit in our doing so, or they are actively concerned about the consequences.

Ministers have simply ignored the difficulties and the overwhelming evidence before them. They have plodded ahead, and when asked “How?” they use their favourite word: hope. They hope that things will be in place—that agreements, funding and people will be available. Despite the impending loss of influence in developing policy in Europe on future nuclear decisions, the unanswered questions about cost, the difficulties in training or even recruiting replacement inspectors, they plod ahead. As the Minister said in response to questions on these matters in the Select Committee, “They don’t really know and we don’t really know.”

There are a lot of unknowns in the Bill, which is why it is imperative to amend it. The ONR says plainly that it might need more than a two-year transition period after 2019, yet the Government still provide no assurance.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman says the Government give no assurance, but the Prime Minister, in her Florence speech, was explicit about the Government’s agenda in respect of a two-year implementation period. I cannot help concluding that the reason the hon. Gentleman advances this line of argument is that he has a destructive attitude toward the whole process, and his ultimate aim is to create a constitutional and ongoing sense of crisis. In fact, the Bill guarantees some continuity, including the two-year period.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman, like many of his colleagues in Scotland, likes to try to go to a happy place when faced with harsh realities. The fact is that a two-year transition period is viewed by virtually nobody as a responsible timescale in which to get up and running.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make some progress. The UK, as it presses ahead with the folly of Hinckley C, will need thousands of workers, many skilled in the nuclear industries.

Rebecca Pow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make some progress. I may come back to the hon. Lady, but we will have to see.

Many of those workers will need to be skilled in the nuclear industries, yet current policy does not support the ability to get those workers if there is no concession on the movement of people, but achieving even that is put into a harsh light when it comes to getting highly specialist staff to meet the new safeguarding functions. Those positions are already challenging to fill. Nuclear inspectors do not live on every street—in fact, they are very rare—and they are in global demand. The Minister
The hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), who is no longer in its place, mentioned medical isotopes. He said that it was scaremongering to say that they would no longer be available, and that treaties would be in place to allow access to them. However, the critical point is not whether people can get the isotopes; it is that they have a very short half-life. Sometimes they have to be used within hours of being produced in order to maintain their effectiveness. If they are sitting at a border point because there is no customs agreement, they will be completely useless. Will the Minister tell us how we are going to put in place the necessary customs arrangements to prevent that from happening?

**Drew Hendry:** Without alternative arrangements to allow the free movement of such goods across borders, there will be considerable complication and delay, which could affect patients.

As it stands, it is a risk too far to leave Euratom without cast-iron guarantees. I respect the Minister and heard his messages of hope about having people in place. I heard him say that he would like to ensure that that will happen, but we have had no guarantees about the set-up or whether it will be in place. There are no figures and no definite timescales, and we have heard nothing from the industry to suggest that it is satisfied. Without cast-iron guarantees to protect such things, we know that the new arrangement will cost us more, deliver less and diminish our influence. Given the evidence, it is hard to see even how it could be delivered.

**Stephen Kerr:** The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) accused Government Members, and Scottish Conservatives in
particular, of seeking to find a happy place. Does my hon. Friend agree that that could never be said of the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey? He is more inclined to find a depressing place, which I do not recognise in my native land of Scotland.

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend, who will know much more than me about SNP Members and their outlook on life.

Our relationship with Euratom is a subject for negotiation. The Government have been clear that they will seek continuity, and they obviously want standards to remain as high as possible. How that connects directly with Euratom is not for this Bill; it is for negotiation directly with the EU. The exact nature of the relationship will of course be closely connected to trade, customs and countless other arrangements.

In Committee, we saw Labour’s attempts to get either a commitment to Euratom, which cannot be given in this Bill, or associate membership, which does not exist and this Bill cannot create. We need to build our own framework so that we are prepared to incorporate whatever kind of relationship with Euratom results from the negotiation. The Government have been clear that that is the most helpful and connected relationship that we can have, so we cannot lay out in this forum what that will look like. We need certainty and structure and to have our own plans in place—not just on paper, but well developed and physically in place—so that we can have continuity regardless of what happens further down the line, meaning that we need to crack on with things now to be ready in time. We heard evidence in Committee about the time needed to put things in place, so we need to crack on now.

I do not understand where the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) was coming from in his speech. While very eloquent, he did not seem to grasp that we cannot write into the Bill things that have not yet happened or are not yet agreed. We cannot include a transitional period, and the Government cannot accept an amendment that foresees a future negotiation with Euratom. The Government cannot accept a commitment to Euratom, which cannot be given in this Bill, or associate membership, which does not exist and this Bill cannot create. We need to build our own framework, and the work to put it in place needs to happen now. An amendment to say that the Bill is merely a contingency would achieve the opposite of its intention by reducing impetus and leading to delays in the process of getting our safeguards in place, which is only bad for the industry and for all the things the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) tried to raise.

That is why I oppose new clause 1, and I hope to speak later about my support for the Bill more broadly.

Alex Norris: I enjoyed serving on the Public Bill Committee, and I rise to speak in support of new clauses 1 and 2, and amendment 3.

On new clause 1, while I have slightly buried the lead by referencing this earlier, it needs full consideration in this place. Members need to know the judgment of Dr Goldshan, who is responsible at the ONR for recreating Euratom in this country:

“Our aim, currently, is to have a system in place that enables the UK to fulfil its international obligations by March 2019, which is when we intend to leave Euratom. I have been very clear in the past—I will repeat it here—that we will not be able to replicate Euratom standards on day one.”—[Official Report, Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee, 31 October 2017; c. 7, Q9.]

Members should reflect on that, whatever the political knockabout, because it makes a compelling case for a transition period. Otherwise we will be saying that our safeguards regime should not be as good as it is today, and I have not heard anyone suggesting that—I do not believe that it would be tolerable.

A week is a long time in politics, and three months is a lifetime in the Brexit process—perhaps it just feels like that—but over that period we have seen the Government move on this point. Conservative Members asked how we can talk about this hypothetical idea. Well, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy himself said less than two weeks ago that the Government want Euratom to be involved in the implementation period. Now is the time to make good on that.

In a similar vein, on new clause 2, if I had £1 for every time someone mentioned in Committee that this is a contingency Bill, I would be able to meet the Foreign
Secretary’s new financial commitment to the NHS. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), would be a particularly significant donor, having mentioned that many times.

If this is a contingency Bill, we really should say what it is contingent on, and we should say that in the Bill. Otherwise it is not a contingency Bill, but a Bill that will be law until the Minister decides on the 19.52 train home that it is not law any more. That is not a satisfactory way to legislate.

Finally, on amendment 3, one issue that has developed since Second Reading is whether we actually have to do any of this. Ministers clearly said on Second Reading that leaving Euratom is legally necessary as part of leaving the EU. We tested that in Committee. I asked two senior lawyers in this area, Jonathan Leech and Rupert Cowan from Prospect Law, whether triggering article 50 necessitates leaving Euratom and if they would have advised the Government to follow this path. To the first question they answered “No” and “Absolutely not” respectively, Jonathan Leech’s answer to the second question was:

“The advice would be that you do not have to accept this and it may not be in your interests to do so.”—[Official Report, Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee, 31 October 2017; c. 12, Q23.]

That is significant, and it is a departure from where we were on Second Reading.

I represent a leave constituency, and I am always mindful of that when dealing with anything relating to Brexit. I have spent a lot of time knocking on doors and have heard every conceivable argument for remaining or leaving. Funnnilly enough, I never heard the argument—I suspect no one in this Chamber did—that our membership of Euratom is undesirable, or that there is a desire for a diminution of our nuclear safeguards regime. There is not much of a case for doing this if we do not have to. If we are doing it only because of an arbitrary red line drawn up in Downing Street that we could cross while still delivering Brexit, we are fools to do so. Either way, as amendment 3 states, Ministers ought to come to this place to justify their approach, because once again this is not a decision for the 19.52 train.

Lots of work has gone into the Bill and I have enjoyed participating in its consideration. I believe that we should all support the Opposition proposals, because they would make the Bill better and then we might not need it at all.

Richard Harrington: I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. Those who have heard our consideration of the Bill for the first time today will not realise, given that most of our discussion has been about one or two new clauses, that many other aspects were discussed in Committee. I pay tribute to the Opposition Members who have participated, as well Government Members, and particularly the hon. Members for Southamptoom, Test (Dr Whitehead), for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), whose cameo Brexit role has been well appreciated. Many points were dealt with by consensus in Committee and in our discussions afterwards.

Today’s debate has focused on new clause 1, but I will also speak to the other new clauses and amendments in the group.

The overall strategy for withdrawal from Euratom, and our ambitions for our future relationship with it, were the subject of a comprehensive written statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 11 January. I think that most Members on both sides of the House would agree that, as I have stated publicly in Committee and privately afterwards, we are seeking the closest and most effective association with Euratom. We are therefore putting in place all the measures necessary to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state from day one.

As Members will be fully aware, the nature of our future relationship with Euratom is part of the next phase of negotiations, which is yet to start. The written statement set out the principles upon which our strategy is based, many of which have been discussed today: to aim for continuity with current relevant Euratom arrangements; to ensure that the UK maintains its leading role in European nuclear research; and to ensure that the nuclear industry in the UK has the necessary skilled workforce. We will be seeking: a close association with Euratom’s research and training programme, which includes the JET project and the international thermonuclear experimental reactor project; continuity of open trade arrangements to ensure that the nuclear industry can continue to trade across EU borders; and maintenance of close and effective co-operation with Euratom on nuclear safety.

Rachel Reeves rose—

Richard Harrington: It is a pleasure to give way to the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the Minister and particularly the Secretary of State for the written ministerial statement published on 11 January, which gave much more clarity on the Government’s aims and ambitions in this area. On the seventh day of consideration of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill by the Committee of the whole House, Ministers gave a commitment to publish a timetable with milestones that the Government will need to achieve to meet the objectives set out in the written statement. When does the Department plan to publish that timetable, because I really think it is crucial? Can we also have an update on progress towards a voluntary agreement with the IAEA for safeguarding inspections, and on how discussions are going regarding the nuclear co-operation agreements, which are crucial to getting the association we need?

Richard Harrington: If the hon. Lady will have a bit of patience, I will come to those points, all of which are valid, later in my speech. Progress on many of those points will be included in the quarterly statements, which are the result of discussions in Committee.

I have been through the important points covered in the written statement, so let me turn to the point about associate membership made by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen)—I learned how to pronounce his constituency in the Westminster Hall debate; I hope he realises that I am showing off now—and others. As I have already stated at the Dispatch Box, we cannot be an associate member of Euratom because there is no
such concept in the treaty as it stands. We have had a lot of discussions about whether we could. The hon. Member for Leeds East—

**Rachel Reeves:** West.

3.45 pm

**Richard Harrington:** I am sorry; I come from Leeds, so I should have known the difference.

The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) mentioned Ukraine, which has been mentioned many times. Ukraine has association agreements on specific parts of Euratom’s activities, with research and development being the classic one. We must work within the existing legal framework, which allows for close association but not this theoretical category of associate membership.

**Albert Owen:** I am grateful to the Minister and the Secretary of State for the clarifications they have given today and previously in writing. I understand what the Minister is saying, but my point is that we are in uncharted waters. We need to get on the front foot, and the best way to do that is by acting on behalf of the UK nuclear industry, which is asking for associate membership. Will the Minister therefore please assure us that he will fight for an associate type of membership?

**Richard Harrington:** With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, this quite amuses me, because last week I was berated for being a mouthpiece for the nuclear industry—something with which I was pleased to agree, by the way. The important point is that the language of whether we can have associate membership or not is not important; the important thing is what we come up with. People inside and outside the House can call it what they want, but effectively we all want the same thing. It is just not correct to call it associate membership, however, because there is no such thing. I have made that clear absolutely beyond doubt, as has the Secretary of State.

**Dr Whitehead:** In the light of what the Minister has just said, will he confirm that in his view an associated status in relation to nuclear safeguards would be distinctly possible?

**Richard Harrington:** I hope and believe that a very close association to do with nuclear safeguards absolutely will be possible, but I do not think it helps just to bandy language between one side and the other. We all know what we want, and I am delighted that everybody—it seems to me—on the Opposition and Government Benches wants exactly the same thing. We have all made our points about the language, but I think we all want the same thing. That is very unusual in this House and it really is a credit to everybody.

It is essential that projects and investments are not adversely affected by our withdrawal from the EU and can continue to operate in the certainty that nuclear safeguards arrangements will be in place. That is why we are putting in place arrangements for a new domestic nuclear safeguards regime, regulated by the Office for Nuclear Regulation, as well as negotiating new bilateral agreements with the IAEA and nuclear co-operation agreements with priority third countries. Those arrangements are not dependent on the EU negotiations and the UK Government’s work is well advanced.

The Bill and the regulations that will be made under its powers are crucial. They will enable us to establish a domestic nuclear safeguards regime to meet international safeguards and nuclear non-proliferation standards when Euratom safeguards arrangements no longer apply in the UK. As Members have noted, it will take time to develop and implement the new regime, so it is absolutely imperative that we maintain the momentum of the work needed to deliver it in the timescale required. However well meaning the new clauses and amendments are—I accept in good faith the reasons why they were tabled—the reality is that they could delay our domestic preparations and lead to uncertainty in our discussions with international partners. There can be no question of our waiting until we know the outcome of negotiations before we put in place our own arrangements. The implications of not having the right systems operating from when Euratom safeguards arrangements no longer apply are too serious for the industry and for our position in the international safeguards regime.

On the implementation period, we intend to ensure continuity for the nuclear industry and to avoid the possibility of a cliff edge for the industry on the date of exit. Members will be aware—if they were not listening at the time, this has been mentioned several times already today, so they will be aware now—that the Prime Minister set out in her Florence speech her desire for an implementation period after the UK ceases to be a member of the EU. If the European Commission agrees to an implementation period of around two years, the UK will not be a member state of the European Union during that period. None the less, the acquis will continue to apply, which means that, for the duration of that implementation period, the UK will expect to continue to pay into the EU, to be bound by its rules and to benefit from access to its market. The European Commission’s draft guidelines are explicit that, in its view, this acquis would include Euratom matters. The implication of that—I accept that it is an implication because it has to be tested in negotiations—is that the current Euratom regime could continue to apply during any transition period.

I have to reiterate that a transition period prior to our withdrawal, as proposed by new clause 1, is not a situation envisaged in the proposals for the implementation period. Both parties to the discussions agree that it would be helpful to have the matter agreed as speedily as possible—again, there is no disagreement over that—so as to provide the certainty that we need. Whatever the outcome of the talks about an implementation period, let me emphasise that the UK’s overarching objective remains to maintain as close and effective an association with Euratom for the long term as possible.

New clause 1, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test, proposes not an implementation period after exit, but a transitional period before exit. That would delay the UK’s non-proliferation safeguards and would not be helpful to the UK. As it stands, the UK’s non-proliferation safeguards and nuclear non-proliferation standards when Euratom safeguards arrangements no longer apply in the UK are made. That was why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a commitment in the written
statement to provide quarterly updates on progress, which will include updates on the negotiations and progress made by the ONR on establishing the UK’s domestic safeguard regime.

I hope that those arguments will persuade Opposition Members not to press the amendments and new clauses to a Division.

Dr Whitehead: We will not be pressing any measure to a vote, except for new clause 1, which has been debated in a very unsatisfactory way this afternoon. We are not convinced by the responses that we have received, so we will be pressing it to a Division.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 255, Noes 294.

Division No. 106]  [3.52 pm

AYES

[Members not to press the amendments and new clauses]

Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeler, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afsal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
Mc Donagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Oonn, Melanie
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thorburn, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twiggy, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie

[Richard Harrington]
Tellers for the Ayes:

Jeff Smith and Colleen Fletcher

Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Dr rh Julian
Ludington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merrimant, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Miller, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David

Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paton, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quine, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie

Adams, Nigel
Afroimi, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
 Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardilidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Doyle-Prince, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, Emma
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francesco, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gymah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Healey, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Dr rh Julian
Ludington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merrimant, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Miller, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David

Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paton, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quine, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Amendment 6, in clause 4, page 4, line 41, at end insert—

“(a) consult—

(i) the ONR,
(ii) the National Audit Office, and
(iii) such other persons (if any) as the Secretary of State considers it appropriate to consult, and

(b) lay before Parliament a statement declaring that he or she is satisfied that the staffing and financial resource available to the ONR is sufficient for the purpose of assuming responsibility for nuclear safeguarding in the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to declare that the ONR has the resources necessary to take on extra responsibilities for nuclear safeguarding in the UK.

Amendment 5, in clause 2, page 4, line 13, at end insert—

“(1A) The Secretary of State may only exercise powers under this section at the point at which amendment of any of the legislation in subsection (1) becomes necessary in order to complete the process of transposition of responsibility for nuclear safeguarding from EURATOM to the Office for Nuclear Regulation, and for no other purpose.

(1B) Upon exercising the power set out in subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on the operation of the power.”

This amendment would limit circumstances under which the Secretary of State may exercise certain powers in this section and requires a report to be laid before Parliament.

Amendment 6, in clause 4, page 4, line 41, at end insert—

“, but not before the Secretary of State has published draft regulations relating to each of the other provisions of this Act under which the Secretary of State may make regulations.”

This amendment would ensure that draft regulations specified in the Bill are published before the provisions of the Act come into force.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1

Nuclear safeguards

Dr Whitehead: I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 22, at end insert—

“(c) ensuring that inspections of nuclear facilities and materials for the purpose of nuclear safeguards continue at the level previously established by UK membership of EURATOM.”

This amendment would aim to ensure that nuclear safeguarding inspections continue at the same level subsequent to leaving EURATOM as they were when the UK was a member of EURATOM.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 4, page 2, line 41, leave out from “must” to the end of line 44 and insert—

“(a) consult—

(i) the ONR,
(ii) the National Audit Office, and
(iii) such other persons (if any) as the Secretary of State considers it appropriate to consult, and

(b) lay before Parliament a statement declaring that he or she is satisfied that the staffing and financial resource available to the ONR is sufficient for the purpose of assuming responsibility for nuclear safeguarding in the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to declare that the ONR has the resources necessary to take on extra responsibilities for nuclear safeguarding in the UK.

Amendment 5, in clause 2, page 4, line 13, at end insert—

“(1A) The Secretary of State may only exercise powers under this section at the point at which amendment of any of the legislation in subsection (1) becomes necessary in order to complete the process of transposition of responsibility for nuclear safeguarding from EURATOM to the Office for Nuclear Regulation, and for no other purpose.

(1B) Upon exercising the power set out in subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on the operation of the power.”

This amendment would limit circumstances under which the Secretary of State may exercise certain powers in this section and requires a report to be laid before Parliament.

Amendment 6, in clause 4, page 4, line 41, at end insert—

“, but not before the Secretary of State has published draft regulations relating to each of the other provisions of this Act under which the Secretary of State may make regulations.”

This amendment would ensure that draft regulations specified in the Bill are published before the provisions of the Act come into force.

I am pleased that the latter option is strongly advocated in the impact assessment, because it seems to me that we should not seek in future to get by on the lowest level we can get away with. Instead, we should assure ourselves of our own integrity on the matter, and assure others likewise—both the IAEA and the countries with which we will be making bilateral agreements—that we are doing it absolutely properly. That will entail seeking to continue with inspections at the high level laid down in Euratom’s arrangements. That is what amendment 1 is about. It is designed to place in the Bill exactly what the impact assessment presently says—it might have helped our discussions in Committee had we been able to look at it at that time.

Predominantly, the assessment works on the basis of costing various options relating to what a future inspection regime would look like. Indeed, there are or could be choices, as we have heard, about that inspection regime, which is, after all, at the heart of the Bill. How are we going to replicate in the closest possible detail the inspection arrangements that franked our probity as a nuclear nation in international agreements on non-proliferation and nuclear safeguarding? We have been signed up to those arrangements all these years, but we have hitherto engaged with them through the agency of Euratom, rather than independently. As we know, duties in relation to safeguarding ultimately end in agreements made between nuclear states and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The inspection regime we envisage for the future could vary, because the level of inspection—such as the number of inspections and the depth of inspection needed to satisfy the minimum criteria of the IAEA—could be at a lower level than we have been used to under the Euratom regime. We might envisage a bronze standard inspection regime whereby we scrape by in our future relationship with the IAEA, or we could ensure that the inspection regime, overseen by the ONR, will be as good and as thorough as that carried out by Euratom inspectors in the past. As the impact assessment says, that would be marginally more expensive.

I am pleased that the latter option is strongly advocated in the impact assessment, because it seems to me that we should not seek in future to get by on the lowest level we can get away with. Instead, we should assure ourselves of our own integrity on the matter, and assure others likewise—both the IAEA and the countries with which we will be making bilateral agreements—that we are doing it absolutely properly. That will entail seeking to continue with inspections at the high level laid down in Euratom’s arrangements. That is what amendment 1 is about. It is designed to place in the Bill exactly what the impact assessment states we should do—to ensure that we will go forward at that level.

The Minister may well say—I hope he does—that we are committed to maintaining that level of inspection regardless of whether it is written in the Bill. But there is a problem with that: when we go independent, will we have the resources to carry out inspections to that level,
or will we need an extended period in which we are allowed to scrape by with the minimum, because that is all we will be able to do?

At the beginning of the Bill Committee we heard from an excellent witness, Dr Golshan, the deputy chief inspector at the ONR. She gave us a fairly stark statement of reality, which members of the Committee have shared this afternoon. Those hon. Members will all recall Dr Golshan indicating clearly that when we leave Euratom, “we will not be able to replicate Euratom standards on day one.” [Official Report, Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee, 31 October 2017; c. 7, Q9.]

In amendment 1, we set out an aim for the Bill: that we cleave to the Euratom standards as soon as possible and assure ourselves that we have the resources to do so.

There is a wider context. What resources will the ONR have to enable it to carry out the substantial new tasks that we set it in this legislation? The ONR is mainly funded through charges to the nuclear industry. That is how it generally recovers the money for its operations, but it also receives some grant funding. Essentially, that funding pays for the nuclear safeguarding work, while the charges on the nuclear industry pay for the ONR’s other functions, which are not the subject of this Bill.

That distinction is important, because the Government intend to halve the grant to the ONR in the period to 2020. At the outset of the negotiations, we face the prospect of the ONR being able to do less work than it does at the moment. If it is to continue to do as much as it does now, it will probably have to levy substantially higher charges on the industry to make up for the loss of the grant up to 2020. At the same time, if the Bill progresses, we are plainly saying that the ONR will have to undertake a whole lot of new work that it has not budgeted for, that has not been in its terms of reference for a long time and that will clearly require a lot more resource. As we heard in oral evidence to the Committee, that is no mean amount of additional work for the ONR to undertake.

To enable it to carry out all its functions, Euratom employs about 160 staff; 25%—or 40—of whom focus on UK installations. One can reasonably assume that the ONR would have to add a similar number of people to its workforce if it were to take on the work done by Euratom on nuclear safeguarding. The safeguards unit in the ONR comprises eight professional staff. Between now and March 2019, therefore, the ONR will have to find roughly 32 staff—qualified, highly skilled and trained nuclear inspectors—from somewhere to take over that responsibility. That is in addition to all the other things that the ONR will have to put in place, such as IT systems and administration resources, to allow it to take on that role.

Another excellent witness who contributed to our proceedings in Committee was Sue Ferns, from the union Prospect. She stated that training safeguards inspectors could take up to five years. We are faced with the prospect of needing 32 such people within 18 months. She said, of the role of an inspector:

“This is a warranted role; this is not just working in the industry. It is not just about knowledge, but experience and commanding the confidence of the companies and the organisations that you deal with, so there are very specific aspects to that role.” [Official Report, Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee, 31 October 2017; c. 35, Q69.]

She also alluded to the relatively small pool in which we are fishing. Not only do we have to fish in the pool, but we have to do so accurately, and we have to attract a good proportion of those people if we are to fill the gap. Consequently, she put a considerable question mark against whether it is possible for the ONR to be ready, as we would like it to be, for the tasks that we are going to give it.

I accept that a number of people in the nuclear industry have many of the qualities that could make them nuclear inspectors—indeed, as the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) said in Committee, there are many such people in the industry—so it may not be necessary to fully train everybody for five years. Nevertheless, it will be a very steep climb to climb to get those 32 inspectors, at least, in place for whenever we take over inspections from Euratom. I sincerely hope, as I am sure all Members do, that those matters can be resolved. It may be a question of making sure that the ONR is funded to the extent that it can properly undertake that activity of fishing in a small pool—perhaps, as I mentioned in Committee, with pound notes attached to the end of its fishing line.

A number of other factors relating to nuclear inspections may also come into play. Euratom may be prepared, as part of an association agreement, to lend the UK safeguarding inspectors. A number of different courses could be pursued. Nevertheless, there is a big question mark against the capacity and ability of the ONR, even with all best endeavours in place, to be properly ready in time, given its present circumstances, its possible future circumstances and how it will address them.

For that reason, it is important, at the appropriate time, to have sign-off from the Secretary of State that we have in place not only a regime but the resources available to work under it in the new circumstances. That appropriate time will be when all the different possibilities have been explored and when the different ways of doing things have been looked at. Amendment 4 would require the Secretary of State to lay a statement before Parliament that, at that point, he or she is satisfied—and does not simply hope—that everything looks all right and that we can safely proceed on the basis that we have not only the powers in place but the people and resources to use those powers.

There are further things we will need to do to be able fully to present to the IAEA our case. That is no mean amount of additional work for the ONR to undertake.

For that reason, it is important, at the appropriate time, to have sign-off from the Secretary of State that we have in place not only a regime but the resources available to work under it in the new circumstances. That appropriate time will be when all the different possibilities have been explored and when the different ways of doing things have been looked at. Amendment 4 would require the Secretary of State to lay a statement before Parliament that, at that point, he or she is satisfied—and does not simply hope—that everything looks all right and that we can safely proceed on the basis that we have not only the powers in place but the people and resources to use those powers.

One thing we will need to do is make sure that we have aligned all existing legislation with the new regime that we establish, and here things get difficult. The Government have chosen the easy way out in doing that, and they have given rise to enormous disquiet about the procedure they have adopted and its potential consequences. In clause 2, they have given the Secretary of State plenipotentiary powers to amend retrospectively by regulation not one but two Acts of Parliament agreed previously by this House. That can be done on
the basis not only of negotiations we do not know about but of treaties we have not had sight of and that are, indeed, not yet concluded.

The powers that are given to the Secretary of State in clause 2—Henry VIII powers, essentially—would have been familiar to Henry VIII himself, because the King was a self-absorbed tyrant who had little time even for the rudimentary Parliament of his day. Mercifully, such powers have not been used quite so frequently subsequently—there are a number of people one might think about in that role, although I would exclude certain people, obviously.

Although such powers have not been used very frequently in this House subsequent to the monarch who gave them their title, they have been used a little more frequently in recent years. The House has fought for many years against the idea that the Executive, by executive action, can overturn, amend or take in a different direction what Parliament has decided through legislation. When such powers have been sought in the past, they have in some instances been successfully challenged, and on many occasions strongly challenged, on both sides of the House.

You might have gathered, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not like Henry VIII powers. We think that they overturn the sovereignty of Parliament in dealing with issues such as these and give the Executive powers that are unwarranted on virtually all occasions. Legislation should be written in that form only in a dire emergency, where a calamity will befall the nation if such action is not taken. In all other circumstances, legislation should properly appear before Parliament to be debated. If the legislation replaces or substantially amends primary legislation, the process should also be one of primary legislation.

In this instance, the primary legislation that might be envisaged would not detain the House forever or be particularly complex or difficult. Indeed, on Second Reading we saw how it was possible, with good will on all sides, to take all stages of a Bill through the House on one day. When changes are made with consensus in the House, the procedure is rapid, straightforward and achievable. Why can that procedure not be adopted for this legislation? Is it because of a national emergency, or will it? Has it not been possible to find parliamentary time to undertake what would be neat and precise Bills with all-party support to make the amendments that the Government want? Indeed, based on what has previously been achieved, would a brief piece of legislation taken on the Floor of the House not have agreement in all parts of it?

I am not persuaded, nor do I think I would easily be persuaded, that it is impossible to proceed through primary legislation for these aligning pieces of legislation. Clause 2 as drafted does not have to be included in the Bill, but the Government have chosen to do so. When all the proceedings have concluded, legislation will need to be in line with new procedures elsewhere on the statute book. That is not the issue; the issue is whether, in order to bring that legislation in line with whatever we have agreed, we effectively declare a quasi-national emergency and say that we have to adopt Henry VIII clauses. That would be quite wrong not only in this Bill, but in many other pieces of legislation in which I suspect the Government may be tempted to include them to get round the proper procedures in the House in the process of aligning our laws post Brexit.

Ideally, we would like simply to strike clause 2 out and say, “You should not do it in this way at all,” but frankly, that might be seen as wrecking the Bill, because a lot of other material would have to be written into the Bill in order to remove the provision fully. In the interests of making progress, and in the absence of what we think should be the final, proper procedure, we suggest in amendment 5 procedures that would not strike the clause out but would amend it very substantially, so that it would at least to some extent come back for parliamentary consideration.

In my view, that is probably still not good enough. There are still Henry VIII clauses in the Bill, but at least the amendment would go some way towards ameliorating the unacceptable way in which those clauses work at present. To my mind, that is the minimum change in the arrangements that the Minister should accept. If he cannot, we will want to pursue the matter, at least as far as a Division this afternoon.

Finally, I will say a brief word on amendment 6, which has been tabled essentially to remind the Secretary of State that at the time of writing, no draft regulations relating to Bill had appeared. I would have expected that to happen as an essential part of enabling proper scrutiny of a Bill to take place. However, after the amendment was tabled, as if by magic, the draft regulations were published at 4.30 pm last Friday—30 minutes before the close of play for the admissibility of amendments for this stage of the Bill. Happily I can report, having scrutinised them in record time, that they appear to be uncontroversial in their application, so I thank the Minister for finally arranging for them to be produced. It is not his fault that he was under such time constraints to slot the Bill into the legislative process when it was not really ready for examination, but I note, in finishing, that that is really not the way to do good legislation in this place.

Stephen Kerr: I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead). I still consider myself to be a relatively new Member, but I had the privilege to serve on the Public Bill Committee. It was a masterclass in how to oppose constructively, so I pay tribute to him and the skillset that he undoubtedly brings to his portfolio and to the added value that he brings to the legislative process. I am glad to say that because it is meant genuinely and sincerely. I understand from his comments that he will not press amendment 6 to a vote. On amendment 1, however, we have heard it repeated ad nauseam that there will be no reduction in or diminution of standards for the inspection criteria on nuclear safeguards. I am disposed to believe these commitments, which have been given in all manner of forums and contexts.

Amendment 4 deals with the allocation of resources to ensure that the ONR can meet its extra responsibilities for nuclear safeguarding in the UK. I believe, having listened to the Minister’s undertakings and to the witnesses from the ONR both in Committee and before the BEIS Select Committee, that there is more than adequate evidence of the Government’s commitment to ensuring that the inspectorate is appropriately resourced and has the required staffing levels and so forth.

Trudy Harrison: Does my hon. Friend know that the ONR has already begun the process of recruiting safeguarding inspectors?
Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that information.

One of the many highlights of the first three months I have enjoyed as a member of the Select Committee was our visit to the Hinkley Point C project, an immensely impressive project that I would encourage Members on both sides of the House to witness. It is an incredible undertaking—nothing short of a feat of modern engineering—and something we should all take great pride in. I was disappointed to hear the rather flippant comments about it from the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). It is a vital strategic project that will safeguard our nuclear security, so it was disappointing to hear him dismiss it, although I understand that SNP Members, as committed nationalists, are against all things nuclear, which is much to be regretted, particularly from a Scottish viewpoint.

One of the highlights of the trip was our visit to Bridgwater and Taunton College to see the partnering there on nuclear skills, whether nuclear construction or engineering. It was immensely encouraging to see so many young workers—men and women—preparing through apprenticeships for a career in nuclear. One of the most upsetting things about hearing Members speak negatively about such a vital and strategically important industry is the impact it has on young people. We had an excellent debate in the House just over a week ago on space. We talked about the space programme in the UK being recognised and understood—we learned it was worth about £16 billion and that 6% of the global spend on space was in the UK—and what a spaceport in Scotland, in Ayrshire, would do to excite the imaginations of our young men and women in relation to the possibilities of a career in that area.

The same is true of nuclear. We need young men and women to see nuclear as a viable career, and there, at Bridgwater and Taunton College, we saw the evidence of the investment in skills and capabilities that is essential for the future of the UK’s nuclear industry. There are very exciting career prospects for those who commit themselves to a career in the nuclear industry, and that is to be encouraged; we need those skills. I am confident that the immediate provisions are being made, in the short term but also in the intermediate term, to ensure that those skills and capabilities will exist, and we shall be able to staff the ONR with an inspectorate and all the other skilled specialists we will need over time.

4.30 pm

The Prime Minister made it clear in her Florence speech that the British position would be to seek a transitional implementation period of up to two years. That period is immensely valuable in the context of the Bill. As was mentioned earlier, we received evidence that it could take 18 to 24 months to train an inspector adequately, and up to five years for someone to reach the level of an in-depth specialist, so we will need that time. However, whatever the outcome of the negotiations on our future relationship with the European Union and its institutions, including Euratom, some interim measures would still be possible.

As the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey pointed out, we are on new territory, and it is possible for us to negotiate all kinds of new arrangements. I agree with him, in the widest context, that it is possible to reach a negotiated agreement that would take care of these matters. We are not an insignificant country, and ours is not an insignificant economy.

Drew Hendry: I am delighted to have given the hon. Gentleman so much material today. He seems to be fascinated by my words. He will concede, however, that I was talking in the context of our being foolish and reckless enough to leave both the EU and Euratom.

Stephen Kerr: That is interesting editing. I cannot recall word for word exactly what was said before and immediately after what the hon. Gentleman said, but I think that I clearly heard him say that it was possible, in these new circumstances, to negotiate new arrangements. We must indeed accept that we will need new arrangements, and that they will need to be negotiated. As was said earlier, we cannot take some of the skills off the shelf—I think Members will have to accept that such an arrangement does not currently exist—but I agree with him that anything is negotiable. I come from a background of sales negotiation, and that was one of the mantras by which we lived: “everything is negotiable”.

I think that when wise adult heads are brought to bear, definite win-win outcomes are possible, as they are in the context of the Bill and its subject matter. I hope very much that the Government will use their powers under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the powers that this Bill will confer on them to bring the appropriate measures to life at the right time, so that we can secure the continuity and the prosperity of the UK’s nuclear energy business.

Drew Hendry: As we have heard many times, and as the evidence has borne out, the industry is clearly desperate for the standards that we currently enjoy through Euratom to be maintained. We have heard time and again that the industry would prefer us to remain in Euratom or to have associate membership, but if that does not happen, which seems to be the direction in which we are going today, it has said that it would like the new standards to be the same as those of Euratom.

It is vital for us to secure a commitment that the UK agency will be able not only to cope with the new work but to obtain the necessary resources, at the levels that are required through Euratom. However, as I said earlier, I do not believe that that is achievable, given the challenges. Crucially, there are still not enough people with enough experience. No matter how much the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) wants to persuade children that science is a good idea, I do not think we have yet found a way to compress five years into two, and it will not be possible in that period to gain the experience nuclear inspectors require.

Two requirements still need to be met: one is for complete transparency in the process, so that those who have expressed concern and the industry can know what is happening; the other is, through the amendments, to get a guarantee that arrangements will be in place that ensure that nuclear safeguards are operated to the same standards as now. I am anti-nuclear and proud that my party is, too, but we have to protect people’s interests where the nuclear industry is concerned. Too many of us in the highlands remember the mess left at Dounreay. Anyone who wants to know what can go wrong in the nuclear industry should go up there and learn about what was left on the beaches and the radioactive material...
moved about in welly boots because the equipment had rusted, before the correct standards were put in place through Euratom.

Mr Vaizey: I cannot support the amendments, although I have a great deal of sympathy with the position set out by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead). The amendment I tabled with colleagues from both sides of the House to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill sought to ensure that the Government consulted fully on implementing a Euratom-like regime after we left, so I understand why he has tabled amendments to ensure that the Government are transparent in their dealings. I did not press my amendment to a vote because the Secretary of State and his very able Minister were clear about their responsibilities to keep the House informed about the arrangements being put in place to replicate what we have in Euratom; indeed, they published a written statement shortly after that debate and before the debate on Report, and they have committed to come to the House quarterly to make clear the progress being made. None the less, as I say, I have a great deal of sympathy for the Opposition’s argument.

I support the Bill because it puts in place some of the structures we will need to replace the arrangements we had as a member of Euratom. I have listened to much of the debate and heard some fine speeches, but however brilliant the speeches, I cannot help thinking that the entire debate takes place in a slightly Alice in Wonderland world. Over many months, I have made no secret of the fact that it is a source of deep and profound frustration for me and many colleagues that we are leaving Euratom. As I said in an intervention, we are leaving Euratom on a technicality. I urge any colleagues who are passionate about Brexit and the apparent freedom and greatness that it will bring back to this country not to try to wrap Euratom up in that thesis.

Euratom is a treaty that works extremely well. The UK is one of the world’s leading civil nuclear powers. Our industry is highly respected and essential to the development not only of current nuclear power, but of nuclear fusion, which is where my interest comes in, owing to the research institute at Culham. Under the nuclear fusion, which is where my interest comes in, owing to the research institute at Culham. Under the Bill, we will engage over the next 18 months in a simple exercise of replicating almost as exactly as we can the arrangements we now enjoy under Euratom. We are not taking back control. We are not regaining sovereignty. We are not going out into the world as a global power. We are simply going to replicate perfectly serviceable arrangements that already exist, and we are doing so on a technicality. I am not making any particular criticism. This is simply an observation of the collateral damage that Brexit has caused to a particular sector. It will be expensive and time-consuming.

As I have said, I wanted to speak to the amendments to make it clear why I was not supporting them and to take the opportunity to thank Secretary of State and the Minister for all their work. They have been candid and open with me and the Chairman of the BEIS Committee and with other concerned hon. Members on both sides of the House about the work they are doing to try to limit any damage to our nuclear industry. They really have worked tirelessly on this issue. From my perspective—other Members might not agree—I think that they have listened and taken on board our concerns.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if there were an opportunity for us to seek some sort of associate membership of Euratom once we have left, what should be done to do that? That would minimise the cost to the UK taxpayer, unlike having to completely replicate the regime over here. I also echo his thanks to the Secretary of State and his ministerial team for the way in which they have approached this matter.

Mr Vaizey: I understand what my hon. Friend is seeking, but the point has already been made that there is in effect no real associate membership of Euratom at the moment. Ukraine and Switzerland have what is described as associate membership, but it is certainly nowhere close to the kind of arrangements that we have with Euratom now. The Government intend to have as close a relationship as possible with Euratom, whether we call it associate membership or anything else, and we will have to put in place our agreements with the other nuclear states with which we currently enjoy a relationship under Euratom—notably Australia, Canada, Japan and the United States of America. That work is under way, although the timing of the implementation of those agreements is unfortunately not in our gift. It is in the gift of other legislatures that might not be as efficient as this august legislature, but I know that we want to replicate those agreements.

I am particularly pleased that the Prime Minister did not follow the example of Watford, the football team of my hon. Friend the Minister, and change the manager unnecessarily in the past two weeks. I am extremely pleased that he remains in his place scoring goals for the nuclear industry, and I look forward to co-operating with him for many years to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Does no one else wish to speak? I call the Minister.

Richard Harrington: I am as speechless as you are on this occasion, Madam Deputy Speaker. Maybe hon. Members on both sides of the House said all that they wanted to say on the first group of amendments. I was also speechless at the compliments that have been paid to me very justifiably—[Laughter.] The compliments were justifiable in the case of the Secretary of State, although they were rather exaggerated in my case. I do hope that the Hansard reporters can sort out my language on that; otherwise the Watford Observer will be interested not just in the comments on the Watford football team’s change of management but in what could be distortions of what I have just said about the compliments paid to the Secretary of State.

I should like to move on. I seriously thank hon. Members for their amendments in this group. They address a range of practical issues around the Bill and the implementation of the nuclear safeguards regime. I shall turn first to amendment 1, which is a very good place to start, as the famous song says. It is important that we have made a commitment to this effect on several occasions. As I have said, and as the Secretary of State has said in his written statement, the Government are committed to ensuring that the new regime “is as comprehensive and robust as that currently provided by Euratom.” It will not be a light version of it.
On inspections, the Nuclear Safeguards Bill is the essential first step in setting up a domestic nuclear safeguards regime. The detail of the regime, including further details in respect of the powers for safeguard inspectors, will be provided in the regulations that underpin the Bill. The pre-consultation draft regulations that were published on Friday provided details of the ONR’s role in respect of nuclear safeguards, and it is important to note that the inspections only form one part of the overall safeguard regime.

4.45 pm

The establishment of effective accountability and control systems and the numerous reporting requirements were outlined in the pre-consultation draft regulations. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), the shadow Minister, noted in his eloquent way that the draft regulations came last Friday, but I feel that they were spiritually, if not physically, with him beforehand, and I believe that he read them comprehensively over the weekend. There are two people on whom I can rely to do that: the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State. I can also rely on myself, but we have dealt with my issues before, following what was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey).

The regulations contain key components by which assurance can be gained and the UK can demonstrate broad equivalence with the current regime under Euratom. As such, the draft regulations demonstrate how we intend to create a domestic regime that will be of equivalent effectiveness when compared with the existing European arrangements. The initial drafts have been provided in a spirit of transparency to show how the regulations are developing and to provide an opportunity for early engagement with Parliament, industry and other stakeholders. We expect the draft regulations and the regime to continue to be developed before they are consulted on publicly. We want to ensure that the ONR’s safeguard inspectors are able to do their job. We want to ensure that they have the powers to do so, and we welcome constructive engagement with the draft regulations to ensure that that is the case.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions on amendment 4, which addresses the issue of consultation on and preparedness for the implementation of the new domestic civil nuclear safeguards regime established by the Bill. On consultation, the Government have had regular discussions with the nuclear industry since the referendum. In September, I held a representative industry stakeholder forum, which provided me and my team with an opportunity to hear the views and concerns of industry leaders, as mentioned today, and to provide them with an update on the progress of our preparations to leave Euratom. In December, I attended the Nuclear Industry Association annual event, where my officials provided a progress update on Euratom, including on the current status of international negotiations, the Bill and the capacity-building measures within the ONR. We are also engaging with civil society through our nuclear non-governmental organisation forum, which I attended last week—I was accused of being a tool of the Nuclear Industry Association—along with Members from both sides of the House, excluding the Scottish National party.

We will continue our constructive engagement with the nuclear stakeholder community, as we have done throughout the passage of the Bill and will continue to do throughout the Euratom negotiations. I have planned a series of roundtables for 2018-19, and the next is scheduled for late next month. Officials at BEIS are working hard with the industry and other interested parties and are providing regular updates on progress, and the Government and industry are working together for the good of the country.

The National Audit Office plays an incredibly important role in all this, but mandatory consultation with it on nuclear safeguards regulations is not appropriate because the NAO already has an established process for scrutinising public spending for Parliament. We have worked with a range of governmental organisations as we develop legislative proposals and will continue to engage with interested parties as the new regime is implemented. The public consultation on the draft regulations, which will take place this year, will not be the first opportunity for stakeholders to be made aware of the Government’s intentions nor will it be their only opportunity to provide the Government with their views.

I will now turn to the subject of the ONR’s capability and readiness, as mentioned in many contributions today. I understand and agree that Parliament must be assured of the ONR’s capability and readiness to take on these new responsibilities in relation to nuclear safeguards. I have consistently stated on Second Reading and in Committee that we will allocate the necessary funding for the ONR to set up this new domestic regime for civil nuclear safeguards. I disagree with the Prospect union’s view, expressed to hon. Members in Committee and elsewhere, that that is not the case.

The Department works closely with the ONR on a daily basis to ensure it will be in a position to take on the role and responsibilities required to help the UK’s domestic civil nuclear safeguards regime to meet international safeguards and nuclear non-proliferation standards when the Euratom arrangements no longer apply to the UK. We are monitoring the progress of the ONR’s delivery plans through our governance process to identify delivery risk and to work with the ONR on mitigating those risks.

We have been transparent about the costs and resources required to set up a domestic civil nuclear safeguards regime. In October 2017, we published estimates of what those costs will be in the explanatory notes to the Bill. The relevant section, “Financial implications of the Bill,” explains that the Department will allocate the necessary funding to the ONR—about £10 million to set up the regime, and ongoing costs of about £10 million a year. I assure the House that we are keeping the estimates under review as the details of the regime develop.

The ONR is in the process of developing an expanded safeguards function, which involves the recruitment and training of additional inspectors. The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), and others mentioned the two-year and five-year time periods. Some people with a lot of experience in this field are being recruited, and they clearly would need two years or less. The five-year period involves a very high level of training. It is not possible to generalise, but I accept that some people, such as apprentices and graduates, will require much longer to train.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to the Minister for pointing that out, but can he give us an indication of what proportion of experienced staff, versus trainees, he intends to have within two years?
Richard Harrington: I am afraid I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that information, not because I do not want to give it to him, but because I do not want inadvertently to mislead him. If I may, I will drop him a line over the next couple of days with the exact information, as I have just done on the number of people recruited to date, as mentioned in the first group of amendments—I think the figure was 11. I do not want to give a rough estimate on such an important question.

The recruitment campaign has been launched and will continue throughout this year.

I will briefly address the issue of timing, not of this speech, but of the assessment of readiness to implement a domestic safeguards regime on withdrawal, because it has been raised by several hon. Members. I have made it clear on several occasions that the Government are committed to establishing a robust domestic nuclear safeguards regime of a standard broadly equivalent to Euratom standards in order to retain public and trading partner confidence in the nuclear industry, about which we are very proud. We are working closely with the ONR to ensure it will be in a position to regulate this new regime.

Based on current progress, I believe we will be in a position to deliver a domestic regime to international standards by March 2019, if required, and that such a regime will be able to satisfy the International Atomic Energy Agency and our international trading partners.

John Woodcock: I listened carefully to what the Minister has just said, and he seems to be setting up the UK to follow a minimum of the IAEA standards, and not necessarily the higher Euratom standards. Is that the case?

Richard Harrington: No. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s version of what I have said. We want a Rolls-Royce standard, the best possible standard we can have.

The negotiations on implementation are due to begin in the spring and, as hon. Members know, we will be reporting to the House regularly on progress.

Let me turn to the Henry VIII power. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) has mentioned his dislike for Henry VIII powers. This is a tiny Henry VIII power—a Henry VIII who has been on a diet for a long time—that is limited to amending references in the Nuclear Safeguards and Electricity (Finance) Act 1978, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2000 and the Nuclear Safeguards (Notification) Regulations 2004 in order to accommodate safeguards agreements with the IAEA. Those amended references will enable the IAEA to carry out its activities in the UK, including by providing legal cover for the UK activities of its inspectors. We have to be able to update that legislation so that it contains the correct references for new safeguards arrangements with the IAEA, which have not yet been made but will be in the near future. Without amendment, the existing provisions will become ineffective when the current agreements no longer apply, which would leave us in breach of any new international safeguards regime.

The detailed amendments will not be known until the agreements are in place, so the power that we are asking for is essential if we are to ensure that the UK has a safeguards regime that complies with its future international obligations when Euratom’s safeguards arrangements no longer apply. It is a very narrow power and I do not think that it is relevant to the general discussions that the House has had on Henry VIII powers. I hope that Members on both sides of the House are satisfied and that they will not seek to press their amendments.

Dr Whitehead: I have listened carefully to the Minister this afternoon and would like to thank him for the constructive way he took the Bill through Committee. My personal view is that is how we should legislate in practice. He has played a substantial part in making the process as good as it could be. However, just as I do not blame him personally for the fact that his football team recently scored a completely illegal goal—it was hand-balled—against my team and deprived it of two points, I do not blame him for the way the Bill has been constructed. He has attempted to justify parts of it that he is unable to amend, but nevertheless their construction, in my view, remains deeply unsatisfactory.

I am happy to withdraw amendment 1 and not to press the amendments that relate to the staffing and funding of the ONS—the Secretary of State has committed himself to reporting quarterly on progress with Euratom, which was the subject of one of our amendments in Committee, for which I am grateful—but I will press amendment 5 to a vote, because it relates to the Henry VIII clauses, which are a fundamental defect in the structure of the Bill. We wish to put it on the record that we would not wish such arrangements to be proceeded with under other circumstances. I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment 1.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

Power to amend legislation relating to nuclear safeguards

Amendment proposed: 5, page 4, line 13, at end insert—

‘(1A) The Secretary of State may only exercise powers under this section at the point at which amendment of any of the legislation in subsection (1) becomes necessary in order to complete the process of transposition of responsibility for nuclear safeguarding from EURATOM to the Office for Nuclear Regulation, and for no other purpose.

(1B) Upon exercising the power set out in subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on the operation of the power.’—(Dr Whitehead.)

This amendment would limit circumstances under which the Secretary of State may exercise certain powers in this section and requires a report to be laid before Parliament.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 254, Noes 295.

Division No. 107

[4.59 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane Abrahams, Debbie Alexander, Heidi Ali, Rushanara Amesbury, Mike Antoniazzi, Tonia Ashworth, Jonathan Austin, Ian Bailey, Mr Adrian Barron, rh Sir Kevin Benn, rh Hilary Betts, Mr Clive Black, Mhairi Blackford, rh Ian Blackman, Kirsty Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta Blomfield, Paul Brabin, Tracy Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben Brake, rh Tom
Nuclear Safeguards Bill

Godsiff, Mr Roger
Glindon, Mary
Gibson, Patricia
Gethins, Stephen
George, Ruth
Gardiner, Barry
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gilhins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Presi Kur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollins, Katie
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Azfar
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lindem, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morriss, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Norriss, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Mr Marie
Robinson, Mrr
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afrife, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smithy, Karin
Smell, Gareth
Sorrell, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittord, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Bolsover, Nick
Boreham, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowdie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cawthorn, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

May I begin by thanking right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for their constructive contributions during the Bill’s parliamentary stages to date? I thank everyone who has worked on it, including those who served on the Bill Committee, the House authorities, the experts who gave oral evidence in

Question accordingly negatived.

Third Reading

5.13 pm
The swift progress of the Bill, and the supportive discussions in the House about it, have aided our negotiations with the EU, the IAEA and third countries. We have already held several rounds of discussions on Euratom issues in the first phase of the negotiations with the EU, and there has been good progress. Negotiations with the IAEA on future voluntary agreements for the application of civil nuclear safeguards have also been constructive, and substantial progress has been made. It is expected that these new agreements will be put to the IAEA board of governors for ratification later this year. Negotiations on nuclear co-operation agreements have also proceeded significantly. In particular, constructive progress has already been made in negotiations with key partners, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan.
In the light of all this, I am grateful to the House for the scrutiny it has given to the Bill and the expert eye it has cast over it. The broad cross-party consensus that we have seen sends an important signal to our international partners that the United Kingdom will absolutely remain a leading and responsible nuclear state. It allows us to reassure the United Kingdom’s very important nuclear industry and the nuclear research community that we absolutely remain committed to supporting them to maintain the United Kingdom’s status as a world leader. Taking early action to have ready a domestic civil nuclear safeguards regime is both responsible and in the national interest, and I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

5.21 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): This is an important and necessary Bill, as the Secretary of State confirmed, to ensure that a contingency is available should the Government’s negotiations with the European Union and Euratom fail. That was why we did not oppose it on Second Reading, and it is why we will not oppose it on Third Reading tonight.

That does not mean, however, that we do not continue to have concerns about the Government’s approach and about whether there was any necessity at all for the Bill. On Second Reading, I made the case that it should be possible—or would have been possible—to retain the UK’s membership, or to secure a close association with Euratom that would allow the continuation of nuclear safeguarding. The Opposition still think that continued membership of Euratom or a close associate status is both achievable and necessary for the most efficient continued working of a whole raft of procedures relating to the nuclear industry, not just to safeguarding.

I am pleased that the Government seem to have acknowledged that negotiating a close association would be the best outcome for our nuclear industry and that Bill does not constitute a replacement for all Euratom’s functions. The Secretary of State’s written statement on 11 January set out that the Government’s strategy was to “seek a close association with Euratom and to include Euratom in any implementation period negotiated as part of our wider exit discussions”.

It went on to say that the “exact nature of the period will be subject to forthcoming negotiations”.—[Official Report, 11 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 9-10WS]

Given that statement, I wonder why the Government did not accept a number of Labour’s proposals: new clause 1, which would simply have asked the Secretary of State to “seek to secure” a transition period during which the UK could secure an association with Euratom, or indeed build any domestic capability; and new clause 2, which would have established that the provisions of the Bill are contingency arrangements if it proves impossible to establish an association with Euratom.

I point out that we could have been more legally robust in our language, especially in new clause 1. We could, for example, have used the words “best endeavours”, but we appreciate the issues that the Secretary of State faces and would have given him the opportunity simply of saying that he would try to secure a transitional period. We are sad that new clause 1 was not accepted today, but none the less I appreciate that the Secretary of State has listened somewhat to Labour’s concerns and promised to report back every three months about overall progress on Euratom in the EU negotiations. As three months from the first statement will be 11 April, which is in the middle of the Easter recess, I look forward to receiving an update on 29 March.

My Front-Bench colleagues have argued that a transitional agreement is vital if we are to ensure that the UK is physically able to provide a functioning domestic safeguarding regime. The evidence taken by the Public Bill Committee highlighted that particular concern of the industry. Dr Golshan of the ONR said: “given our membership of Euratom, it has not been necessary for the UK and ONR to build capacity and resilience in this area.” She added: “a transitional arrangement will be extremely helpful.” That is not least because the training of inspectors takes several years, as outlined by the representatives of Prospect and Unite the union. Indeed, when she was asked about training, Dr Golshan said: “We have started that process, but it is a long road and I am not going to sit here and pretend that it is all going to be a smooth run.”—[Official Report, Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee, 31 October 2017; c. 5-9, Q3, 8 and 16.]

We have ongoing concerns about the timely replacement of inspectors, so we urge Ministers to agree a transitional arrangement to prevent full obligations from being placed on an unready ONR. The Government did not see fit to accept amendment 4, which would have required the Secretary of State to declare that the ONR had the resources necessary to take on extra responsibilities for nuclear safeguarding in the UK, but I hope they will listen to this plea.

I will say a little word on the powers that the Bill will hand to the Government—the very small Henry VIII provisions, as they were referred to previously. The Minister did not see fit to accept our amendments that attempted to curtail the executive powers conferred by the Bill, but he promised to publish regulations ahead of Report. He did indeed publish those regulations, but not until Friday afternoon—beyond the deadline to table any further amendments to the Bill. I would just like to record on record that although in the event of the publication of the regulations, the timing was rather cheeky and not altogether in the spirit of the constructive approach that both sides have taken to the Bill.

I associate myself with the words of the Secretary of State in thanking all who have spoken throughout our consideration of the Bill, as well as all members of the Public Bill Committee. I want to thank the Front-Bench teams, including the Secretary of State and the Minister. I think it is fair to say that they have been in listening mode. I especially thank my Labour colleagues, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who have worked diligently on the finer details of all things relating to nuclear safeguarding. Finally, I want to thank the Public Bill Office and the Clerks for all their tremendous support, as ever.

5.27 pm

James Heappey: I sense that the Bill is accelerating towards the other place, so I will not speak for long. I congratulate Front Benchers on both sides of the House and all who have spoken in our debates. As with so many debates on energy in this place, there has been broad consensus, with disagreement about small details around the edges. It is pleasing to be part of such a
constructive approach to an important area of policy without partisan divides getting in the way, as they sometimes do in other areas of policy.

The nuclear industry has cultivated a small but perfectly formed and enthusiastic band of representatives in this place. Colleagues on both sides of the House have enjoyed the industry’s hospitality and benefited from its briefing in order that we might understand the issue, which is important for the industry, and have scrutinised the legislation in the House to ensure that it meets the industry’s aims.

I am glad that the Bill has not been amended today, because I think it does exactly what it should be doing in the first place. It is vital that we maintain the safeguards and reputation of the nuclear industry. It is an industry in which even the smallest mistake is unacceptable, and we in this country have a fine reputation for delivering almost immaculate standards of safety, so it is right that Members on both sides of the House want to be reassured that, when dealing with the important issue of our membership of Euratom, absolutely no compromises are made over safeguarding and the safety of the industry.

The Government have been clear, as has the EU, that the treaties of the EU and Euratom are so intertwined that it is impossible to remain a member of Euratom while leaving the EU. Some Opposition Members, who are no longer in their places, made the point earlier that we should at least seek to remain in Euratom. I do not disagree—I think that would be the best possible outcome—but what I do disagree with is the idea that, in amending the Bill to secure that commitment, we should take a bit of a long shot on what has been unachievable for many other countries that are not within the EU, at the cost of providing the industry with what it has been so clear with us that it wants. I am glad that we have not done that, and I have every confidence that the Secretary of State and his team will seek, if not full membership, the closest possible thing to it that is allowable while meeting the terms of our wider Brexit ambitions. I am also glad that, since I spoke on Second Reading, when there was a great deal of rather unfortunate debate about things such as medical isotopes, such fake news has disappeared from the debate and we are all now much clearer about what the Bill does and does not impact on.

The nuclear industry is of huge importance to this country and my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), in his lengthy remarks earlier, mentioned the importance of nuclear to our energy mix. He is not in the Chamber to hear the answer to his question, but I believe that about 25% of our energy needs today are provided by nuclear, either within the United Kingdom or through our interconnection with France. That is an important contribution, and until we can fully unlock the potential of energy storage, demand response and other flexibility measures, that provision of base-load is absolutely essential to the industrial powerhouse of our nation, so we should support the industry.

We must also ensure—this is the one constituency point I want to cheekily make on Third Reading, Madam Deputy Speaker—that the industrial opportunity of the new nuclear programme genuinely benefits the places in which that nuclear fleet is being built. We must ensure that not just things such as catering companies, accommodation and transport, but meaningful engineering, technology and high skills-based industries, are included in the supply chain for the construction of the new nuclear fleet. Somerset needs more than a fantastic caterer as a legacy of the construction of Hinkley.

The only other point that has come out today that needs to be underlined is that the chairwoman of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and other Opposition Members said that there was some debate about whether the ONR would be ready on day one to deliver the standards that Euratom has required of our industry. My response to their concern is not that we should legislate to mitigate the threat, but that we should encourage those on the Front Bench to lean on the ONR and support it in every way possible to ensure that it has the capacity to deliver such safeguarding on the first day of its responsibilities.

That is all that I wish to say, apart from congratulating Ministers on their stewardship of the Bill. The Secretary of State, who I am delighted is still in the Chamber, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and the Under-Secretary are enthusiastic fellow travellers on our route to a zero-carbon energy system. I am glad that they have brought this important piece of legislation through the House, and I am glad that it will not be opposed on Third Reading. I look forward to working with Front Benchers and colleagues on both sides of the House on other energy policy Bills in the future.

5.34 pm

Drew Hendry: If power over these issues, as they affect Scotland, were in the purview of the Scottish Parliament, I am certain that Scotland would be staying within Euratom. However, here we are, and this Bill is going through this House. The Minister knows that I respect him on this issue; he has tried to engage with me very positively, and I thank him for doing that.

I would like to say that the Government and the Secretary of State have written in some checks, but I see no evidence of any. However, I do see hopes, promises and assurances. In the fullness of time, the Government will be judged on what happens to nuclear safeguards when their agency is set up and on how well it performs. For the sake of the industry, the safeguards and the people involved in it, I hope that it is a success.

5.35 pm

Trudy Harrison: The Bill is absolutely essential to the nuclear industry. Without it, after we leave the European Union, our nuclear industry would collapse. As I said earlier, it would be economically crushing not to have a safeguards regime in place. That would have catastrophic implications for every part of the country, which would be felt across the whole sector.

Following the construction and successful commissioning of the world’s first nuclear power station—Calder Hall, in my constituency, back in 1957—Euratom was formed by the Euratom treaty. It was as important then as it is now to apply civil nuclear safeguards in the UK. The UK has committed, as a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, to have nuclear safeguards in place—a clear demonstration to the international community that civil nuclear material is used only for civil activities.

The Bill enables the UK to set up a domestic safeguards regime to meet our international commitments on safeguards and nuclear non-proliferation standards.
Without the Bill, the movement of materials, fuel—including spent fuel—and components, and even the conversations about materials, fuel and components, could not take place.

Euratom provides the basis for the regulation of civilian nuclear activity in the UK, including fuel supply, waste management and co-operation between nuclear states. It implements a system of safeguards, controls the supply of fissile materials in Euratom member states, guarantees high safety standards and funds international research into nuclear fission and fusion. It is also critical for nuclear co-operation across the world.

In a community such as mine, where the income of 55% of the population depends directly or indirectly on work in the nuclear industry, and in our country, where more than 20% of energy is generated by nuclear power plants, not having measures in place as we leave the EU and Euratom would be unthinkable. An effective safeguards regime is necessary for Sellafield’s operations, for the low level waste repository’s business, for the national nuclear laboratory’s research and for the development of Moorside, the new-build nuclear power plant that is expected to be constructed adjacent to Sellafield. All of that is in Copeland.

I have visited 70-something businesses in my constituency, including large global operations now based in Copeland—some of the biggest names in international industry—and our many small and medium-sized enterprises to listen to their concerns and ambitions for the future. Each and every one is wholly dependent on being able to trade globally. Those businesses are not just critical to that sector, but integral to the socioeconomic fabric of daily life. Of the 1,020 apprenticeships that were started last year, the vast majority were in industry and engineering connected with our nuclear sector. But it goes further: those companies are proud, passionate parts of our society, donating to charities, supporting local organisations and providing enormous socioeconomic benefits. I am proud to say that tomorrow, Sellafield is sponsoring “A Taste of Cumbria” in the Jubilee Room here in Parliament, such is its commitment to its community and county.

I cannot emphasise sufficiently strongly how vital the Bill is for Copeland and Cumbria, and indeed for the whole country. I was delighted that the Government committed further to the Joint European Torus and the international thermonuclear experimental reactor projects. The Bill is equally necessary for research and development and for science and innovation.

Our nuclear industry is an international marketplace, which means that we need in place not only domestic regulations but bilateral agreements with countries such as the US, Japan, Kazakhstan and Canada—the list goes on. We cannot even begin to discuss bilateral agreements without there being a domestic safeguards regime in place. We need one to carry out decommissioning work across the country and to consider exporting the skills and products being developed. It is estimated that overseas reactor decommissioning will total £250 billion over coming decades, according to the Government’s “The UK’s Nuclear Future” document.

The Calder Hall reactor I referred to earlier now requires decommissioning. This is a fantastic opportunity for us to benefit from the skills and experience gained from decommissioning but to leverage wider UK, European and worldwide decommissioning. The iconic golf ball structure at Sellafield, the Windscale advanced gas-cooled reactor, was the prototype power reactor for the 14 EDF Energy AGRs, which currently supply about one fifth of the UK’s electricity. Its core heat exchangers and associated equipment have all been safely decommissioned and removed, thanks to Government-funded projects, demonstrating that a power reactor can be successfully decommissioned.

I hope that Calder Hall can be decommissioned as a priority and a new breed of small modular reactors installed in its place to ensure that we are at the forefront of nuclear technological developments once again. Small modular reactors and advanced modular reactors offer the chance for UK nuclear expertise and manufacturing to lead the world, but we need the Bill to ensure that we are globally compliant with safeguarding, in addition to security and safety.

On the role of the ONR, it is important to understand the differences between safeguarding, security and safety, all of which are critical to the secure and compliant running of our civil nuclear industry. Currently, the ONR has responsibility for security and oversees the civil nuclear constabulary with regard to security. Bringing responsibility for safeguarding under this one organisation would seem to bring benefits of shared knowledge and skills and combined experience. The ONR is an independent regulator that was made a statutory public body under the Energy Act 2013, which sets out its role, functions and powers.

International oversight will be a key part of the future regime, so I am pleased that the UK is seeking to conclude new arrangements with the IAEA. It is absolutely vital that the IAEA retain its right to inspect all civil nuclear facilities and continue to receive all current safeguards reporting. That will ensure that international verification of our safeguards activity continues to be robust. We must retain our reputation for excellence to ensure that companies in other countries, such as KEPCO in South Korea, which we anticipate will become the new owner of NuGen, want to do business with us.

Our country is a pioneer and global leader in this area and has an enviable safety record. The Centre of Nuclear Excellence in my constituency and all the businesses and livelihoods that are utterly reliant upon an effective safeguarding regime need this Bill. I hope that the UK will continue to play a leading role in the development of international nuclear security and safety standards, including through the IAEA, and I commend the Government’s work thus far. In particular, I would like to thank the Secretary of State, the Minister and his team for answering questions put to me by my community and businesses, including some that have trained Euratom safeguards inspectors—such is the level of expertise in Copeland. I commend the Bill and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak.

5.43 pm

Layla Moran: I find it hard to believe that we have finally got to this point, having attended every sitting on the Bill, apart from the Public Bill Committee. As a former physics teacher, I must say that it has been wonderful to hear so many Members talk about all things physics. That is always a pleasure.

The Liberal Democrats and I will, of course, be supporting the Bill, but I do have some questions that I hope the Minister will answer. I echo what has been said
across the House about the constructive way in which the Bill has gone through. I appreciate that. As a relatively new Member, this is how I imagined Bills would pass—with lots of conversations, concessions and so forth—so I thank him for that.

It seems to me that the House has achieved broad consensus on most parts of the Bill, and that the Bill is necessary as a contingency measure. I am all for having a contingency planning mechanism to deal with matters that are out of our control, but I think it worth my saying again that we did not have to be in this position. We did not have to leave Euratom—or, at least, the legal case is still being contested. If the Government have been told otherwise and it is set in stone, I ask them to release the legal advice, which would put that argument to bed.

My constituents, many of whom work in the industry, are still crying out for certainty and clarity, but time is running out. I know that the Minister disagrees with the Liberal Democrats’ position of wishing to stay in Euratom, but I urge him to reconsider. So much about the Brexit process seems to be groupthink at its worst. We can still change our mind, but if we are not going to do that, we should at the very least make the crucial admission that this is about the red line of the European Court of Justice. That is the critical issue: that is the main red line that we are not allowed to cross. It was a choice, not a fact, that that was a consequence of the referendum.

If the Government cannot or will not change their mind, I am reassured by what the Secretary of State said in a written statement earlier this month about seeking the closest possible associate membership, and by his warm words about the Joint European Torus and the international thermonuclear experimental reactor—not least because those contracts will be worth billions to the UK over the next few decades and are vital to the local economy, particularly in the Abingdon area of my constituency. He also seeks “open trade arrangements for nuclear goods”, the ability to ensure that materials cross borders “without disruption”, and “maintaining close…cooperation…on nuclear safety.”

It is true that Euratom does not directly govern the issue of radioisotopes, but the Minister will be well aware that I am still deeply concerned about the issue. The institution of “a” customs union, rather than “the” customs union, will put blocks at the border, and, because of the short half-lives involved, there will be disruption unless we are very clear about how we will mitigate it.

I look forward to the regular updates that the Minister has said he will give, but has he considered increasing their frequency, at least to begin with? One of my main concerns is that while the Brexit negotiations will continue until the start of next year, Austria will take over the presidency of Euratom very soon, and the heavy lifting really ought to be done before it takes the helm, because there will still be some problems for us. Will the Minister consider giving more frequent, earlier updates to let us know how the negotiations are going before Austria takes over? The issue is causing a huge amount of consternation throughout the industry, and throughout the House.

As the Minister knows, to ensure that the JET has a future we need to guarantee the 2018-19 work programme by the middle of this year. Again, I should like some updates on how we are to achieve that. It is not just about the money; it is also about ensuring that nuclear scientists have full access to the schemes in the future, not just in the next two years but in the next five and 10. We also need some assurances, albeit not from the Minister’s Department, about the movement of nuclear scientists. Those assurances are not yet written in stone, but this matters to the scientists, because they are extremely saleable.

I accept that the Bill is needed, because it is better for us to be safe than sorry, but I wish that we did not have to do this at all.

5.48 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I congratulate the ministerial team on their successful navigation, which has allowed the Bill to reach this stage. It is a key piece of legislation that will safeguard Britain’s international reputation as a responsible nuclear state once we have left Euratom. I believe that there is potential for significant inward investment in the UK in the post-Brexit era. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) about the impacts that the nuclear industry already has in this country, but I think that we can do more.

The Government have been clear throughout the passage of the Bill that they will work to establish a close and effective working relationship with Euratom after the UK leaves the organisation, including close association on matters such as research, training and trade. Ministers have made no secret of their ambitions for the nuclear sector, and I support those ambitions. We have an opportunity for some of the UK’s leading companies to be at the forefront of world-leading new nuclear technology.

During the Bill’s passage, Ministers have been consistent in reassuring the House that leaving Euratom in no way diminishes the UK’s nuclear ambition. The announcement by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), in December of a new £86 million fund to establish a national fusion technology platform demonstrates the Government’s continued commitment to nuclear research and development, which will be welcomed by a number of my constituents who work in the nuclear sector.

The launch of the small modular reactor competition in 2016 is another example of the importance the Government attach to the UK’s civil nuclear industry to provide a secure, clean and affordable source of domestic electricity that can also be exported overseas. The UK small modular reactor consortium, led by Rolls-Royce, estimates that the design, development and production of a fleet of small modular reactors would create up to 40,000 skilled nuclear supply chain jobs and add over £100 billion to our economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, our young people need to know that there is a future in the industry; they need that certainty to start on their career pathway. As the centre of Rolls-Royce’s nuclear operation in the UK, Derby has the potential to become a world leader in new nuclear technology, with the potential benefits extending across the wider region, including to my constituency. I will therefore follow closely the progress of the small modular reactor competition in the coming weeks and months.
The Bill will strengthen the UK as an independent global nuclear power, reflecting the Government’s ambitions for the sector.

5.52 pm

Rebecca Pow: I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and all other colleagues who have spoken today in what I am sure everyone agrees has been a fascinating cross-party discussion. I want to contribute to debate because the Bill deals with a crucial issue that affects every single one of us and the safety of our nation. Getting the agenda and the legal framework right as we take the historic step of exiting the EU is imperative, because leaving the EU means also leaving Euratom—the European Atomic Energy Community—the body that sets the nuclear safeguards regime.

The Bill gives us the tools to ensure that an effective nuclear safeguards regime is established, enabling us to continue to meet international standards for nuclear safety, while maintaining the UK’s reputation as a responsible nuclear state. I have raised the question how we cope with leaving Euratom since the start of the discussions on EU withdrawal, always stressing that leaving the EU must not result in a weakening of our nuclear safeguards, on which we all rely and which are instantly recognisable on the global stage. I have often referred to the matter in wider speeches on the environment, because it is all related to the environment and is so important to us all.

I am confident that the Government have made it clear that future nuclear safeguards arrangements will continue to provide the quality, safety and robustness provided under Euratom and that we will continue to co-operate on standards. Our domestic regime will meet agreements are reached.

The ONR, which already regulates nuclear safety and security, is the obvious route. It is also important to keep legislation relating to nuclear safeguards updated as they change on the international stage. The Bill will give the Secretary of State powers to do just that by updating existing international agreements once new agreements are reached.

Our nuclear industry is second to none on the world stage. It has a fine reputation, which we must maintain. Our standards have been a major draw in attracting investors to the nuclear industry in this country. Obviously, I am going to cite the Hinkley Point example, with its Chinese investment. One of the reasons that the Chinese want to engage with us is that we have very high standards on nuclear. That shows us off well on the wider stage and reflects well on us. Hinkley Point is the largest development site in the whole of Europe. I liken it to a James Bond film set. It is absolutely unbelievable how huge the development is. It needs to be seen to be believed. In energy terms, the power station will deliver 7% of our baseload energy, and it is low carbon, which is exactly the kind of energy that we are promoting, alongside all the other renewables. It is a clean source of energy.

Hinkley Point is not in my constituency but adjacent to it, and it has a massive knock-on effect for the people in Taunton Deane, from managers to engineers and from bus drivers to the caterers mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey). Ultimately, 26,000 people will be employed on the site. The industry is spawning many other jobs and creating a whole generation of nuclear businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash mentioned that she had a similar situation in her constituency with her micro-nuclear plants.

The first nuclear degree is operating partly from University Centre Somerset, which is in Taunton in my constituency. It is sponsored by EDF and the Ministry of Defence. It is critical that the industry should grow and enable all the young people who are doing this training to have a future. That is why the Bill is so important. We need the right checks and balances, so that we can go forward into a really positive future and be a world-leading industry. In mirroring Euratom, we are going to regulate civilian nuclear activity in the UK, including fuel supply, waste management—mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison)—and co-operation between nuclear states, which will be essential. I am confident that, through the ONR, we will achieve that, as well as new agreements with the IAEA.

I want briefly to touch on the subject of radioisotopes, because it has been raised with me by constituents. I welcome the cross-party work that is going on to ensure that there is no interruption in the continuity of supply of radioisotopes as we exit the EU. The Government are rightly listening on this. There seems to have been a lot of scaremongering, which is frankly not helpful. On nuclear research, the UK is a world leader in promising nuclear fusion technologies and we must maintain that lead. We must have the arrangements that the Government are negotiating, so that we can continue to participate on the world stage and attract the right nuclear brains to this country. I fully support the Bill. Nuclear safety and security are issues that deserve the utmost attention, and I am sure that the Bill will achieve its aims and set the Rolls-Royce standards mentioned by the Minister. I am optimistic that we will get the right system in place to keep us all safe.

5.58 pm

Stephen Kerr: I shall make just a few brief comments. I paid my compliments earlier to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and I also want to pay tribute to the Minister, who has conducted the passage of this Bill with great aplomb, dignity and good humour. That has been much appreciated. Like the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), I have attended all the debates on the Bill in the Chamber and in Committee. As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, under the very able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), I have also had the benefit of attending several hearings at which we received evidence on this subject.

Leaving Euratom is actually a matter of some regret for me and probably for many Members on both sides of the House. I am not one of those people who...
supports the Government’s programme of leaving the European Union without appreciating that some aspects of being part of the EU have been intensely beneficial to the United Kingdom, and nuclear safeguarding is without question one of those areas. I therefore hope that Members will recognise that the Bill is a plan B in case we are unable to remain in some way associated with Euratom.

Euratom is at the heart of our nuclear industry and has not only the skills and expertise but the experience to be of service to our nuclear industry, which is a complex field. Nuclear energy is a vital part of our energy mix, offering baseload capacity for the energy market. As such, the Bill is vital to ensure that we meet our international obligations as we leave the EU. Although such things form a vital part of the reasoning behind safeguarding in this industry, it is not a luxury; nor is it simply a health and safety matter. Our international obligations under non-proliferation treaties make our leadership in this area as a world power a significant issue, and as a leader, the UK must meet its obligations. We secure the moral authority to stand up to rogue states and to nations that have a different view of non-proliferation through our safeguarding regime. We must not forget just how much safety concerns matter in this sector. The consequences of getting something wrong would have ramifications not only for us, but perhaps for generations to come. Having a strong safeguarding regime in place, which is what the Bill provides, is absolutely vital for the health and prosperity of the industry and of our economy. I therefore unreservedly support the Bill on Third Reading.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (RELIEF FROM NON-DOMESTIC RATES) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 10 July 2017 (Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill (Programme)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement. —[Jo Churchill.] Question agreed to.

Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I must draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 1 to 13. If any Lords amendment is agreed to, Mr Speaker will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the Journal.

I also remind the House that certain of the motions relating to the Lords amendments will be certified as relating exclusively to England and Wales, as set out on the selection list. If the House divides on any certified motion, a double majority will be required for the motion to be passed.

Clause 1

RELIEF FROM LOCAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES; OCCUPIED HEREDITAMENTS

6.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we may take Lords amendments 2 to 13.

Rishi Sunak: It is an honour to begin my first Bill as a Minister. The Government have been and remain relentless in our pursuit of seeing every home in Britain provided with a decent broadband connection. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) is not in his place, which is a first for a broadband debate in this Chamber in recent times, but thanks to the good work he started, by the end of last year around 95% of premises had superfast broadband.

Under the universal service obligation introduced by this Government, every home in Britain will gain access to a high-speed connection within the next three years. That goal is indispensable to creating a cohesive, modern and economically vibrant Britain, and this Bill is another important step in ensuring we achieve just that.

At the autumn statement in 2016 the Chancellor announced a rate relief scheme for new telecom fibre. The relief will apply for five years, retrospectively from 1 April 2017, and it forms part of a wider package of support for digital infrastructure worth £1.1 billion.

The Bill provides us with the powers needed to introduce the relief scheme, and the relief itself will be introduced by technical regulations. In September 2017 we published detailed draft regulations for consultation. My Department is now considering responses to that consultation and is holding further discussions with stakeholders on the details. I am pleased to report to the House that the responses have been very positive, and I can therefore confirm that we will be ready to introduce the relief scheme shortly after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

As hon. Members will recall, the Bill received widespread support when it was considered by the House last year, and that support continued through the debates
in the Lords. The Lords amendments make a helpful improvement by ensuring the five-year relief period appears in the Bill, as Opposition parties called for and as welcomed by my ministerial colleague Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth. The amendments will give telecom operators the added assurance that the relief scheme will operate for five years.

The amendments will still allow us to extend the period of the rate relief beyond five years, if we wish, through secondary legislation. Stakeholders wished to see that ability retained in the Bill, and it means that if the Chancellor wants to repeat or extend the relief scheme, we can do so quickly without a further Bill but still with the approval of Parliament. As a tax measure, it will of course be for the Chancellor to decide in the future if such a repetition or extension is desirable.

I commend the amendments to the House.

6.7 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the new Minister on his promotion. I look forward to working with him on matters of common interest such as local government finance, which is a niche subject that does not always attract wide attention, but it is important, and it is important that we see reform. I made that offer to his predecessor, and most of the issues are not partisan at all. They are technocratic but essential, and if there is room for us to work together, we should seek to do so.

I am pleased to see the Bill return having been amended in the Lords, and I am pleased that the Government have received the amendments in the way they have. As we have seen in our debates, this is not necessarily a subject that gets Members excited or that results in mass attendance, but the people who do attend understand how important it is. This financial relief is intended to ensure that as many parts of England and Wales as possible benefit from high-speed fibre broadband. A financial incentive is an important mechanism for achieving some of that.

We were very probing in Committee and, unsurprisingly, we will be looking to see how the Bill works in practice. In particular, can we ensure that this is not just a tax relief for the big providers and that it gets to the smaller providers, too? Can we ensure it has a net effect on the extension of fibre broadband, or will it basically provide a subsidy for installations that would have happened regardless? Have we been able to reach a position where the providers themselves are satisfied that the Bill goes some way towards balancing the revaluation that they met with a degree of concern? I read recently in the Financial Times that BT and Virgin had hinted at the possibility of considering legal action against the revaluation, and I am interested to know the outcome.

Fundamentally, the Bill does two things. First, it rescues an element of the Finance Bill that fell when the election was called. The Bill contained many important reforms that were not contentious or party political but would have allowed local government finance to catch up with the changing times. I encourage the Minister to look at other provisions in the Bill to see what else could be brought forward to benefit local government.

Secondly, the measure proves that the Government can look at financial incentives for business growth, but business rates, of course, cover a wide range of business activity. It has been a long-standing criticism that we have not yet managed to address the impact of the treatment of plant and machinery, for instance, on business investment in new technologies and in new plant and machinery in those premises.

That has also been a concern on our high streets. When banks and building societies close, they are often the only provider of a cash machine in town. When a local convenience store agrees to take on the cash machine, it generally finds itself in a worse position at the end, despite providing a community service, because the turnover at the cashpoint will count towards its rateable value.

I raise those two points because I think there is a demand in industry and the community to ensure that business rates add value to our communities, rather than detract from them. As we embark on Brexit, we need to ensure that our country is in the most robust position possible to attract investment and ensure that we have strong infrastructure.

Finally, I pay tribute to Members in the other place, particularly Lord Kennedy, who spent a great deal of time on the issue and was involved in amendment 2. Let us see whether it makes a difference on the ground, because we pass legislation here not for the sake of it, but to make a material difference to public policy and the community. I will be waiting with interest to see whether this has a net effect on infrastructure investment.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for his kind words of welcome. He has a long and distinguished track record in local government, and I very much look forward to working with him in the constructive manner he outlined. He made a couple of points that I would like to address briefly. The first point was about who is eligible for the relief. As he knows, it is available for any company deploying new fibre. One of the expectations and hopes for the relief is that it will bring more alternative and smaller providers into the market. We will be watching that closely, as I know he will, because we would all welcome a broader diversity of suppliers.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the relief being gamed, and ensuring that it is targeted specifically at new fibre deployments. That was raised in the Commons stages by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), and indeed in the other place by Baroness Harding of Winscombe. I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that, following those exchanges, my Department worked extensively with Gamma Telecom and Ofcom to conduct a detailed study of the potential for the relief to be gamed. The results of that analysis clearly support the conclusion that, based on the evidence available to date, neither the Government nor Ofcom expect the rate relief for new fibre to give rise to gaming in the system. Without going into the details, simply the cost of deploying new fibre, withdrawing dark fibre, opening up the ducts and then reconnecting everything would in almost all cases be more expensive than the saving from business rates.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned other measures in the Local Government, Finance Bill and the importance of ensuring that we have a business rates system that supports economic growth. I wholeheartedly agree with him and am keen to use the opportunity for the business rates reset, the revaluation and the fair funding formula.
to ensure that our financial system does indeed support local authorities in their aspirations to grow their local economies.

I put on record my thanks to Members in the other place and, of course, the officials who brought me up to speed on the legislation incredibly quickly. I also thank my predecessor in this role, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who did so much to get the Bill to the point at which we are in a position to approve it. As I have said, demands on broadband are doubling every couple of years. It is vital that we stay ahead of that need and move quickly to implement the relief scheme that has been promised. I am delighted that we are making good progress on the draft regulations, which will be implemented swiftly. I am grateful to Members in this House and in the other place for the swift progress we have made. This is only one small part of the Government’s strategy, but it is an important one called for by all stakeholders.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived.
Lords amendments 2 to 13 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived.

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority


6.16 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Jackie Smith to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 19 February 2018.

The motion gives the House the opportunity to debate the recommendation agreed by the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. The appointment has arisen following the conclusion of the term of Elizabeth Padmore. Members may be aware that the Speaker’s Committee has produced a report on this matter—its second report of 2017—in relation to the motion.

It may help if I set out the key points for the record. IPSA board members are appointed under the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009. Under that Act, the Speaker is responsible for overseeing the selection of candidates for appointment to IPSA, and the names of any candidates to be members of IPSA must be approved by the Speaker’s Committee for IPSA. The 2009 Act states that at least one of IPSA’s members must be a person who has held, but no longer holds, high judicial office, within the meaning of part 3 of the Constitutional Reform Act 2005; that at least one of IPSA’s members must be a person who is qualified under schedule 3 to the National Audit Act 1983 to be an auditor for the National Audit Office; and that one of IPSA’s members—the parliamentary member—must be a person who has been, but is no longer, a Member of the House of Commons.

On this occasion, the vacancy on the board of IPSA was for a person not subject to any particular statutory requirements, to replace the outgoing board member, Elizabeth Padmore. Although Mr Speaker is not regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in making this appointment, he chooses to follow its recommended best practice in his supervision of appointments. As is normal for such appointments, Mr Speaker appointed a panel that conducted the shortlisting and interviewing of candidates. The panel was chaired by Mark Addison, the former civil service commissioner. The other members of the panel were: Ruth Evans, chair of IPSA; Shrinivas Honap, lay member of the Speaker’s Committee for IPSA; Meg Munn, former Member of Parliament for Sheffield, Heeley; and Michael Whitehouse, former chief operating officer at the National Audit Office.

The candidate recommended by the appointment board is Ms Jackie Smith, chief executive and registrar at the Nursing and Midwifery Council. The board considers that Ms Smith has been a successful chief executive, known for turning around organisations and delivering performance in a complex political environment. She also has extensive experience in regulation. As required under the 2009 Act, the appointment was approved by the Speaker’s Committee at its meeting in December.
6.19 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for what she has said. I wish to thank the independent panel appointed by Mr Speaker—the independent chair, Mark Addison; Ruth Evans, the IPSA chair; Shrinivas Honap, the lay member of the Speaker’s Committee for IPSA; Meg Munn, former MP for Sheffield, Heeley; and Michael Whitehouse, former chief operating officer of the National Audit Office—for their assiduous work in identifying possible candidates. I also wish to thank the outgoing IPSA board member, Elizabeth Padmore, for all her work.

The panel has been independent, transparent and diligent in its work. It was the panel’s unanimous view, which was endorsed by the Committee, to appoint Jackie Smith, who, as the Leader of the House has said, is currently the chief executive and registrar at the Nursing and Midwifery Council, and so has had experience in dealing with an organisation of more than 800 staff over five locations across the four countries of the United Kingdom. She was also head of investigation and lay affiliate for standards and fitness to practise at the General Medical Council. Ms Smith’s experience in regulation and delivering performance will serve her well.

The Opposition endorse the appointment of Jackie Smith to the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, and wish her well in her new role. She will be there from 19 February 2018 to 18 February 2023.

Question put and agreed to.

6.21 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Professor Sir Ian Kennedy as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 February 2018 for the period ending 31 January 2022.

As with the previous debate, the motion before us gives the House the opportunity to debate a recommendation that has been agreed, this time by the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission.

Electoral commissioners are appointed under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended by the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. Under the Act, the Speaker’s Committee has a responsibility to oversee the selection of candidates for appointment to the Electoral Commission. Commissioners are appointed for a fixed term, but the Committee may recommend their re-appointment, where that is appropriate. Hon. Members may know that the Speaker’s Committee has produced its third report of 2017 in relation to the motion. The Speaker’s Committee is not regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, but it has chosen to follow its recommended best practice in its supervision of appointments. The OCPA code of practice for appointments to public bodies, which was published in April 2012, provides that no reappointment may be made without a satisfactory performance appraisal.

The Speaker’s Committee was required to recruit a new electoral commissioner to replace the outgoing electoral commissioner, Toby Hobman. His term of office expired on 31 December 2017. Mr Hobman had been a commissioner since 2010, serving two terms.

As is normal for these appointments, Mr Speaker appointed a panel to conduct the shortlisting and interviewing of candidates. The panel was chaired by Joanna Place, chief operating officer at the Bank of England. The other panel members were Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission, and the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), a member of the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission.

The independent panel was unanimous in its recommendation that Professor Sir Ian Kennedy be appointed. Sir Ian served as the first chair of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority from 2009 until 2016. Between 2002 and 2009, he was chairman of the Healthcare Commission, which was the first body to regulate the NHS. He has also chaired a number of reviews and inquiries across a spectrum of public life, including into xenotransplantation for the Department of Health, and into rabies and quarantine for the then Ministry of Agriculture.

The panel’s recommendation was endorsed by the Speaker’s Committee. Once the Committee has reached a decision, statute requires that the Speaker consults the leaders of political parties represented at Westminster on proposed appointments. The statutory consultation provides an opportunity for the party leaders to comment, but they are not required to do so. The responses to
consultation can be found in the appendix to the Speaker’s Committee’s report. No objections to Sir Ian’s appointment were received.

If this appointment is made, Sir Ian will serve as an electoral commissioner for four years. If the motion is agreed, I wish him well in his post. I commend the motion to the House.

6.25 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I thank the Leader of the House for her comments? I also thank the chair of the independent panel, Joanna Place, and the other panel members, namely Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission, and my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), who is a member of the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, for their work in identifying the candidates and going through the selection process. My thanks also go to the outgoing commissioner, Toby Hobman, who has served two terms since 2010.

The unanimous view of the panel was that Professor Sir Ian Kennedy should be appointed as an electoral commissioner. Sir Ian has been involved in public life for more than three decades. The Opposition therefore agreed with the independent panel’s recommendation on the appointment of Professor Sir Ian Kennedy from 1 February 2018 to 31 January 2022.

6.26 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I will be brief, because I know that the House wants to move on quickly.

I oppose the motion. The Electoral Commission is an incredibly important body, and I ask Members to reflect on why the issue has been brought to the House. It is because it is for the full House to make a decision, rather than relying on our Front Benchers and the official channels.

I do not believe that Sir Ian Kennedy would be an appropriate appointment to the Electoral Commission. This gentleman is 76 now; he would be 80 at the end of his term. When he served on the Health Commission, he claimed £15,000 on taxis from north London to the job. Although our expenses system desperately needed to be reformed, I do not think that a single Member thinks that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is a system lacking in bureaucracy that could not be well reformed. I do not think he did a good job there. The Electoral Commission requires somebody who understands politics. All its existing members either understand politics—and he does not get that—or understand the media and have an idea of how to project the commission’s broader work. We are being asked to vote on this motion because we can legitimately have an opinion. I believe that that opinion should be that he is not a fit and proper person to serve, and I ask Members to vote in the No Lobby this evening.

6.28 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. As the only Member of this House to serve on the appointments panel, and as a member of the Speaker’s Committee, I should like to make a short contribution setting out a bit more about the process mentioned by the Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz).

I reiterate that the recruitment process that was followed was the same open, fair and transparent process that has been used in the past to recruit all electoral commissioners. It is also worth stressing that this appointment represents one of 10 places on the board, four of whom were nominated by the main political parties. As the Leader of the House set out, the appointments panel was composed of Joanna Place, the chief operating officer at the Bank of England, who served as our independent chair; Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission; and me, as the representative of the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission.

With the support of independent consultants, and following an open advertisement, a long list and short list were drawn up. Five very strong candidates were selected for interview, and following a comprehensive and lengthy interview process, the panel concluded that Professor Sir Ian Kennedy was the strongest candidate, and unanimously recommended his appointment. The Speaker’s Committee in turn agreed with that recommendation. As we have heard, the leaders of all the main parties were consulted, and no objections were received.

I seek to reassure the House that this was a fair, open and transparent process that followed all the usual steps that should be followed and that were followed in previous processes. I am confident in the rigorous process that was followed, and as a panel we stand by our decision to recommend the appointment of Sir Ian Kennedy.

6.29 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Like other colleagues, I shall not detain the House for long. Many relevant points have already been made by the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge).

I think that there is concern about this appointment. Quite apart from more general questions as to the role of the Electoral Commission and whether it is a body that has been losing its way, which is a wider debate for another day, we do need to look at this. Let us be frank: Sir Ian Kennedy, many colleagues feel, largely created the dreadful, anti-elected-Member, vindictive attitude that has permeated so much of IPSA, which has basically taken as its premise that it is there to make life difficult for Members of Parliament.

I have to say in all honesty to my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), who is an excellent Member of Parliament—I do not say that in any patronising way, but in a genuine way—that if Sir Ian Kennedy was the best candidate, I do wonder about the process through which we are undertaking appointments. We ought to look at how other countries run such electoral commissions. They have serving politicians who actually understand the current electoral system, rather than, as we do so often with such bodies in this country, putting it out to the great and the good, and the relentless quangocrats. When people read out the long list of quangos on which they have served, I regard it as a criticism rather than a commendation that they have constantly been on these public bodies, rather than, as used to be the case, people from industry on one side and from trade unions on the other who had much broader experience.

Why Sir Ian Kennedy, the arch-quangocrat? The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East mentioned Sir Ian Kennedy’s record at the Healthcare Commission. Many of those who were here at the time remember the
disdain with which IPSA, his organisation, treated Members who had difficult transport issues, family housing issues or disabilities. In the case of new Members who might have been inclined to give more slack to the organisation, I know that many of them, and their staff, have found dealing with it incredibly difficult, due to the amount of staff time that that takes, and its great obstructionism and very limited access. That stemmed from the culture imbued there at the start.

With that record, I do not think that Sir Ian Kennedy has shown the qualities and comprehension appropriate to this position, which involves dealing with those in elected office. Frankly, I hope that we will reject this appointment and do better next time.

6.33 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am one of the new members of the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, as well as of the Speaker’s Committee for IPSA. It has been really illuminating to be part of those bodies and, in particular, to look at the rigorous appointment procedures that are gone through in advance of somebody being recommended to the House.

I am honestly quite baffled by some of the contributions that we have heard. I am shocked that anybody would suggest that somebody was too old to sit on this body, given the number of people just along the corridor who are significantly older than Professor Sir Ian Kennedy. Although I have used that line in criticising the House of Lords, I do not think that Members who support the House of Lords are in a position to do so.

The other thing I am confused about is why people seem to be unhappy about the gentleman’s extreme length of experience. In any other circumstances, people would be saying that such experience was really impressive and that he could really bring something to the table.

It is pretty clear that there is a significant personal element to how some Members feel about this issue. Owing to the way the process has worked, when the matter has come to the House before, there has not been a debate, so people have just been able to shout “No” without making it clear why they believe that the appointment should not happen. Having been part of the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, it honestly feels to me that the process was very rigorous. Any outside observer would think that a rigorous process had been undertaken, and that Professor Sir Ian Kennedy was therefore the right person to be appointed to the role.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 46, Noes 77.

Division No. 108] [6.35 pm

**AYES**

Alexander, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Bowie, Andrew
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Bruce, Fiona
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Creagh, Mary
Donelan, Michelle
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Mark
Hobhouse, Wera
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Little Pengelly, Emma
Mak, Alan
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
Milling, Amanda
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pincher, Christopher
Prentis, Victoria
Robinson, Gavin
Rudd, rh Amber
Shannon, Jim
Simpson, David
Smith, Chloe
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Sym, Sir Robert
Tracey, Craig
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Watling, Giles
Whittaker, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wright, rh Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Jo Churchill and Wendy Morton

**NOES**

Amess, Sir David
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Ben
Bridgen, Andrew
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cooper, Rosie
Cryer, John
Davies, Philip
Dodds, Anneliese
Drew, Dr David
Dudbridge, James
Elphicke, Charlie
Ford, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Glindon, Mary
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodman, Helen
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Hammond, Stephen
Hanson, rh David
Hayes, rh Mr John
Healey, rh John
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lewer, Andrew
Lloyd, Stephen
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Martin, Sandy
McDonald, Andy
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Meeans, Ian
Mills, Nigel
Moore, Damien
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Perry, Andrew
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Sherriff, Paula
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Henry
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stewart, Bob
Stone, Jamie
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Tomlinson, Justin
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Wiggin, Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William

**Tellers for the Noes:**
Gareth Snell and Mrs Anne Main

Question accordingly negatived.

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 7 to 9 together.

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

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
That the draft Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 11 December, be approved.

SAVINGS ACCOUNTS
That the draft Help-to-Save Accounts Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 11 December, be approved.

EDUCATION
That the draft Higher Education (Access and Participation Plans) (England) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 4 December, be approved.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION
Toft Hill Bypass

6.46 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The life of my constituent Alex Wright was literally shattered when a van drove into her living room and totally destroyed it. She had to move out for months while the house was rebuilt.

For years, the residents of Toft Hill have been calling for a bypass, and 950 people have signed this petition. This is not purely a local issue; it raises questions of national road policy. Currently the criteria focus on housing and congestion. We would like to see a rebalancing of the criteria towards northern concerns, such as economic development and quality of life.

The petition states:
Declarations that the A68 that runs through Toft Hill is unsuitable and unsafe for the volume and nature of vehicles, especially HGV Lorries; and further that the proximity of the primary school and proposed future development in the village would make this stretch of road more dangerous to local residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to priorities a new relief road to alleviate the problems faced by residents of Toft Hill.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002098]

Neuroblastoma

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

6.48 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am honoured to be called to speak in this Adjournment debate. It is a great honour, as a Member of Parliament, to be able to make representations in this House on local cases, and this particular case is something I have been very much affected by. I have met the parents of the young boy concerned, and I would be grateful if the House allowed me to explain the nature of the case I am here to plead this evening. I wanted to hold this debate on funding for the treatment of children who are diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a specific form of childhood cancer. It is very debilitating, arises in immature nerve cells and is the third most common type of childhood cancer, affecting about 100 children every year in Britain.

Members may be familiar with the case of Bradley Lowery, a young boy from Sunderland who struck up a friendship with the England footballer, Jermain Defoe, after appearing as a Sunderland mascot. Bradley suffered from neuroblastoma and his cheerfulness and great courage touched the hearts of so many people. Very sadly, Bradley passed away last year. He was only six years old, but in his short life he touched the hearts of millions.

It can be very difficult to spot the early symptoms of neuroblastoma, as they can be vague and mistaken for other childhood conditions. There are options to deal with the illness, but the case I briefly want to describe involves a young boy, Alfie Ward, who is now 15, and who lives in my constituency in Ashford. He is now battling this disease for the third time. The problem we have is that the NHS, under its current dispensation and policy, funds treatment only in the first instance. However, as Alfie started nursery, having battled the disease and survived this appalling affliction, it became apparent that it had come back.

At this point, I want to make the case for the NHS to review its policy on not funding relapses. As I understand it, about half the people who suffer from this appalling illness relapse, if they recover. It seems very harsh to adopt a policy whereby people can be funded the first time that they are affected by the illness, but not for subsequent relapses. In Alfie’s case, he has been denied treatment. As I said, this is the third time that he has had the illness. Now he, his family and his parents are under the extreme pressure of having to raise something like £600,000 so that he can get treatment.

In wrapping up my remarks, I want to say that £600,000 is a huge amount of money. It is to their eternal credit that Alfie’s parents, who I have met—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I could not let the debate go by without commenting on a young gentleman in Northern Ireland. Some things in Northern Ireland cross the barricade, and one of those was the touching story of young Oscar Knox, whose battle with neuroblastoma touched people...
from every part of the Province and in whose memory I stand in this House today. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must do more to fund the treatment of this cancer in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, instead of parents having to try to raise money to help their children? We must look towards more treatment options as well. Does he agree with that? I know the answer.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has made representations from his part of the country. People face this problem across the country. It is not widely known, because the absolute numbers are not great, but the suffering is severe. We absolutely have to try to think of a way to reach an accommodation on funding, because £600,000 is a huge amount to raise.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this very serious issue to the House, and I am sure that many people in Coventry and the west midlands would support him too. It is tragic to pick up a newspaper and read about families trying to raise money for treatment abroad that they cannot get in this country. We wish him well in his endeavours to get some justice for his constituents.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am touched by the hon. Gentleman’s remarks. It is delightful to see cross-party agreement on this. It is a great honour to raise this issue—it goes to the heart of what one does as a constituency MP. I have met Alfie’s parents and have been incredibly impressed by the way they have conducted themselves, and by their bravery and courage. They are totally devoid of self-pity. They have just got on with it and raised a great deal of money, and I am hopeful that they will reach their target.

In the case of relapses, however, the obligation should not fall on the shoulders of parents and friends to go through what is a very stressful experience. We have all raised money for various causes in our time, and it is a stressful and time-consuming endeavour. As a society, we have to consider ways in which the NHS or the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence can fund treatment for relapses so that the parents of young boys such as Alfie Ward do not have to go through that kind of suffering and pressure simply to give their son a fighting chance of life.

I am grateful to have secured this debate, on an issue that has been raised by other people, and it is a privilege to have raised it in this forum. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I congratulate my hon. Friend and parliamentary office neighbour, the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), on securing this debate on such an important issue.

It is a privilege to be cancer Minister—I hear some of the worst and some of the best. We know that cancer is a disease that will affect most of us, either directly or indirectly, at some point. I suspect it will affect everybody in the House tonight. That is particularly true, and somewhat inevitable, as the population ages, but it is especially heartbreaking, is it not, when cancer afflicts children and teenagers, as it has his constituent Alfie? I have young children myself, and I cannot help but think about that.

Neuroblastoma is an uncommon cancer—there are about 95 cases in the whole of the UK each year—but it has one of the lowest survival rates of all the childhood cancers, and that is why raising awareness of it is vital and why I thank my hon. Friend for bringing it to the attention of the House. As he says, it is always a privilege to speak here and to raise issues on behalf of constituents.

I will come in a minute to how we are prioritising investment, which is so important, in research and improving access to drugs for cancer, particularly those that are less survivable. First I would like to pay tribute to the Bradley Lowery Foundation—my hon. Friend mentioned Bradley—which is providing fantastic support to Alfie’s family, for which I thank it. As a football fan myself—okay, I am a Spurs fan—I saw several times how Bradley’s smile lit up many football grounds, including his own in Sunderland, before he sadly lost his own battle against neuroblastoma, as my hon. Friend said. His legacy is the tremendous awareness of this rare cancer that he raised in his short life. He encouraged a huge amount of fundraising for treatment and research that will help so many children. I often think, whether we live for 100 years or 100 minutes, we all in some way change the world we are born into, and that is certainly true of Bradley’s life.

In England, we want something that is very difficult but quite simple to convey: we want to have access to the best cancer services in the world, especially for children and young people who have to face this disease so early in their lives. That is why the Government—this Prime Minister, the previous Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and I—have prioritised cancer services. Since 2010, we have seen year-on-year increases in the number of people surviving. At the end of last year, this country had its best survival figures ever, which is of course something to be pleased about, but just one person who is battling cancer will not feel like that.

We know that there is a huge amount more to be done. NHS England is leading the health and care system in implementing every one of the 96 cancer strategy’s recommendations with the aim of achieving our ambition to save a further 30,000 lives a year by 2020—although if we can do more, we should. NHS England has committed some £600 million to support the delivery of the strategy. No one will hear me speak about cancer without mentioning early diagnosis, which is the most crucial factor that we know of in successfully treating neuroblastoma or any other cancer.

In 2016, some £200 million was made available to the new cancer alliances, challenging them to encourage innovative ways in which to diagnose cancer earlier and to improve the care for those living with cancer. That is so important. Members will have seen the television campaign by Cancer Research UK, which includes the words “A mum with cancer is still a mum.” Many people are battling cancer, but they are still living their lives. It is always important to say that. The funds are also intended to ensure that all cancer patients receive the care that is right for them, and we are rolling out one-stop shops throughout the country. We have invested
some £130 million in upgrading and replacing radiotherapy equipment, to ensure that patients have the best and latest equipment regardless of where they live.

Cancer services for children and young people, including the treatment of neuroblastoma, are specially commissioned by NHS England. Neuroblastoma is often treated with radiotherapy. In 2013, a £23 million fund was used to improve access to intensity modulated radiotherapy, a precise form of radiotherapy that can be directed more accurately at cancers and allows a higher dose of radiotherapy to be given with, hopefully, fewer side effects. That is particularly important to very young children, who may have weaker immune systems and who are less resilient to more invasive treatments.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his endeavours. It is always a pleasure to listen to his response to any constituency issue. In England, responsibility clearly lies with him, but is there any possibility of discussions with the regional Governments with a view to joint working, whatever their role might be? I think of young Oscar Knox in Northern Ireland, and that is really my reason for making the suggestion.

Steve Brine: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is here. He raised the same point last week during the Westminster Hall debate on blood cancers, to which I responded. As he had to leave before I did so, I will repeat what I said then. Obviously, once devolved government returns to Stormont and there is a Health Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, I shall be happy to meet him or her, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would like to be involved in that meeting. We shall then be able to talk about some of the successes that we have had in England and some of the things that I am sure we can learn from Northern Ireland.

An even more precise form of radiotherapy that can be used in neuroblastoma treatment is proton beam therapy. It sounds like something out of the future, and in many ways it is, but the future is coming. In 2012, the Government provided some £250 million for the building of two PBT centres in England, at University College Hospital here in the capital and at the Christie cancer centre in Manchester. I had the privilege of visiting the Christie last year—I happened to be there in the autumn, for some reason—to see its new PBT facilities, which are incredible and which will be providing treatment for patients later this year. As a result, the NHS will no longer need to send young patients to the United States—although, for some reason—to see its new PBT facilities, which are incredible and which will be providing treatment for patients later this year. As a result, the NHS will no longer need to send young patients to the United States—although, for some reason, involved huge expense to the families and the NHS—for this cutting-edge treatment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne spoke about guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. We want the very best new innovative treatments, such as the promising antibody therapy we have heard about today, to be available on the NHS. NICE is the independent body that provides guidance on whether drugs and other treatments represent a clinically effective and cost-effective use of resources in the NHS—a publicly funded health system. I am advised that NICE is currently considering two antibody-based treatments for neuroblastoma. It is appraising Dinutuximab-beta for use in high-risk neuroblastoma, but the appraisal has been delayed as NICE awaits additional evidence from the drug company. Final guidance on the use of any drug can be issued only after careful consideration of all the available evidence and extensive engagement with stakeholders. That has to be the right approach, however frustrating it is. Another drug used in the treatment of high-risk neuroblastoma is dinutuximab or Unituxin. NICE’s appraisal of this drug, which is in the same family as Dinutuximab-beta but is distinctly different, has also been suspended as demand for the drug in the United States has exceeded expectations and is outstripping the company’s ability to meet global need.

I stress that just because drugs are not routinely available to patients on the NHS that does not preclude their use. Clinicians can make a case on a patient’s behalf for exceptional funding if they believe a particular treatment would deliver the best clinical outcomes. I understand that Alfie’s consultant is looking at doing that. Individual funding requests made by a supporting clinician are always a potential route for access to treatments that are not currently commissioned by the NHS. NHS England is not aware of any IFR in Alfie’s case, but I will be happy to make it so, working with my hon. Friend, following tonight’s debate.

Despite the strides we have made in increasing overall cancer survival rates, we recognise that there are some cancers where progress has been far too slow. That is why our focus for these cancers is on research and innovation, and ensuring that proven innovations, once they are discovered, are adopted swiftly across the health service in England. I am pleased to say that the Government are fully supportive of the Less Survivable Cancers Taskforce, which I launched last summer here in the House, specifically to address the survivability gap between the least and the most survivable cancers. I met the taskforce just before Christmas to discuss how we can work together to raise awareness of the symptoms of cancer and how we can ensure that less survivable cancers have better access to research funding. That is a promising workstream. The taskforce is a cutting-edge group and I look forward to working with it.

Cancer Research UK is also funding research to better understand childhood cancers such as neuroblastoma. In September 2016, the Government announced the largest ever investment in health research infrastructure—£816 million over five years from April 2017 for 20 National Institute for Health Research biomedical research centres in England. That was a big step, and I am sure hon. Members recall the Prime Minister’s announcement. That includes £61.5 million in the biomedical research centre at the Royal Marsden Hospital here in London and the Institute of Cancer Research. The NIHR spent £137 million on cancer research in 2016-17—an increase from just over £100 million in 2010-11. That investment in cancer research is of huge importance and constitutes the largest in a disease area.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I am not sure whether this has any bearing on the subject of the debate, but will the accelerated access review help to bring some of these potential new treatments forward more quickly?

Steve Brine: The accelerated access review is an important piece of work, and I will be happy to write to the hon. Lady in more detail than I have time to go into now. It is
[Steve Brine]

about bringing treatments quickly to the market for patients’ use once they are approved, instead of having to take a rather arduous and tortuous route.

I want to put on record that we want the NHS to be the best in the world at treating childhood cancers and all cancers. We can only imagine the pain that Alfie’s family are going through, and they have our prayers and our support. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne will agree that the Government are working hard, even in difficult economic times, to implement the cancer strategy, to invest in research and to continue the investment in cancer treatment to ensure that we can lead the world in the fight against cancer and make this a reality by making life better for people like Alfie.

Question put and agreed to.

7.10 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 24 January 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Devolution of Powers

1. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):

It would be remiss of me not to point out that tomorrow marks the anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, and I am sure that the whole House would like to join me in wishing well not only to those who are organising and participating in events around the world but to everybody who celebrates the life and legacy of Scotland’s great bard.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear, we are intensifying our discussions with the devolved Administrations on powers returning from the EU. I had a useful discussion with Mike Russell early in the new year, and I am confident that discussions will continue to be productive.

Mike Amesbury: The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) said during the Committee stage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill:

“I will not support a Bill that undermines devolution and does not respect the integrity of the Union.”—[Official Report, 4 December 2017; Vol. 632, c. 733.]

If that is the position of the Scottish Conservatives, why did they vote against the Labour amendment that would have safeguarded devolution?

David Mundell: It is quite easy, in opposition, to pursue stunts and gimmicks, and that is what the Labour amendment was. This Government have made it quite clear that we would agree an amendment to the Bill with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government, and that is what we are doing.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Figures published today show that trade between Scotland and the rest of the UK is four times more important to Scotland than its trade with the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that, as powers return from the EU to Scotland, we must ensure that we protect the UK internal market so that businesses in Scotland may continue to flourish?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I would point out that those figures were produced by the Scottish Government themselves. Trade within the UK is worth four times as much to Scotland as its trade with the EU. When “Scotland’s place in Europe” was published last week, it disappointed me that that fact was not recognised.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell the House what he thinks is wrong with the devolution powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and how he would like to see them fixed? Or is it that, in this week of Burns celebrations, he is just the great puddin’ o’ the chieftain race?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman always has an interesting take on events, but I am clear that we want to work with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government, and with the Scottish Parliament, whose Finance and Constitution Committee has set out its views on clauses 10 and 11 of the Bill. I want to reach agreement with them, so that the Government will recommend a legislative consent motion.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Brexit presents an enormous opportunity for the Scottish Parliament to gain even further powers?

David Mundell: It represents not only that opportunity but an opportunity to use those powers. We never hear the Scottish National party talking about how the powers devolved to Scotland after we leave the EU will actually be used. That is the debate we should be having now.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): First, on behalf of the lassies, may I echo the sentiments expressed by the Secretary of State and wish everyone in the House a happy Burns day? In December, I stood at this Dispatch Box and was comforted to hear the Secretary of State commit to bringing forward amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on Report. Sadly, he did not keep that commitment. Will he now please tell us why?

David Mundell: The answer is very simple: we could not meet the timescale that we had aspired to. I take responsibility for that. I gave a commitment at the Dispatch Box that we would bring forward amendments on Report, but we were unable to reach agreement with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government on those important amendments within the timescale. Significant work is ongoing in that regard, and the commitment to amend the Bill is unchanged. However, it will involve an amendment that can command the support of the Scottish Parliament, not a gimmick amendment.

Lesley Laird: That lack of planning is extremely disappointing, because the Secretary of State, in failing to keep his commitment, has now singlehandedly put the future of the devolution settlement in the hands of the other place. Given his lack of judgment in his
previous commitment, how confident is the Secretary of State that an amendment will come back to this place that all parties will find acceptable?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady is relatively new to this House, but she will know that this Chamber will be able to discuss the amendment, which will be discussed by the Scottish Parliament when we seek its legislative consent. The Scottish Labour party has been all over the place on the EU, and I have no idea how it will vote on a legislative consent motion when it comes to the Scottish Parliament, but I hope that it will be yes.

2. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent discussions has he had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903399]

5. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903402]

6. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903403]

9. Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903406]

10. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903407]

13. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903410]

14. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903411]

15. Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on devolving powers to Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [903412]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): My answer is “many.”

Dr Whitford: And yet the Secretary of State cannot name one. He failed in his promise to amend clause 11 in this House to avoid undermining the principle of devolution to Scotland and Wales, as not just Scotland’s governing party, but all Scottish MPs will be excluded from the next step of the debate. Will he tell us now what proposals will be brought forward in the Lords?

David Mundell: I echo the remarks that Michael Russell made yesterday in Holyrood, where he said: “The Scottish Government... aims to agree amendments to the Bill with the UK Government that would allow a legislative consent motion to be brought to the chamber and passed.”—[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 23 January 2018; c. 31.]

Mr Russell and, indeed, Mark Drakeford in the Welsh Assembly have not given a running commentary on the negotiations, and I do not intend to do so either.

John Mc Nally: Holyrood’s Finance and Constitution Committee has stated that clause 11, as currently drafted, is incompatible with the devolution settlement in Scotland. Does the Secretary of State agree?

David Mundell: I have committed to amending the Bill—my commitment remains exactly the same—so that it meets the concerns of the Committee set out in its report and so that a majority of Members of the Scottish Parliament can vote for a legislative consent motion in respect of the Bill.

David Linden: The Secretary of State was left looking a bit glaikit this morning when the Brexit Secretary said that the Secretary of State had potentially made a promise that he could not keep. Is not the reality here that all the talk from the Tories about giving power back to Scotland is nothing less than a power grab and that that lot—the Scottish Conservatives—are just Lobby fodder?

David Mundell: The pantomime season is over, and the hon. Gentleman’s theatrical tone strikes a discordant note with the tone set yesterday by Michael Russell, the Minister in the Scottish Government responsible for such matters. There was no suggestion of a power grab. The suggestion was that both Governments are engaged in intensive negotiations to agree an amendment to the clause.

Mhairi Black: I appreciate the Secretary of State’s honesty in saying that he ran out of time to get the amendments in, but unfortunately that is not good enough. How can he justify it being okay that Michelle Mone and Alan Sugar will have more of an impact on the Bill than Scotland’s elected Members, some of which sit on the Secretary of State’s side of the House?

David Mundell: From everything that I see and read in Scotland, the hon. Lady has a considerable impact on events in Scotland, and I am sure that her views on the Bill will be well recorded. The amendment will be debated in the House of Lords. I regret that it is being brought forward in the other House, but we simply did not meet the timescale to which we aspired. There will be a further opportunity to debate the amendment in this House, and the Scottish Parliament, which SNP Members say they are concerned about all the time, will also be able to have an extensive debate and vote on the clause.

Deidre Brock: Will the Secretary of State’s colleagues in the House of Lords make the changes he promised us he would make to the Brexit Bill? And will he sit down with the Scottish Government thereafter to discuss what further powers need to be devolved?

David Mundell: I intend to sit down with the Scottish Government next week to discuss progress on amending clause 11. In relation to further devolution, the Smith Commission determined the nature of the settlement,
to which all parties in the Scottish Parliament signed up. This Government do not support changes to the devolution arrangements, as agreed in the Smith Commission.

Drew Hendry: The Secretary of State has failed to answer for his broken promise to this House and to his Tory colleagues in Scotland on clause 11. That means Karen Brady, Sebastian Coe, Joan Bakewell and 26 Church of England bishops now have more say over Scotland’s future than Scotland’s elected MPs. Will the Secretary of State finally apologise for that sad state of affairs?

David Mundell: I am sure the hon. Gentleman’s views and mine on the future of the House of Lords are closer than he would anticipate. I have taken full responsibility for not meeting the timescale I originally set out. We are committed to amending the Bill, and to amending the Bill in agreement with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government. I would have thought that that is something even Opposition Members would recognise.

Gavin Newlands: In a rare lucid moment, the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said

“the Government made a clear commitment to the House on the amendments to clause 11, and I took those commitments at face value. As a Conservative Member, I never want to get to the point where I cannot take commitments given to me...at face value”,

and that

“They have let this Chamber down by not delivering on what they promised.”—[Official Report, 16 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 819-21.]

Will the Secretary of State apologise to his own colleagues, to this House and, more importantly, to the people of Scotland for letting us all down?

David Mundell: I think the hon. Gentleman seeks to conflate two issues. The commitment to amend the Bill remains unchanged. The Bill will be amended in agreement with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government. We failed to meet the timescale to which I aspired, and I take full responsibility for that.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Resistance to further devolution of powers comes from many quarters, such as the Constitutional Research Council led by the Secretary of State’s friend, and prominent Scottish Tory, Richard Cook. As we all know, the CRC funded the Democratic Unionist party’s version of hard Brexit in the campaign. Does the Secretary of State now agree that it is time for not meeting the timescale I originally set out. We are committed to delivering that.

David Mundell: As my hon. Friend knows, in September 2014 the people of Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain within the United Kingdom, and the Union Jack is the flag of the United Kingdom. It beggars belief that, at a time when children’s hospital wards are being closed, educational standards are falling and Police Scotland is in chaos, the priority of the First Minister of Scotland is flags.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State talks a good game but, unfortunately, delivery does not appear to be his strong point. Speaking of auld acquaintance, it turns out that his key adviser tasked with increasing awareness of devolution across Government is none other than the interim chief executive of Carillion. Given the shambolic handling of clause 11 last week, how does the Secretary of State think that is going?

David Mundell: First, it is not correct to suggest that non-executive directors take policy decisions in relation to Government Departments. Keith Cochrane has done an excellent job as a non-executive director of the Scotland Office, and I pay tribute to him as one of Scotland’s most respected businessmen. However, in order not to become a distraction at a time of very important work for the Scotland Office, he has decided to step aside from his responsibilities until the investigation into Carillion and any subsequent inquiries are complete.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I also wish you a very happy Burns season, Mr Speaker?

The Secretary of State talked of a powers bonanza and could not list one new power. He promised amendments on clause 11 and no such amendments were tabled. Can we now believe another word he says in this House?

David Mundell: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not necessarily have the best of relations with some people in the Scottish Government, but perhaps he could have a word with them about the publication of the frameworks. I am keen that we publish what has been agreed in relation to frameworks, but the current position of the Scottish Government is that that should not be published.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman is personally responsible for a breakdown in the relationship between this House and the Scottish Government, and the breakdown in relationships between all the Members of this House. The Brexit Secretary today has suggested that the right hon. Gentleman is the blockage to progress. He has accepted full responsibility for not producing these amendments. Has he now had the time to think about his own position?

David Mundell: Again, the hon. Gentleman strikes a completely different tone from Michael Russell, who has pursued a very professional approach to these matters. They are complicated and difficult matters, and it is important that they are thoroughly debated, discussed and agreed. The reason the Government did not bring forward an amendment at that stage was that no amendment had been agreed with the Scottish Government, but we are committed to delivering that.
Economic Development: Cross-border Co-operation

3. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What plans does the Government have to further cross-border co-operation on economic development between Scotland and the rest of the UK?  

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Today’s figures from the Scottish Government again show that Scotland’s trade with the rest of the UK is worth nearly four times that with the EU. We know that more than half a million Scottish jobs depend on the vital UK internal market, and that people in Scotland want a UK-wide approach to trade. As the UK prepares to leave the EU, it is essential that we ensure that the important UK internal market can continue unimpeded.

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the First Minister of Scotland recently said that, “independence must be an option”, highlighting once again some people’s interest in separation, not governing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that keeping separation on the table makes constructive, co-operative working difficult, and that opportunities will be missed both for Scotland and the UK as a result?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It has just become absolutely clear that when Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP are asked what they want from Brexit, the answer is another independence referendum.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Brexit poses the biggest risk to Scotland’s economy. If the Government want to show co-operation with the Scottish Government, does the Secretary of State agree that the sectoral reports that are available to MPs in this place should also be made available to MSPs?

David Mundell: I understood that they had been made available to MSPs. If that is not the case, I will ensure that it is.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): This week, Moray Council discussed the projects that will be included in the ambitious Moray growth deal. The Secretary of State knows of my strong support for the bid, so will he join me in Moray to meet the people involved in the Moray growth deal bid, to show the UK Government’s commitment to take these from proposals to projects delivered?

David Mundell: These growth deals and city deals across Scotland are very important to the economy as we prepare to leave the EU. I am excited by the proposals that have been brought forward by stakeholders in Moray and I would be delighted to visit with my hon. Friend.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that today’s export statistics show the importance to Scotland of remaining in both the EU and the UK, despite the SNP’s latest attempt to break that link by taking down the flag?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady will expect that I will agree with part of what she said. Of course, as the people of Scotland voted, Scotland must remain in the UK and benefit from the UK internal market, but the people of the United Kingdom have voted to leave the EU, and we are leaving the EU.

Renewable Energy Sector

4. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on Government funding for the renewable energy sector in Scotland.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Thanks to the investments that we have all made in the future of renewables and the Government policy framework, Scotland’s renewable energy is thriving. A quarter of the UK’s renewable capacity is based in Scotland because of the climate and the geography. That capacity has more than doubled since the Conservative-led Government came to power in 2010, and we will be going further in bringing forward energy from remote offshore wind projects in the next auction, in 2019.

Jeff Smith: That is not what Scottish Renewables says. It says that, with the exception of offshore wind, growth across all other technologies is low to stagnant. How much funding will be available to Scotland under the Government’s clean growth strategy? Has the Minister assessed the impact that it will have in Scotland?

Claire Perry: As I was pleased to set out in the clean growth strategy, we will make almost £560 million available up to 2025 to support all forms of renewable energy. As we have now set out, we will enable offshore wind projects, which are so vital to the remote islands, to bid in that next auction. We want to keep it going; Scotland is doing incredibly well. Last year, renewable energy right across the UK contributed a third of our electricity generation. We are on a renewables road.

City Region Deals

7. **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with the Scottish Government on the implementation of city region deals in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I spoke to the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work last week. We will meet again shortly to discuss our joint approach, including how we can deliver for my hon. Friend on the Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal.

Stephen Kerr: Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that the UK Government are committing new money to the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, not simply rebadging existing funding? When he next meets the Scottish Government, will he secure a similar commitment from them that they will put new money into the deal and not just rebadge existing funding?

David Mundell: I confirm that the UK Government will definitely put new money into the Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal. That has always been our approach.
to such deals, and that is why they have such a transformative effect. I will speak to Keith Brown on the issue my hon. Friend raises, but I know Mr Brown takes a particular interest in that deal.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): All the city region cash that has gone Inverness’s way is most welcomed by residents of Inverness. However, other communities in the Highlands such as Wick, Thurso and Tain struggle to see the benefit. It is supposed to be a city region deal. Will the Secretary of State look into why it is not working as it should?

David Mundell: I will of course look into the hon. Gentleman’s point, which was also raised with me when I was on Skye. May I use this opportunity to rebut the fake news that Skye is full and not open for business to tourists? It is open for business and a great destination.

Leaving the EU: Economic Opportunities

8. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with businesses in Scotland on the economic opportunities available to them after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is always a pleasure to speak to Scottish businesses. In fact, there have been more than 100 such conversations in the past year in my Department. I look forward to meeting many more businesses this Friday, when I travel to Aberdeen as the Government’s oil and gas champion, including a visit to the Oil and Gas Technology Centre, which benefited from £180 million as part of the Aberdeen city deal in 2016.

Tom Pursglove: As Corby is the most Scottish town in England, I am well aware that Scotland produces some of the UK’s best-known products, including Scotch whisky. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that, as we leave the European Union, new opportunities are taken, for the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom economy?

Claire Perry: I am told that Corby is a great place in England to buy an Irn-Bru and a pie. As we know, whisky is one of the UK’s greatest exports. Forty thousand people are employed in the industry, and the value of exports is more than £4 billion. It absolutely stands to benefit from post-Brexit trade opportunities. Both our industrial strategy and—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is rather discourteous. The Minister is giving us a detailed answer, which I think the House should hear.

Claire Perry: I am sure whisky drinkers everywhere will be grateful for that intervention, Mr Speaker.

The industrial strategy sets out other opportunities with industries across the UK to grow their productivity, improve their exports and create high-value jobs. I am pleased to say we are working closely with the Scottish Government to implement the strategy.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): To mitigate the extreme hard Tory Brexit and create further job opportunities in Scotland, will the Minister commit to speaking to onshore wind developers and allowing them to bid in future contract for difference auctions?

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman knows from conversations around the Dispatch Box, we are keen to bring forward renewable technology at the right price for bill payers and consumers right across the UK. We will continue to offer opportunities for all sorts of renewable businesses to get involved in CfD auctions going forward.

Leaving the EU: Common Frameworks

11. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on ensuring that common frameworks with the Scottish Government are in place when the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments agreed the principles that will guide how we approach common frameworks in future at the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations on 16 October. Those principles have facilitated constructive engagement at official level, and we expect to make significant further progress in the coming months, including publishing our analysis.

Paul Masterton: During those constructive discussions, has the Secretary of State received any indication from the Scottish Government about how they intend to use the plethora of new powers that they will receive?

David Mundell: As I said in response to a previous question, we have heard nothing from the Scottish National party or the Scottish Government about how they intend to use the new powers that will be available after we leave the EU. Let us have a debate about using powers for Scotland’s benefit, not about process.

Hospital Car Parking Charges

12. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Whether he has had discussions with the Scottish Government on their abolition of hospital car parking charges.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have not had discussions with the Scottish Government regarding hospital car parking charges. The policy falls wholly within their area of devolved competence.

Robert Halfon: The vast majority of national health service hospitals in Scotland do not charge for car parking. Will my right hon. Friend initiate discussions with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to explore the options for extending that to England?

David Mundell: I am sure that my colleague the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will have heard my right hon. Friend’s comments.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—Engagements

Q1. [903508] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 24 January.
The Prime Minister: I am sure that Members throughout the House will wish to join me in marking Holocaust Memorial Day this Saturday and in remembering all those who endured such appalling suffering in the holocaust.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today. Later, I will travel to Switzerland to attend the World Economic Forum and—who knows?—I might even bump into the shadow Chancellor while I am there.

Stephen Metcalfe: Mr Speaker, as you and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will know, last week saw the successful launch of the Year of Engineering campaign, which is aimed at changing the perception of engineering and inspiring the next generation of engineers. I know that the Prime Minister is personally committed to the campaign, so may I invite her to join me and 80,000 young people at this year's Big Bang fair, to reinforce the message that engineering is a great career that is open to everyone, regardless of their background, ethnicity and gender?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The issue of engineering, and particularly the need for more women to see engineering as a career, is something that I have promoted for many years now. Engineers are vital to our economy, which is why we want to see everyone, whatever their background—this is about not only gender but background and ethnicity—having a chance to build a good career in engineering. The Year of Engineering gives us a great opportunity to work together with business to do exactly that. If my diary allows, I would be happy to attend the fair to which my hon. Friend referred.

Jeremy Corbyn: Since 2010, we have lost 14,000 NHS beds. The King's Fund, the Health Foundation and the Nuffield Trust all agree that the NHS needs another £4 billion. In December, the month just gone, NHS England recorded its worst ever A&E performances, with more patients than ever waiting more than four hours. Now the UK Statistics Authority says that the numbers may be worse because the figures have been fiddled. Can the Prime Minister tell the House when figures calculated in line with previous years will be published?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that the NHS is open in publishing a whole variety of figures in relation to its targets. We are putting more money into the NHS, year in and year out, and we are continuing to do that. If he wants to talk about figures and about targets being missed, yes, the latest figures show that, in England, 497 people were waiting more than 12 hours, but the latest figures also show that, under the Labour Government in Wales, 3,741 people were waiting more than 12 hours.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister is responsible for the underfunding of the Welsh Government and the needs of Wales. Despite that, the overall Welsh Labour Government health budget has grown by 5% in 2016-17. It is Labour Wales that has a problem of underfunding from a Conservative Government based in Westminster. So far this winter, 100,000 patients have been forced to wait more than 30 minutes in the back of an ambulance in NHS England, for which she is responsible, yet still she refuses to give the NHS the money that it needs. Can she tell us how many more patients will face life-threatening waits in the back of ambulances this winter?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that of course we want to ensure that people are not waiting in those ambulances, but the only answer that he ever comes up with is on the question of money. The question—[Interruption.] No, the question is this: why are there some hospitals where the percentage of patients waiting more than 30 minutes is zero and other hospitals where the percentage of patients waiting more than 30 minutes is considerably higher? If he wants to talk about funding, perhaps we should look at what the Labour party promised at the last general election last year. [Interruption.] It is all very well shadow Ministers...
shouting about the comparison of money. The point is that, at the last election, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said this:

“Labour and the Conservatives are pretty much on the same page...there's not much to choose between them in terms of the money they'll put into the NHS.”

Jeremy Corbyn: A Labour Government would not be underfunding the NHS. A Labour Government would not be privatising the NHS. A Labour Government would not be underfunding social care. A Labour Government would be committed to an NHS free at the point of use as a human right.

According to a whistleblower, as many as—[Interruption.] Hang on, hang on. According to a whistleblower, as many as 80 patients were harmed or died following significant ambulance delays over a three-week period this winter. This is a very serious situation, and the Prime Minister must be aware of it. What investigation is the Department of Health carrying out into these deeply alarming reports?

The Prime Minister: When we hear reports of that sort, of course they are very alarming. That is why the Department of Health makes sure that investigations take place. That may be undertaken by the Department of Health or by the particular trust involved—the ambulance trust or the hospital. These issues are properly investigated, because we do not want to see this happening; we do want to see people being properly cared for. If there are lessons to be learned, then they will be learned. Because our support for our NHS is about providing it with the funding, the doctors, the nurses, the treatments and the capabilities that it needs in order to be able to deliver for patients. That is why we are backing the NHS with more funding. It is why we are ensuring that it gets the best treatments; survival rates for cancer are higher than they have ever been before. It is why we are ensuring that we have better joined-up services across the NHS and social care so that people who do not need to go into hospital are able to be cared for at home. And it is why we are ensuring that we are reducing waste in the NHS so that taxpayers' money is spent as effectively as may be on patient care. That is a plan for the NHS, but it is a plan that puts patients first.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister must be aware of ambulances backed up in hospital car parks, with nurses treating patients in the back of ambulances. Ambulance drivers and paramedics desperate to get on to deal with the next patient cannot leave because the patient they are dealing with at that moment cannot get into the A&E department. It has been reported that a man froze to death waiting 16 hours for an ambulance. Last week, a gentleman called Chris wrote to me, saying:

“My friend's 93 year old father waited 4 hours for an ambulance after a fall.”

These are not isolated cases; they are common parlance all over the country. It needs money, it needs support, and it needs it now.

The Prime Minister is frankly in denial about the state of the NHS. Even the absent Foreign Secretary recognises it, but the Prime Minister is not listening. People using the NHS can see from their own experience that it is being starved of resources. People are dying unnecessarily in the back of ambulances and in hospital corridors. GP numbers are down, nurses are leaving, the NHS is in crisis—[Interruption.] Tory MPs might not like it, but I ask this question of the Prime Minister: when is she going to face up to the reality and take action to save the NHS from death by a thousand cuts?

The Prime Minister: There is only one part of the NHS that has seen a cut in its funding—the NHS in Wales under a Labour Government. This is a Government backing the NHS plan, putting more money into the NHS, recruiting more doctors and nurses, and seeing new treatments come on board which ensure that people are getting the best treatment that they need, because this is a Government who recognise the priorities of the British people: to ensure that our NHS remains a world-class healthcare system—indeed, the best healthcare system in the world—to build the homes that people need, and to make sure that our kids are in good schools. This is a Government who are building a country that works for everyone, and a country in which people can look to the future with optimism and hope.

Q8. [903516] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The British people need to be confident in the integrity of our voting system, so what is my right hon. Friend doing to follow up on Sir Eric Pickles' report, “Securing the ballot”, to minimise voter fraud, whether for referendums, general elections or local elections?

The Prime Minister: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on a very good council by-election result in Hulton, where the Conservatives took a seat from the Labour party?

My hon. Friend raises an important issue about strengthening our electoral process and enhancing the confidence people have in our democratic processes. We are shortly going to be running pilot schemes in five local authorities to identify the best way to implement voter ID and nationality checks. Tower Hamlets, Slough and Peterborough are going to be piloting measures to improve the integrity of the postal and proxy vote process. Our democracy matters, but it is important that people can have true confidence in it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I wish you a happy Burns day for tomorrow, Mr Speaker?

May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister about Holocaust Memorial Day? We should never forget the horrible tragedies and the price that people had to pay. However, we should also remember the genocide that has happened in many territories since that time as well, and we all must work to eradicate that scourge from our society.

Earlier this week, the Royal Bank of Scotland chief executive officer, Ross McEwan, admitted—in a leaked memo—that closing 22 local branches would be “painful” for customers. Thirteen towns in Scotland are to lose their last bank. Prime Minister, I will give you one other opportunity: as the majority shareholder, will you meet RBS and make the case to keep the bank branches open?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has asked me this question on a number of occasions, and I have made the point in response to every one of those
questions—and the answer is not going to change today—that these are commercial decisions for the banks involved. We do have a duty as a Government: we look at how the market is working for people, and that is why we established the access to banking standard that commits banks to carry out a certain number of steps before closing a branch. It is also why we welcome the fact that the Post Office has reached an agreement with the banks that will allow more customers than ever before to use post office services, so about 99% of personal customers are able to carry out their day-to-day banking at a post office as a result of that new agreement. That is the Government making sure that people are covered by the services they need.

Ian Blackford: I would simply say to the Prime Minister that we own RBS: it is time that you took your own responsibilities. By closing these branches and replacing some with mobile banking vans, which do not provide disability access, the Royal Bank of Scotland appears to be in breach of the UK Equality Act 2010. Wheelchair user Sandra Borthwick has described her experience of banking outside as “degrading”. Does the Prime Minister agree that RBS has a legal responsibility to offer equality of services to disabled customers, and will she hold RBS to account on this issue?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that, of course, we all want to see that all customers are able to access the services that they need—that is, both customers who are disabled and customers who live in remote areas. As I have said to him, this is a commercial decision that has been taken by the Royal Bank of Scotland. Banks are closing branches—other banks are closing branches—because what they see is actually less use being made of those branches. As the right hon. Gentleman has been talking about matters financial, I am sorry that he was not able to stand up and welcome the fact that today’s trade figures for Scotland show that their biggest export market remains the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call Damian Green.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Q11. [903519] Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Thank you—it is a lot easier asking them than answering them.

It is vital for long-term prosperity that the Government maintain infrastructure investment. With this in mind, and especially as proposals for new bridges are currently fashionable, may I ask the Prime Minister to commit the Government to a very practical idea, which is an early start on the lower Thames crossing between Kent and Essex? This would create up to 5,000 jobs, relieve pressure on the motorway network and provide a significant boost to the economy of the whole eastern side of England.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right in drawing attention to the impact of infrastructure when it is developed in various parts of the UK. On the specific point of the lower Thames crossing, I know that is going to unlock opportunities and economic growth for the region and the country, and will offer better connections, new connections and better journeys. It is, of course, part of the biggest investment in England’s road network in a generation.

As my right hon. Friend knows, Highways England has announced the preferred route; it did that last year. I recognise this has raised some concerns in affected constituencies, but may I assure him and other Members that there are going to be further opportunities, for both those who support these proposals and those who do not, to give their views and to have their say? But he is absolutely right: new infrastructure developments such as this can make a huge impact not only on jobs during the development of that infrastructure, but on the economy, locally and nationally.

Q2. [903509] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Outside a customs union with the EU, many UK businesses would face, in the Brexit Secretary’s own words, “complex and punitive ‘rules of origin’ tariffs”. Given the Prime Minister’s aim for frictionless trade post-Brexit, will she confirm whether she intends to pursue a customs union with the EU?

The Prime Minister: I have said this on many occasions and I am very happy to repeat it: leaving the European Union means that we will be leaving the single market. We will no longer be members of the single market or the customs union. We want to be able to sign and implement trade deals with other parts of the world, as part of an independent trade policy. We are looking forward to the negotiations for a bespoke deal—a comprehensive free trade agreement—between the UK and the European Union for the future. We will be looking for as tariff-free and frictionless a trade agreement as possible.

Q12. [903520] Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Many Members on both sides of the House, myself included, have expressed concern about the future of our national defences. Of course, the fact is that this Government will always take the right long-term decisions to protect our national security, so will my right hon. Friend assuage those concerns and assure the House that this approach will continue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very important subject. In July the Government initiated the national security capability review, in support of the ongoing implementation of the 2015 national security strategy and strategic defence and security review, to ensure that we do indeed have the capabilities, and the investment in those capabilities, that we need in our national security, and that that investment and those capabilities are as effective and joined up as possible.

I agreed the high-level findings of the review with ministerial colleagues at the National Security Council, and I have directed that the work should be finalised, with a view to publishing a report in late spring. It has been a significant piece of work and it will help to ensure that we have the right capabilities. As part of that, we recognise that more work is needed on defence and on modernising defence. We want to ensure that the defence budget is being spent intelligently and efficiently, and that we are investing in the capabilities we need to keep our nation safe. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will update the House in due course.
Q3. [903510] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It is a tragedy that in the past year knife crime has risen by 26%. The Youth Violence Commission is conducting the first national youth survey of experiences of trauma and violence. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss the root causes of youth violence and how we can find solutions?

The Prime Minister: This is an important issue and obviously we need to look at it. Although, as the hon. Lady will know, crimes traditionally measured by the independent crime survey have dropped by well over one third since 2010, we need to consider the root causes of violence—particularly among young people, and especially knife crimes. The nature of crime is changing; it is important that we remain adaptable and resilient, but we need to understand that. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about youth violence and the causes of youth violence.

Q4. [903522] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): On 28 December, the East of England Ambulance Service attended an address in Lowestoft at which a man was sadly confirmed as having died. This followed on from a call the previous afternoon from the police regarding the same person, who it appears was left outside overnight in what were inhospitable weather conditions. I have now spoken to the person who made the initial call to the emergency services and I have serious concerns as to how the matter was handled, including why the case came to light only in the past few days.

Will the Prime Minister endorse my request to the East of England Ambulance Service and Suffolk police to instigate immediately a full and independent inquiry to establish exactly what happened and to then put in place measures to ensure that such a tragic event does not happen again?

The Prime Minister: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns about this event and the tragedy that happened. First, we should recognise that all those who deliver our ambulance services work hard and regularly go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure our safety, but concerns have been raised about the provision of services in the East of England Ambulance Service trust, including, obviously, this very, very worrying, tragic case.

As I said earlier in response to the Leader of the Opposition, we take these cases very seriously—any claims that patient safety has been put at risk are taken seriously. The Department of Health and Social Care has received assurances that these reports are being investigated by the trust, in conjunction with its commissioners, as a serious incident. This is also an issue that my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Health has discussed with the chief executives of NHS England and NHS Improvement.

Q5. [903513] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): This morning, thousands of people across the country heard my friend and former boss, Baroness Tessa Jowell, tell the House for the first time since she was diagnosed with a high-grade brain tumour. As ever, it was a joy to hear her utter relentless positivity and complete commitment to changing the world. In a speech in the other place tomorrow, she will call for improved cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Will the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary meet Tessa, me and health experts to discuss how to improve outcomes to meet Tessa’s goal and ultimately save lives?

The Prime Minister: The whole House was saddened to hear of Baroness Jowell’s diagnosis, but I am sure it was encouraged by the positive approach that she has taken. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary says that Baroness Jowell’s speech this morning was very moving. I am sure that everyone across the whole House sends her their very best wishes. Cancer treatment is a priority for the Government, and we want to make sure that the best treatments are provided. We will consider investing in anything that improves that. We have accepted 96 recommendations in the NHS cancer strategy, but we need constantly to look at this. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is happy to meet the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and Baroness Jowell.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr John Hayes.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr John Hayes.
Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am only just beginning, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister will know of the devastation, debt and despair caused by fixed-odds betting terminals, which are now widespread—a far cry from the charm of the bingo hall, the pools coupon or the style of the sport of kings. Given the fact that there is a review, will she meet me and others to discuss how the maximum bet on those terminals can be reduced, and will she take the chance simultaneously to plan a crackdown on online gambling sites that target young children? The stakes are too high to gamble with our children’s futures.

The Prime Minister: We are clear that the fixed odds betting terminals stakes will be cut to make sure that we have a safe and sustainable industry where vulnerable people and children are protected. As I suspect my right hon. Friend knows, the consultation that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport launched on this closed yesterday, so a final decision will be made in due course. He will know, with regard to the specific point about children—this is important—that there are in place controls to prevent children and young people from accessing online gambling. The Gambling Commission has asked the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board to examine the wider relationship between children and gambling. I think it is important, as we take these decisions, that we all recognise the potential threats and dangers, but that we ensure that we have the best information possible in order to be able to act.

Q6. [903514] Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Amber Rose Cliff, my 25-year-old constituent, lost her battle with cervical cancer and died in January last year. Amber went to her GP around 30 times with symptoms and repeatedly asked for a smear test, but she was refused. She got the test only when she paid to have it done privately, and sadly, the cancer had spread by that point. Will the Prime Minister support Amber’s family in their campaign to introduce Amber’s law, which would change the regulations so that women under 25 could access a smear test on the national health service when they were symptomatic?

The Prime Minister: I send my condolences—I am sure the whole House does—to Amber’s family on this terrible thing that has happened. Look, the smear test is hugely important. Sadly, what we see, even for those women who qualify today to have the smear test, is that too many women do not take it up. I know that it is not a comfortable thing to do, because I have it, as others do, but it is so important for women’s health. I first want to encourage women to actually have the smear test. Secondly, the hon. Lady raised an issue about the availability of that test. I will ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to look at this issue. It is a question that has been raised before for those who are under the age of 25. Of course, action has been taken in terms of the vaccine that has been introduced for teenagers. There have been some questions about that—I have had people in my constituency raising questions about it. We need to address this issue in every way possible, so we will look at the question of the age qualification for the smear test. My overall message is, please, those who are called for a smear test, go and have it.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Bexley rugby club on its 60th anniversary and agree with me that the pursuit of sport is good for health and wellbeing?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to endorse what my right hon. Friend says about sport, and indeed to join him in congratulating Bexley rugby club on this significant anniversary. I am sure that over all those years it has given many young people and others an introduction to the joy of sport and the way that sport can be both good for the community and for society, and for the individuals, so I am happy to endorse his claim.

Q7. [903515] Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): This week, I have been approached by a constituent, Emma-Jane Best, who is a single mum, and up until December, was a teacher. She has been told that she is going to have to wait over six weeks for a universal credit payment and has been denied a hardship loan. This means that she is living on £20 a week child benefit and the charity of food banks. Will the Prime Minister tell us, is that how universal credit is supposed to work, and does she regret Emma-Jane’s son now joining the nearly 9,000 children living in poverty in Batley and Spen?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, we made changes to the operation of universal credit, which were announced in the Budget, including changes that mean that the availability of advance payments has increased and that the size of those advance payments has increased. But I am sure, if she would like to write in with the details of the case, that we can look at it and make sure that it is properly considered.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the Government are making further progress in reducing the deficit. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be reckless to change course now in favour of a policy of renationalisation, which would burden taxpayers such as those in Erewash with an estimated bill of over £170 billion?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It has not been easy reducing the deficit in the way we have. We had to deal with the biggest deficit in our peacetime history, which was left to us by the Labour party, but by decisions the Government—[Interruption.] Yes, yes. Labour might not like hearing that, but it is what happened. It is by the hard work of the British people and by decisions the Government have taken that we have been able to reduce the deficit. Adding to it an extra £170 billion to meet the ideological desires of the Leader of the Opposition would saddle people up and down this country with higher debt, and ordinary people would pay the price.

Q9. [903517] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister instruct the Department for Work and Pensions to release the details of benefits
claimants with disabilities who took their own lives after their claims were turned down or their payments stopped without notice or significantly reduced?

The Prime Minister: The DWP does not give details of individuals with whom it deals, and that is absolutely right; what it does is ensure we have a welfare system that provides support to those who need it and increasingly encourages those who can to get into the workplace, because we continue to believe that work is the best route out of poverty.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): In a December press release, the Bank of England described the UK’s financial system as both “a national asset” and “a global public good”. Does my right hon. Friend think it unreasonable that the UK financial services sector, which pays billions of pounds in taxes, wants to hear the Government’s ambition to ensure that the City of London remains a global pre-eminent financial centre, in the same way they set out their ambition for other sectors last summer?

The Prime Minister: I have said in this Chamber and outside that we retain the ambition of ensuring the City of London remains a global financial centre, and that is indeed what we are working on. I was very pleased to welcome a number of senior representatives from the financial services sector to No. 10 Downing Street only a few weeks ago and to sit down and talk to them about how to do exactly that. London’s place as a financial centre for the world is not just a benefit to the UK; it is a benefit to the global financial system and to the EU.

Q10. [903518] Mr Tammanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is wonderful that while others are talking about building walls we in Britain are talking about building bridges—connecting communities, despite Brexit—but let me reassure our American friends that the Mexicans, no, the French, will be paying for it, because our NHS needs to be properly funded first. Rather than building an airy-fairy 22-mile-long bridge over the English channel or a £50 billion Boris airport in the Thames estuary, however, will the Prime Minister confirm when the western rail link, the 6 km rail track to Heathrow from my constituency, which will connect Wales, the south and the west directly to Heathrow, will finally be built? Or will we be subjected to further sluggish studies and consultations?

The Prime Minister: I believe that there is very strong cross-party support for the western rail link for Heathrow. The hon. Gentleman has expressed his support, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) has also been supporting it. It would reduce journey times for passengers in the south-west and could support the Thames valley economy as well. I myself, as a Thames valley MP, have looked into it previously. Development funding has been committed for the project and the Department for Transport will provide further detail on the timing in due course.

Dr Andrew Murray (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the parties in Northern Ireland on the resumption today of talks at Stormont. What more can be done to ensure that the Executive are restored and the nightmare of direct rule avoided?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The people of Northern Ireland need strong devolved government and political leadership, and cannot continue to have their public services suffer from the lack of an Executive and Ministers to make key policy and budget decisions. We are determined to re-establish a fully functioning, inclusive devolved Administration that works for everyone in Northern Ireland. We believe that a basis for a deal exists, and that is why, as he has said, today my right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary has started a set of political talks to restore the Executive. I believe that this is very important, and I would strongly encourage all parties to come together and focus on the job of restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Q13. [903521] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Over Christmas, Toon Aid and Newcastle United football fans raised more than £50,000 for the West End food bank in my constituency—which you are soon to visit, Mr Speaker—with the £50,000,000, helping to feed people like John, who, despite having chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arthritis, dyspepsia, prostatism, type 2 diabetes and anxiety and depression, was sanctioned for not trying hard enough to find work. Will the Prime Minister congratulate the people of Newcastle on their generosity, and will she explain why it was necessary?

The Prime Minister: I applaud all those who have given their time voluntarily and raised money through their activities across the board. The hon. Lady has given a specific example of the work of people in Newcastle. I commend people who raise money for causes, but, as she knows, I cannot discuss an individual case at the Dispatch Box. I think it important for us to have a system that works properly and fairly, and I am sure that if she wishes to raise the individual case with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, it will be looked into.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Prime Minister will know that the welcome introduction of the national minimum wage has created an as yet unresolved difficulty for the care sector, specifically relating to 24-hour care for those with significant learning difficulties. The issue is connected with sleep-in shifts and money owed to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Will she agree to meet me, and a number of concerned colleagues, so that we can discuss how we can best find a way out of the impasse?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue that is of concern to a number of organisations and Members of Parliament, and I should be happy to meet her to discuss it. The Cabinet Office has been working with the relevant Department—now called the Department of Health and Social Care—to try to resolve it, and measures have been taken to defer the implementation of certain aspects. However, we continue to work on it, and are happy to look into it further.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): No one has been charged over Poppi Worthington’s death, although the 13-month-old was probably anaesthetised in the hours before her death at home. Poppi was not known to social services, despite a staggeringly
troubled family history. Will the Prime Minister respond to our cross-party calls for a public inquiry, so that we can learn lessons from this and make children safer throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: Everyone in the country who is aware of the horrific abuse that was carried out has been shocked and appalled by it, and, obviously, by the tragic circumstances of Poppi’s death. I am sure that all Members will join me in offering condolences.

I understand that the Crown Prosecution Service has announced that it is considering the coroner’s decision in liaison with the Cumbria constabulary. I think it right for us to allow that process to continue and to await the outcome before deciding whether any further action is needed. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that I—if along with, I think, all other Members—am well apprised of the significance of the issue and how appalling this tragedy was, and of the need for us to ensure not only that there is justice but that lessons are learnt.
Presidents Club Charity Dinner

12.45 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he thinks that it is appropriate that David Meller remain a non-executive director in the Department for Education following the revelations about the men only Presidents Club dinner.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): Mr Speaker, I assure you that I have read the papers this morning. It has been reported that last Thursday, the Presidents Club—this is the first time I have heard of the club—[Interruption.] I am just saying, I had not heard of it before. This club hosted a charity dinner to raise money for causes such as Great Ormond Street Hospital in London. I understand from reports that there are allegations of inappropriate and lewd behaviour at this event.

It is quite extraordinary to me that, in the 21st century, allegations of this kind are still emerging. Women have the right to feel safe wherever they work, and the type of behaviour alleged to have occurred is completely unacceptable. I have recently taken on ministerial responsibility for the board of the Department for Education and was previously Minister for Women. As hon. Members will know, David Meller has been a non-executive board member in the Department for Education and chair of the apprenticeship delivery board. The Government expect board members to adhere to the code of conduct for board members of public bodies, which clearly states that they should adhere to the seven principles of public life.

David Meller is stepping down as a non-executive board member for the Department for Education and as a member of the apprenticeship delivery board. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is absolutely clear that that is the right thing to do. In case right hon. and hon. Members or you, Mr Speaker, are in any doubt, the event was absolutely nothing to do with the Department for Education.

Jess Phillips: I thank the Minister and welcome David Meller standing down. The undercover report in the Financial Times about the event organised by the charitable trust that David Meller chairs tells more than just an alarming story. I notice that the organisation wants to send out a clear message that this is unacceptable. I have also been the Deputy Speaker of the House, and this is an issue on which women across the House combine. We have to send a clear message that this is unacceptable.

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend raises a number of important issues, not least sexual abuse and harassment in schools, and that is where the sort of culture that ends up at a dinner like last night’s starts. Unless we get it right in schools, it will simply feed through to the rest. It is not just about forcing people to do the right thing; it is about changing attitudes. The reports of women being bought and sold are extraordinary. I contributed to a WhatsApp group this morning and said that words failed me. I am quite old—I was born in 1955—and as I have said at the Dispatch Box before, I thought that things had changed. However, it is absolutely clear that things have not changed. I think that there is an association between wealthy people and this sort of behaviour, and we have to send a clear message that it is unacceptable.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): As a mother of three young women who are the same age as the hostesses who attended this function, I can only describe my initial reaction as emotional and like a lioness. I immediately put myself in the position of it having been one of my daughters. That must be the reaction of every woman and every mother across the country—[Hon. Members: “And fathers!”] And fathers, too. My apologies. I am a single parent; I never think of fathers. I support the Minister in her response. It was not just Conservative men at that dinner; they were from all political denominations. The problem is with the dinner itself, and the fact that there are men who attend those dinners and think that that is appropriate. One of the prizes on the brochure was plastic surgery to “add spice to your wife”.

It is appalling that this continues, and I support the Minister in her response. We all have a duty to ensure that these dinners never happen again.

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend is a lioness in so many ways. I also speak as the mother of a daughter, and this can become very personal. I have also been the Deputy Chief Whip, and to some extent had duties and responsibilities towards women in the House. This is an issue on which women across the House combine. We have to send out a clear message that this is unacceptable. People need to know where the line is, because there is a line. This is about changing attitudes.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for securing this urgent question. I welcome the new Secretary of State to his place and thank the Minister for her comments today. I hope that the Secretary of State is as disappointed as I am that a board member and a Minister in his Department attended an event that described itself as “the most un-PC event of the year”. [122x-3392]…
Let us be clear about what that meant. It meant an event where women were invited not as guests but as objects for rich and powerful men. They had to act as hostesses and were forced to wear revealing clothes. A number have reported that they were groped and sexually harassed. Will the Secretary of State make it clear that, like me, he believes those women and that the reported events were totally unacceptable?

I welcome the Minister’s comment that organising this kind of event should not be acceptable for any official, let alone a member of the board of the Department. I also welcome the fact that David Meller is standing down. He should not have any other role in education. Will the Secretary of State also investigate the attendance at the event of the Minister for children? Can he confirm reports that the Minister attended previous events and was invited personally by David Meller this year? His Department is responsible for safeguarding millions of children, for caring for thousands of victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, for tackling sexual harassment and violence in our schools, colleges and universities and for educating another generation of girls and boys. Is it not time that it started leading by example?

Anne Milton: I will lead by example. I have spoken to the Secretary of State this morning, and I know that he is equally appalled by the reports of this event. I have also spoken to my fellow Minister in the Department. He did not stay at the event long—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Anne Milton: I know that my hon. Friend the Minister found the event extremely uncomfortable. He left, and he was truly shocked by the reports that have emerged. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) said, this is an event that is attended by men of various party political allegiances—[Interruption.] Sadly, they do not know any better, and that is the tragedy—[Interruption.] That is the tragedy. Opposition Members are right to feel appalled. Believe you me, I also feel appalled. It is a tragedy that they do not know where the line should be and that they attended these events.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the clarity and swiftness of her response—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Maria Caulfield: In this centenary year of suffrage, is this not an opportunity for all female parliamentarians to unite and send a clear message on behalf of all women in this country that this behaviour is no longer acceptable?

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In this centenary year, there is an important opportunity for women not just in this House but around the country—but particularly here—to join together and send out the message that this has to change. If there are men who do not understand what precisely it is that needs to change, they can come and talk to me and I will tell them.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Obviously, the Minister has been fairly robust in the comments she has made so far, but she said that those men “do not know where the line should be”. This event was billed as “the most un-PC event of the year”, so they clearly do know where the line should be, and they decided to cross it. We have heard reports of toilets being monitored and of women who were lingering too long in them being called out and led back to the ballroom. That is not sexism; that is slavery. It is appalling. I was a teacher for 20 years, and I had occasion to deal with sexism, but never on this scale or to this degree. Back in October, the previous Secretary of State for Education said that “sexist…language must have no place in our society, and parliamentarians of all parties have a duty to stamp out this sort of behaviour wherever we encounter it”.

We might think that everyone agreed with that statement, but we need to ask ourselves whether the current Secretary of State and the Government really do agree with it. This comes at the start of what we were told would be a radical shake-up of the culture of sexual harassment—

Mr Speaker: Order. I recognise the extreme sensitivity of this subject, and I respect the hon. Lady and want to hear what she has to say, but she has now exceeded her time. She has given us a real sense of her anger, and I ask her now to put her question, please.

Carol Monaghan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will put a couple of questions. First, what message does this send to our young people, and how are we giving our teachers the ability to fight sexism when the Government are appointing such people to prominent roles? I also ask the Minister, what screening is being carried out of people who are being appointed to all Departments?

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Lady, but I would just like to say that I do not think my attitude towards this issue and many others affecting women could be described as “fairly robust”. I am extremely robust and extremely radical. She made a point about where the line should be drawn. I have not seen how the event was billed, but the people who attended it clearly did not know where the line was. We need to make it clear where it is—[Interruption.] If Opposition Members would listen for a minute, I would just like to say that this is not about this Government. I will answer the points about due diligence and governance, but this is an issue for women that goes right across the political spectrum. This is not just about this Government or Conservative Members; this happens everywhere. If hon. Members do not think that it happens everywhere, they will be in for shock. The Government do understand, and there is no doubt that measures will be put in place so that proper due diligence is done. We cannot do that just once, however; we have to look at people’s behaviour continually. We cannot just do it as a one-off and leave it at that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Minister for her strong condemnation of this event. Does she share my disgust for the women who put themselves in a position of leadership and pimped the young ladies involved? Does she agree that their actions are also abhorrent?
Anne Milton: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that related but important issue. There were women in leadership roles who painted these women, and it does not fall far short of payment for sex. It is shocking that such women were probably encouraging other women into these sort of jobs.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that, according to the Financial Times, the Presidents Club actually includes the following disclaimer in its corporate literature for the event? It states:

“The Presidents Club shall accept no responsibility and shall not be held liable for any actions of its members, staff or event attendees that amount to harassment.”

The fact that it tried to include that disclaimer in the first place shows how shocking things are. It was trying to disclaim any responsibility for what happened. The organisers chose to make it a men-only event. They chose to treat the hostesses in this way, making them parade across the stage in front of the men, making them wear black skimpy outfits and specifying the colour of their underwear. They chose to ask them to drink before the event. Does the Minister agree that all the organisers, including the Presidents Club and all the private companies involved in organising the event, should be investigated for breaches of the law and charity rules?

Anne Milton: The right hon. Lady is obviously very angry about this, and her report—[Interruption.] Mr Speaker, do I look like somebody who is not angry? Do I look like somebody who is in any way excusing this sort of behaviour? I am not. I am absolutely shocked by the Presidents Club. If the organisers were trying to deny responsibility in their literature, perhaps they will wake up at the end of this urgent question and realise that they now do have some responsibility. Things are now out in the public domain, and Members’ contributions today will have added to that. It is shocking, but do not cry at me; I feel as appalled as all Opposition Members.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement today. She has done absolutely the right thing. I share everybody’s anger, disgust and, frankly, astonishment that an event of this nature can even have taken place. Does she think that possibly one of the best things that we could do is to ensure that every single person at that dinner who runs a big business in our country damn well gets their gender pay gap data published?

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Never miss an opportunity, I say, to mention the gender pay gap. She is absolutely right that every single business and organisation that attended that dinner should report that data at least by the end of this week.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Fawcett Society recently published a report stating that violence and harassment against women was endemic in our country, with two thirds of women over 16 reporting that they now do have some responsibility. Things are now out in the public domain, and Members’ contributions today will have added to that. It is shocking, but do not cry at me; I feel as appalled as all Opposition Members.

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement today. She has done absolutely the right thing. I share everybody’s anger, disgust and, frankly, astonishment that an event of this nature can even have taken place. Does she think that possibly one of the best things that we could do is to ensure that every single person at that dinner who runs a big business in our country damn well gets their gender pay gap data published?

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Never miss an opportunity, I say, to mention the gender pay gap. She is absolutely right that every single business and organisation that attended that dinner should report that data at least by the end of this week.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Fawcett Society recently published a report stating that violence and harassment against women was endemic in our country, with two thirds of women over 16 reporting that they have suffered sexual harassment. Does the Minister note that the employment contracts and notes for the women attending the event as hostesses asked them to be “tall, thin and pretty” and that they had to deal with what was expected to be harassment? That is surely against the law. Will she look at employment law protections and make it certain that the law is enforced, that the Equality and Human Rights Commission looks at the event and that we get some protection for vulnerable women?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I will certainly ensure that the situation is looked at with regard to employment law. I commend the Fawcett Society, which does brilliant cross-party work to further women’s rights and women’s political representation. But clearly—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady asks me from a sedentary position whether these women were self-employed. I do not know anything about the Presidents Club—[Interruption.] Let me finish. I know nothing about the Presidents Club, but we will clearly look into it, particularly if there is a suggestion that the law was broken. If any hon. Member knows of something that they think should be investigated, it would probably be helpful if they used me as a conduit and sent me their emails. I will investigate and ensure that, if any law has been broken, the full force of the law will come down on those who have broken it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I selected this urgent question because I regard it as a matter of the utmost importance, and I would like to accommodate every colleague who wants to contribute. I ask colleagues to bear in mind that there is a ten-minute rule motion to follow and two Opposition day debates, the first of which is particularly heavily subscribed. If we can have brief questions and brief replies, that would be helpful, but I do want colleagues to be heard.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister’s response and the resignation of the individual concerned. Does the Minister agree that there is much cross-party work that we could do to ensure that such events have no place in our society and that such behaviour is condemned?

Anne Milton: “Cross-party” is absolutely the phrase to use, and perhaps that work will start from today.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The outstanding journalism of Madison Marriage at the Financial Times shines a spotlight on a real problem in our society. Some men, especially the rich and powerful, feel entitled to women, view their bodies as playthings and think that the lecherous pawing and groping of women is acceptable behaviour. That a charity is prepared to facilitate that behaviour as long as wealthy men are opening their chequebooks beggars belief. I am glad that David Meller has stepped down from the board of the Department for Education—perhaps he was encouraged to do so—but does the Minister agree that the Charity Commission urgently needs to investigate the failure of the trustees of this charity to discharge their duties to protect health and safety and the reputation of the charity?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady mentions rich entitled men, but I will also mention powerful entitled men because this is not just about the rich. I gather that Great Ormond Street Hospital is not going to take the money that was raised by the event, which is a start, and I also gather that the hon. Lady has raised her point with the Charity Commission.
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Minister for her robust response, which is unequivocally supported by Conservative Members. The businesses involved need to be hit in the pocket. What more can the Minister do to send out a clear message that this culture is unacceptable and to damage their profits?

Anne Milton: Today’s contributions from all around the House should send an important message to businesses that such behaviour is unacceptable, but this does not just happen at big charity events. We have heard about sexual abuse and harassment in this House but, believe you me, it is also going on in the workplaces of businesses up and down the country.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I suggest to the Minister that this is more than a collective misjudgment; it is a deliberate sticking up of two fingers to those who are perceived to be part of the PC culture. One way in which her Department could root out this behaviour is to expedite the introduction of compulsory personal, social, health and economic education in our schools, so that at least the next generation of men will know that it is totally unacceptable.

Anne Milton: Sex and relationships education is now compulsory. The hon. Lady raises an important point that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) also raised. What really matters is that we breed a new generation of young people who understand where the boundaries lie. What has gone so terribly wrong that we have bred young men—I suggest that a lot of people at the event were perhaps 20 or maybe even 30 years younger than me—who think that this sort of thing is acceptable?

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her considered response. However, it is frankly not good enough to say that the Minister for children and families stayed a short time, which is a very subjective term—it might be an hour to some and three hours to others. Can she advise whether that same Minister reported back after he had seen, at worst, illegal or, at best, unsavoury activities during that event?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady will have to take me as vouching for the Minister for children and families. I know he felt deeply uncomfortable. I would be surprised if he had seen all the publicity material for the event, but I know he felt very, very uncomfortable. The hon. Lady will have to believe me that, from his demeanour this morning, the Minister for children and families was truly shocked.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I was profoundly shocked by the reports of what happened at the event organised by the Presidents Club, and I am pleased that the Minister has given such a robust condemnation of the event. Although she has been very loyal to her ministerial colleague, who reportedly did not stay for any long period of time, it is also reported that the same hon. Gentleman attended the Presidents Club event on a previous occasion. I have no idea whether that is true, but that is what has been reported. If that is the case, should he not consider his position?

Anne Milton: I have no idea whether the Minister for children and families has attended the event before, but I know that senior Members on both sides of the House have attended this event. Let us hope that this urgent question draws a line in the sand and demonstrates to hon. Members that they should think twice about attending any event like this ever again.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): With 64% of teachers in mixed secondary schools telling UK Feminista that they hear sexist language on a weekly basis, what message does the Minister think the attendance of the new Minister for children and families at this event sends to those teachers who are trying to combat sexism in their classrooms? And what action, not words, will the Department take to address it?

Anne Milton: I know the Secretary of State will want to look at all aspects of this, not least the due diligence. The hon. Lady is right, but hearing sexist language in the playground and in schools is just the tip of the iceberg. The stories of sexual abuse, rape and harassment happening in some of our schools are shocking.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): In light of the fact that a departmental non-executive director and a Minister attended this despicable event, does the Minister agree that it may be time for a review of the ministerial code of conduct and of the seven principles of public life to ensure that they reflect the commitment to the standards of equality and decency that we expect from our public servants? That will set an example and send a message to society as a whole.

Anne Milton: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is looking at a number of issues, and I believe the code of conduct is being reviewed. The tragedy is that we should not need a code of conduct, but we clearly do. It is a tragedy that we need it. Why do people need to be told to behave appropriately? Why do they need to be told not to use sexist or racist language? Why do they need to be told where the boundaries are? People clearly do, and that is the sadness of it. I am robust and angry, but a little bit of me is also extremely sad.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As a former Education Minister, I know jolly well that civil servants brief Ministers on what events are in their diary and give them information. I have a lot of time for the Minister. Can she find out exactly what was said to the Minister for children and families about attending the event last week?

Anne Milton: The Minister for children and families did not attend in any official capacity. I understand that he attended not as a Minister, but as a private individual.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Financial Times reports that lot four of the charity auction last week included lunch with the Foreign Secretary. Has the Minister spoken to him? Does she know whether the lunch is still going ahead? What message does it send out to the world that our Foreign Secretary endorses such an event?

Anne Milton: I make it absolutely clear that the Foreign Secretary knew nothing of his inclusion in any auction, and he in no way endorsed the event.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is absolutely clear from the Financial Times report that the women were employed to be harassed. They were forced to sign a disclaimer beforehand that they were not given time to read. Whatever the Minister’s personal views, will she take away the message from this House that we do not have confidence in the Minister for children and families, who attended the event and who is meant to be in charge of child protection?

Anne Milton: Yes, I think they were employed to be a great deal more than harassed. We will look at all aspects of this in relation to employment law. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said earlier, this brings into sharp light the women leaders—the people who run the businesses that employed these young women. We need to look at it all, and we will take robust action. Have no fear about that.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As a former teacher, I woke up this morning thinking, “What on earth will my former students be thinking this morning about the state of the world?” It is absolutely disgusting. I press the Minister on the point already made about bringing sex and relationships education into schools for the upcoming academic year. Sex and relationships education has never been more needed. There is no doubt that the Department will make sure these guidelines are out as soon as possible, because there is clearly an urgent need. It is absolutely vital that we understand what sort of relationship and sex education young people, and I have been shocked, in my six months of being an MP, at the young girls who have an expectation that it is normal to sleep with their boyfriend’s friends, carry their boyfriend’s knives and behave in a certain way; and language is so important, as well as words. If it transpires that the Minister did not report his concerns, and that he attended the event on previous occasions, it is obvious that he needs to resign. Our women, our young girls are too important to be getting this kind of message from our leaders and to think that it is acceptable.

Anne Milton: The Minister for children and families submitted a report to me first thing this morning, at the earliest opportunity.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Minister talks about the importance of talking to young people. I am sure that all Members here spend time talking to young people, and I have been shocked, in my six months of being an MP, at the young girls who have an expectation that it is normal to sleep with their boyfriend’s friends, carry their boyfriend’s knives and behave in a certain way; and language is so important, as well as words. If it transpires that the Minister did not report his concerns, and that he attended the event on previous occasions, it is obvious that he needs to resign. Our women, our young girls are too important to be getting this kind of message from our leaders and to think that it is acceptable.

Anne Milton: Language is critical because language says more than the words that are said, because it describes underlying attitudes. With relationship and sex education in schools, I think we can make young people understand what attitudes lie behind the words that they use.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): These were crimes against women, but I hope the Minister will also agree that these were crimes against a decent society, and that plenty of men share my bewilderment and revulsion at what has gone on. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) the Minister offered to be a conduit, so would she possibly be a conduit to Home Office Ministers, who might then refer the matter on to the Metropolitan police for consideration of crimes such as indecent exposure and sexual assault?

Anne Milton: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s contribution, because it is important that we all recognise that men can be very powerful agents for change, at all levels, concerning the abuse of women. The appropriate authorities will look at all of this. Obviously, today’s exchanges in the Chamber will be read by Home Office Ministers, and I know they will take this matter very seriously; I give the hon. Gentleman my assurance of that.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What can I say? It is an absolutely appalling event. It objectified women, undermines the steps we have taken towards equality and perpetuates fundamentally abuse in society. When it comes to the Minister, I have to say I believe it is absolutely incongruous to be working seriously on sexual harassment in Parliament and beyond whilst attending this type of event.

Anne Milton: I will finish where I started, and that is to say that I share the hon. Lady’s views. Words absolutely failed me when I heard reports of this event.
Points of Order

1.22 pm

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A slew of points of order. I call Tonia Antoniazzi.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on how to impress upon the Prime Minister her duty to respond to the First Minister Carwyn Jones’s offer of financial help for the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has transmitted her opinion on this matter through the attempted route of a bogus, albeit mildly ingenious, point of order. I dare say the Prime Minister will learn of what the hon. Lady has said, and it is up to the Prime Minister to decide by what means, and when, to respond.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Pursuant to the urgent question that was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills has answered very competently on the issues for the Department, but a number of issues are still outstanding regarding the conduct of the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and it would be wrong for the right hon. Lady to try to answer that. Will you suggest to me, Mr Speaker, how we may be able to get those answers about the Minister’s personal conduct in relation to this event, and how that may be tabled in this House so that we can all see whether he is fit for office?

Mr Speaker: It is open to the hon. Gentleman to table questions. The Minister, very fairly, pointed out that the Under-Secretary of State had not attended in an official capacity. However, the Under-Secretary of State is a Minister, and it is perfectly within the wit and sagacity of the hon. Gentleman to table questions to him. That is one route open to him. If he wants to raise the matter in other ways, I am sure he can consult his colleagues and decide whether, and if so how, to do so.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday evening, it was confirmed by No. 10 that Defence would be coming out with a national capability review, and that there would be a statement in the House today from the Defence Secretary. We were told this morning that there would be a statement in the House today, that there would be coming out with a national capability review, and that there would be an oral statement today, I think I can safely say that I would now be aware of it. But one of those to whom I look for worldly wisdom and procedural sagacity is enthusiastically waving a paper at me, though sadly, from the hon. Gentleman’s point of view, on this occasion—perhaps correctly—the inscribed word consists of two letters, of which the first is N and the second of which is O.

What I would say further to the hon. Gentleman—I do not scoff at the issue he has raised, which is an issue of great importance to Members in all parts of the House—is that I am sure other Members will be pursuing this matter. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who chairs the Defence Committee, is extremely well known to me, and he is as persistent a colleague as I know and takes a great interest in this matter. I rather imagine that if he is discontented about it, or simply in eager pursuit of ministerial answers, he will seek to ensure that the attention of the House is focused on it. So I think the hon. Gentleman will not be alone or isolated in his interest, and in his determination that this matter be aired sooner rather than later.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During a Westminster Hall debate I led last Wednesday, on drug consumption rooms, the Minister made some comments that must be queried for their validity. First, the Minister said: “In terms of Spain, the evidence I am given by those who sit behind me is that there is one room open in Catalonia for one hour a day from Monday to Friday.” However, according to the House of Commons Library briefing that I was given, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction stated that in February 2017 there were 13 in seven cities in Spain. The Minister also said: “Canada has kept its provider, Insite, not because of the evidence that the services provided by Insite work, but because the users of Insite brought two court actions”—[Official Report, 17 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 406-407.]

However, the Canadian Supreme Court said that “during its eight years of operation, Insite has been proven to save lives with no discernible negative impact on the public safety and health objectives of Canada”.

Plainly, the Minister was inadvertently misrepresenting the facts on these two issues. Could you, Mr Speaker, indicate how I could get the Minister to set the record straight?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving me notice of this point of order. He will not. I imagine, be astonished to hear that I do not regard this as a point of order for the Chair, and I will happily explain why.

Each Member of this House is responsible for his or her contributions to debates, and these contributions are frequently open to interpretation and differences of opinion. In the spirit of transparency, I will say to the hon. Gentleman that I have heard detailed representations from the Minister concerned. The Minister is satisfied in her own mind that she has not misled anyone. There is obviously a genuine difference of opinion about this matter. The hon. Gentleman has expressed himself with his usual eloquence and alacrity, but I know that he will not expect me to adjudicate on this matter between him and the hon. Lady. We will leave it there for now, but he has ventilated his concern with some force.

If there are no further points of order, perhaps we can now move to the 10-minute rule motion.
Multi-employer Pension Schemes

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.28 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about multi-employer pension schemes, including provision for the protection of unincorporated businesses, such as plumbing businesses, from certain multi-employer pension scheme liabilities; and for connected purposes.

I must first declare an interest. My dad was a plumber and he currently receives a pension from the Plumbing and Mechanical Services (UK) Industry Pension Scheme, hereafter known as “the scheme”. That is a multi-employer pension scheme, which has potential debt issues that arise from Government legislation, and it is my desire to correct some wrongs via this proposed ten-minute rule Bill.

Let me be clear: my dad receiving a pension from the scheme is completely separate from my motives in advancing this Bill, and indeed when I first became aware of the issues, I did not know the source of his pension. However, that actually allows me to see the rationale behind the existing legislation and the flaws in it from both an employee’s and an employer’s perspective.

Workers like my dad, working in all kinds of weather, up roofs and under floors, and doing overtime at weekends and nights to get more money, deserve to be able to retire on a decent pension. They have worked hard for that all their lives, and some have worked too hard to be able to enjoy a long, happy retirement. That was why the existing scheme was set up in 1975.

The scheme is run by a trustee company, controlled by three organisations: the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers’ Federation, the Association of Plumbing and Heating Contractors and Unite the union. The nominated directors or trustees represent both employers and employees. The issue that concerns them all is legislation that stems mainly from the Pensions Act 1995, which came into being some 20 years after the scheme got up and running. That legislation was well meant, aiming to ensure that multi-employer schemes remain solvent and able to pay pensions due to former employees. Nobody can argue against that sound principle, aiming to ensure that multi-employer schemes remain solvent and able to pay pensions due to former employees. Nobody can argue against that sound principle, but the legislation also incorporated the law of unintended consequences.

From 1995 until further changes in 2005, the fund was assessed on a minimum funding basis. When valued like that, the scheme was deemed to be fully funded, so any employer leaving the scheme did so without detriment to the overall scheme and employers remaining in the scheme. However, in 2005 the assessment of such schemes was altered to a buy-out basis: if the scheme were to close down, what would be the estimated cost for an insurance company to pick up the liabilities in the form of annuities? That is where the problems began.

That process can be up to three times more expensive in its valuations, and it has been applied retrospectively, so companies that previously left the scheme in good faith and did not have to pay any shortfall—because there was not one—are now deemed to have created a debt for the scheme. That debt cannot be recovered, so it is passed on to the remaining employers. The same applies to companies that become insolvent. Those accrued debts are known as orphan liabilities. Any company that now leaves the scheme triggers a section 75 debt, which attributes orphan liabilities into the mix.

Besides leaving the scheme, there are other ways of triggering a section 75 debt, such as no longer having an employee enrolled in the scheme, a change in ownership and changing from unincorporated status. In fact, some employers have inadvertently triggered the section 75 debt process through such actions, not realising what the outcome would be.

Although an accurate way of assessing a debt share under section 75 rules has yet to be formally agreed, estimates to date provide ridiculous sums of several hundred thousand pounds—and, in some cases, more than £1 million. That is completely unsustainable and, if put into practice, will bankrupt several individuals. That in turn will create a domino effect, increasing debts on remaining scheme members until the whole thing collapses. Jobs and apprenticeships will be lost, and individuals’ and families’ lives will be completely ruined.

I mentioned my dad as a hard-working employee. Employers are also hard-working, with many doing manual work while running their own companies, working hard to create an asset that they can either sell or pass on as a legacy to a family member. Yet, because of the debt issue, those companies are now effectively worthless and cannot be sold. That happened to a company in my constituency, which closed down before Christmas because a buyer could not be found. I also know an employer who works with his son. He is approaching 70, but he still has to work—he cannot retire and pass the company on, because of the debt issue. Those are responsible employers, trying to do the right thing by their employees. It is ironic that the Government have now made it compulsory for all companies to enrol their employees into a pension fund, yet the guys who did that many years ago now feel penalised for having done so.

It feels like Governments have buried their heads in the sand, but it does not have to be that way. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) raised such concerns in a Westminster Hall debate in October 2016, and the then Pensions Minister pledged to do work on the issue. Of course, Pensions Ministers come and go, and now others have to pick up the baton.

A couple of weeks ago, the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) brought about an Adjournment debate on this issue, and she was willing to sponsor the Bill. She raised several possible solutions, which appeared to be dismissed by the Minister. I intend to return to some of those and rebut the Minister’s answers.

As I come to solutions, let us remember that, using conservative estimates, the last actuarial valuation in 2014 said the scheme was fully-funded, based on technical provisions. It therefore makes sense to move away from the buy-out assessment, which is not implemented even if an employer makes a debt contribution. If an employer pays a debt, in theory that still does not protect its own workers, because the money goes into the general pot. That said, the reality is that allowing a change to the method of evaluation will allow the scheme to continue to function and honour its pay-outs.

Another ask is that orphaned liabilities are taken out of debt calculations. Why should current employers pay for historic debts applied retrospectively? Additionally,
the Pension Protection Fund should be the guarantor of last resort for orphaned liabilities. It is hoped that such a guarantee would not be instigated, but it is the correct measure. We are currently in the crazy position of Carillion having created a pensions black hole while paying top staff handsomely, with the PPF picking up the slack. However, the Government are unwilling to do the same for the plumbing pensions. Carillion will make more firms insolvent, putting further liabilities on to the pension scheme, yet the Government are stepping in to help the Carillion pensioners but not the plumbers.

I also suggest that if the PPF has to step in for orphaned debts, in reality the whole scheme will have failed anyway. The Minister stated that using the PPF in such a way would be unfair to payers of the PPF levy. However, the plumbing pension fund is in fact a levy payer, so that argument falls down there.

We must also put legislation in place to allow unincorporated businesses to change, to protect them from unlimited liability. They must be able to incorporate without triggering a section 75 debt. The Minister claimed that that is possible under existing legislation, but it is not as straightforward as he made out. A number of exemptions act as barriers, with the main one being the funding test from the flexible apportionment arrangement. They must be removed, and my Bill aims to do that. The Minister needs to understand that that option is available only to employers currently participating in the scheme and not those who have left or are no longer trading. That is why the other measures I have outlined are also critical.

As the Government have changed legislation to ensure that all employees are required to have some form of pension, we have a duty to remove any anomalies from existing schemes that employers have paid into in good faith. It is an act of folly to allow a fully funded scheme to collapse, risking jobs, succession planning and even family homes. That is why I will pursue the Bill, which has the support of six political parties. I will also happily take any recommendations from the Government's White Paper in due course.

It has been argued that the plumbers' pension scheme cannot be treated differently. I would say it is unique, and it must be treated differently if need be. I will pursue this to the bitter end.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Alan Brown, Pete Wishart, Deidre Brock, Patricia Gibson, Gavin Newlands, Jim Shannon, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Mr Jim Cunningham, Sir Peter Bottomley, Peter Aldous, Stephen Kerr and Hywel Williams present the Bill.

Alan Brown accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June, and to be printed (Bill 156).
uncertainty and domestic pressures, we need to focus on our own finances and public services, not on showing compassion to those in need elsewhere; there will be those who say that if we need global alliances to help to preserve trade and investment, that must come ahead of other considerations, including human rights; and there will be those who say that we have enough on our plate trying to manage Brexit, and that the rest of the world’s problems can be left to the rest of the world. But they could not be more wrong.

Our global leadership is needed now more than ever, not least because the five challenges that currently leave 65 million people in our world internally displaced or as refugees are getting only worse. Those challenges are: first, the state-led violence faced by minority groups in places such as Myanmar; secondly, the seemingly intractable wars in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere; thirdly, the cycles of division and violence in which Israel, Palestine and others are trapped; fourthly, the political instability that faces post-conflict countries such as Lebanon; and fifthly, the ever more stark realities of climate change.

Those five challenges may vary, but they all lead to one crisis: millions of vulnerable civilians, many of them children, left in desperate humanitarian need, either trapped, praying that relief and protection will come to them, or fleeing in the hope that they will find it elsewhere. Make no mistake: in the coming years those challenges will test the limit of our resources, the depths of our compassion, the strength of our global leadership and, ultimately, the greatness of our country.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that one of the really big tests relates to our international agencies, particularly the United Nations, and the political paralysis that results from the lack of commitment from Russia, China and the United States? We have to get that commitment back. If we are going to lead, Britain has to make the United Nations central to the solution to the problems my right hon. Friend is outlining.

**Emily Thornberry**: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I will develop those arguments later and look forward to listening to his speech, if he gets an opportunity to be heard.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to praise the work of the International Organization for Migration, a key UN agency leading the effort to provide solutions to the refugee crisis? Will she also take this opportunity to urge the Government, and particularly the Department for International Development, to increase funding for that key UN agency?

**Emily Thornberry**: Particularly given its current role in Bangladesh, because of the distress of the Rohingya refugees, it is clearly important to put renewed focus on that organisation. It is also unfortunate that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is not given a greater role in Bangladesh.

In my speech, I shall talk about each of those five challenges and the countries they affect—countries where the humanitarian crisis is clear and the need for global leadership is clear, but where, at present, the Government’s response is anything but.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): I have not heard much in what the right hon. Lady has said with which I disagree. The difficulty as I see it is how we use the UN when Russia and China block any attempt to move forward. Of course, Russia and China are also known for using international aid as, effectively, a loss-leader for their exports, rather than in the way we use it.

**Emily Thornberry**: The right hon. Gentleman advises the House simply to give up. We do not give up. We must work in a multilateral way, within the United Nations, and fight our corner. We should be a force for good. We should not allow the difficulties that we face make us say that it is all too hard and that we should simply walk away.

Let me make some progress. There no shortage of state persecution in our world, whether it is done by states such as Russia and Iran, which the Government rightly criticise, or those such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Philippines, whose abuses they choose to ignore. As we saw in Darfur exactly 15 years ago, when the state turns an entire group of people—even the children and the elderly—into military targets, it leaves families with an impossible choice: they must risk their lives by staying put, or risk their lives by fleeing. That is exactly what we have seen in Myanmar.

No one present needs any reminding of the horrors and hardship that the Rohingya have faced ever since the attacks in August. No one needs any telling of the desperate humanitarian situation in the camps on the Bangladesh border. No one needs any warning of the dangers of the proposed repatriation of the Rohingya. What we need to know is what action our Government are actually taking—not just to alleviate the situation, but to resolve it.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend will, like me, be disappointed to hear that the situation in Darfur is worse today than it was 15 years ago. There is more conflict there but, because of other conflicts in the world, it has sadly gone off the front pages. Will she do what she can to help the bedevilled people of Sudan and South Sudan, who have known nothing but conflict for the past 40 years?

**Emily Thornberry**: My hon. Friend, having visited the region himself, is a great expert in that area. He echoes many of the things that the shadow Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), has been telling us. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) will sum up the debate, focusing particularly on the humanitarian situation in Africa.

We know that Myanmar simply will not act without external pressure—not on consent for repatriation, and not on the guarantees the Rohingya need regarding their future security, citizenship and economic viability. Will the Minister, finally, use our role as the UN penholder on this issue to submit a Security Council resolution to ensure legally binding guarantees on and international monitoring of all these issues? Until we get those guarantees, will he urge India and Japan to withdraw their offer to fund the planned repatriation?
As we work for the future protection of the Rohingya, we cannot forget those who have already suffered and died, so let me ask the Minister this as well: is it still the case that only two of the Government’s 70 experts on international sexual violence have so far been deployed in the region, despite the vast scale of crimes that have occurred? Will he make it clear that Myanmar must allow the UN special rapporteur on human rights to carry out her investigation unobstructed, or Myanmar risks once more being a pariah state and being pushed out into the cold?

The second challenge is about the countries locked in intractable conflicts, leaving millions of innocent civilians internally displaced or as refugees. I turn to Yemen. More than 5,000 children have now been killed or injured since the war began—five children every single day. Hundreds of children are now suffering with malnutrition, cholera and diphtheria. I learned only recently what diphtheria really meant. For me, it was just about my children being injected when they were young. Diphtheria is called the strangling disease: it strangles babies. It is now stalking Yemen, and 2 million children are now receiving no schooling at all.

UNICEF usually says that such and such percentage of children require support, but last week it was clear that almost every single child in Yemen now needs humanitarian aid. Resolving this situation could not be more urgent. In that context, I do not know whether the Minister was present for the Foreign Secretary’s recent Cabinet presentation on the Yemen conflict, but, according to The Mail on Sunday, his opening line was, “We have got to do something about the Saudi war on Yemen”. Well, that is what we have been telling the Government for two years now, so thank goodness they are finally listening, even if they do so only in private.

I hope that the Minister will admit another private truth today. He says that there is no military solution in Yemen—the UN says it and even Rex Tillerson says it—but the truth is that that is not what the Saudis believe. Just a few weeks ago, exiled President Hadi said that the current Saudi military offensive would “put an end to the Houthi coup” and that, as a result, there was no purpose in peace talks. In other words, the war will continue until the Saudis secure victory, no matter how long it takes and no matter what the cost. That is unacceptable. If the Government genuinely want to do something to end the Saudi war, I suggest that, as with Myanmar, they take the following steps: pull their finger out, get their pen out and do their job. They should do the job that they have been given by the United Nations and submit a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire and the resumption of peace talks. Will the Government follow the lead of Germany and Norway and suspend arms sales for use in this conflict pending the result of a full independent investigation of alleged war crimes?

In Syria, the humanitarian situation is equally dire. The need for peace is just as great, and we face the same impasse in moving towards a political solution. From Astana to Sochi, and from Geneva to Vienna, we have rival peace processes with no agreed set of participants and no agreed set of goals or acceptable outcomes. As long as that impasse continues, the only incentive on all sides is to maximise territorial gains whatever the costs.

We see that Assad’s typically criminal assault on Idlib and eastern Ghouta is already triggering a fresh wave of displaced civilians. What we also see is the US plan for an open-ended military presence to stabilise so-called liberated areas near the Turkish border alongside a new 30,000 strong Kurdish army, which was idiotically named by the Americans as the Syrian border force. Therefore, while we condemn Turkey’s response in invading the border area and assaulting the Afrin enclave, we must ask the US how it thought Turkey was likely to respond. It is a hugely dangerous development, and it takes me back to what I said at this Dispatch Box some 15 months ago, which is that a long-term political solution in Syria must be predicated on the de-escalation of overseas forces, not a move to their permanent presence.

I have these questions for the Minister. First, what steps is he taking to resolve the impasse over peace talks? In particular, is he determined now automatically to reject any positive outcome from next week’s congress in Sochi? Secondly, can he tell us whether there are any UK personnel—military or otherwise—involved either in training the new Kurdish border force or in America’s proposed “stabilisation activities” in Northern Syria? Finally, as the violence escalates in Idlib and Rojava, what preparations are the Government making for a fresh wave of Syrian refugees fleeing towards Turkey and the Aegean sea?

The third challenge concerns countries caught in a cycle of entrenched division and sporadic violence, leaving millions of civilians trapped in poverty and deprivation. My hon. Friend the shadow International Development Secretary will talk later about the grave situations in Somalia and South Sudan.

Let me focus in particular on the millions of Palestinian refugees spread across Gaza, the west bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. For almost 70 years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency has supported those refugees and their descendants. UNRWA’s budget last year was $760 million. We could fund its work for the next 220 years with the cost of just one “Boris bridge” across the channel, and it would be a far better use of the money.

Thanks to UNRWA, 500,000 Palestinian children receive schooling every day and millions more receive healthcare. Last week, Donald Trump cut their funding by $65 million. I am reluctant to quote his Tweet, but he said:

“we pay the Palestinians...MILLIONS...and get no appreciation or respect.”

Young children will be denied education and medicine all because poor Donald Trump does not think that he gets enough “appreciation or respect”. How utterly pathetic!

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I completely endorse my right hon. Friend’s point. It is simply not acceptable for the United States President to give vent to his petulance by attacking the vital services that 5 million Palestinian refugees need. Does she also agree that we need to step up to the plate now and to bring forward or to increase the UK’s contribution to UNRWA to buy some short-term respite for the organisation? There should also be an international conference to ensure that there is a long-term solution and long-term funding for that organisation.
Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend is a mind reader: that is exactly what I was about to suggest.

The concern is that this money could trigger a domino effect. Given that most of UNRWA’s costs are local staff salaries, cuts would mean severance payments and severance payments would mean further cuts, and so on, round and round. UNRWA could face a Catch-22 situation in which it cannot afford to maintain its services, but risks bankruptcy if it cuts them, which would be a devastating scenario for Palestinian families. It is a humanitarian crisis in the making—we know that—entirely caused by the egomania of the American President.

Although we would all welcome today a commitment of extra money from the UK—I hope that is what we will hear—we know that short-term fixes by individual countries will not ultimately solve the problem. What we need, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) has said, is a long-term and multilateral solution to this shortfall. May I urge the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.

I want to focus today on Lebanon, which, for decades, has lurched from devastating conflict to chronic instability. Its peace must be preserved as it becomes the latest battleground for regional control between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri was invited to take a camping trip in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Salman. When he arrived, he was roughed up by Saudi guards and forced to read a televised statement announcing his resignation. He had to beg for a suit so that he did not resign in a T-shirt and jeans. If Riyadh’s plan was to provoke the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.

I want to focus today on Lebanon, which, for decades, has lurched from devastating conflict to chronic instability. Its peace must be preserved as it becomes the latest battleground for regional control between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri was invited to take a camping trip in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Salman. When he arrived, he was roughed up by Saudi guards and forced to read a televised statement announcing his resignation. He had to beg for a suit so that he did not resign in a T-shirt and jeans. If Riyadh’s plan was to provoke the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.

I want to focus today on Lebanon, which, for decades, has lurched from devastating conflict to chronic instability. Its peace must be preserved as it becomes the latest battleground for regional control between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri was invited to take a camping trip in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Salman. When he arrived, he was roughed up by Saudi guards and forced to read a televised statement announcing his resignation. He had to beg for a suit so that he did not resign in a T-shirt and jeans. If Riyadh’s plan was to provoke the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.

I want to focus today on Lebanon, which, for decades, has lurched from devastating conflict to chronic instability. Its peace must be preserved as it becomes the latest battleground for regional control between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri was invited to take a camping trip in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Salman. When he arrived, he was roughed up by Saudi guards and forced to read a televised statement announcing his resignation. He had to beg for a suit so that he did not resign in a T-shirt and jeans. If Riyadh’s plan was to provoke the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.

I want to focus today on Lebanon, which, for decades, has lurched from devastating conflict to chronic instability. Its peace must be preserved as it becomes the latest battleground for regional control between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri was invited to take a camping trip in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Salman. When he arrived, he was roughed up by Saudi guards and forced to read a televised statement announcing his resignation. He had to beg for a suit so that he did not resign in a T-shirt and jeans. If Riyadh’s plan was to provoke the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.

I want to focus today on Lebanon, which, for decades, has lurched from devastating conflict to chronic instability. Its peace must be preserved as it becomes the latest battleground for regional control between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri was invited to take a camping trip in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Salman. When he arrived, he was roughed up by Saudi guards and forced to read a televised statement announcing his resignation. He had to beg for a suit so that he did not resign in a T-shirt and jeans. If Riyadh’s plan was to provoke the Government today to lead that international effort and consider initiating a special funding conference, such as that held for humanitarian emergencies—the difference in this case being that we must not wait for that emergency to strike before acting? If it is not to be us, who will do it?

The fourth challenge concerns those countries trying to recover from major conflict whose stability and peace must be nurtured, lest they again collapse. We think of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More recently, we think of Libya, about which the shadow International Development Secretary will again speak later.
our Government. Instead, they continue to insist that Her Majesty the Queen, the head of the Commonwealth, must welcome him into her home. Perhaps next time the Foreign Secretary talks about “supine invertebrate jellies” he should take a good look at himself in the mirror.

However, Donald Trump’s behaviour has had one important consequence that goes to the heart of the motion. Last week, a Gallup poll revealed that in the past year global approval of American leadership had fallen to 18%, the lowest in the history of the survey. That leaves a massive void waiting to be filled by a country—so what about us? What about a country such as ours? Are we prepared to take the lead internationally on conflict resolution, climate change, human rights and the refugee crisis? Are we prepared not just to wring our hands about the suffering of the Rohingyas, the Yemeni people and the Palestinian refugees, but to do something—to take a global lead—to end that suffering? Are we prepared to stand up to Donald Trump and tell him clearly that he is not just wrong on UN funding cuts, climate change and refugees, but simply unfit to govern? That is the action we need to take, that is the policy the Labour party stands on and that is the message that this motion sends. I commend it to the House.

2.6 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for tabling the motion, the text of which the Government have at their own heart as well. Much of what she said is agreeable with. There were a number of issues that she did not raise, and I am happy to do so. There were also a number of things that we would query, and I am happy to respond.

May I begin with an apology? A change in whipping later on enables me to leave immediately after. I have spoken to take up an opportunity to see the Foreign Minister of Morocco. If I left any later, I would not be able to do that. If the House would accept, and Mr Speaker would accept, that I can slip away—

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Only if you talk about Western Sahara.

Alistair Burt: Western Sahara is always part of our discussions with friends in north Africa. Having met the right hon. Gentleman over many years, in all sorts of capacities, to discuss common interests in the area, I can assure him that he will not be disappointed in relation to that complex issue.

I thank the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury for reminding us of her manifesto, which came a good second in the general election, if I remember correctly. I am pleased to say that a number of issues raised are of great interest to us.

If the right hon. Lady wants to find a force for good, which she began with, I invite her to come to the United Nations General Assembly week in September. I would like her to see how the United Kingdom is seen, treated and spoken of in that Assembly, because of our commitment to development and to human rights, and because of the things that we stand up for. There is not a room that a Minister goes into where we do not find that. That is no praise for a Minister, because it is due to policy followed over a number of years by successive Governments, and the hard work done by our officials.

The sense that people have of the United Kingdom, certainly under this Government, is that these are issues on which we not only make a substantial contribution—it was this Government who were determined to put the target of 0.7% of gross national income into law—but give leadership. If the right hon. Lady really wants to be reminded that the United Kingdom is a force for good, rather than using it as a debating point, she should go to UNGA in September, see how we are treated and ask whether that Assembly thinks that we are force for good. She will get the answer that yes, we are. However, that is something we have to live up to. That is what these debates are about, and that is what the Government are determined to do.

Within her first weeks in the job, my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary travelled to Cox’s Bazar. There she met a young mother—one of more than 650,000 Rohingya refugees who have arrived in Bangladesh since August. Her name is Yasmin. Yasmin had fled Burma with her new-born baby, after her village was burned down and her brother murdered. On their journey, she and her baby were thrown over the side of a smuggler’s boat so that her son’s crying did not alert the Burmese soldiers. They arrived in a giant, crowded camp only for her son to contract cholera.

Yasmin is just one of the 65 million people around the world—the right hon. Lady mentioned them—who have been forcibly displaced. She is like those I have met in refugee camps in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, and like those a number of colleagues have met, because the whole House takes an interest in this issue and many colleagues have visited people in such circumstances. This number of 65 million is equivalent to the size of the UK population, and it has almost doubled in the past 20 years. Each is a life uprooted, a family torn apart and a future uncertain.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that on 16 March a private Member’s Bill on family reunification is coming up, which is supported by the Red Cross, Oxfam, the Refugee Council, Amnesty and the UNHCR. Will his Government be supportive of it, bearing it in mind that the rehabilitation of refugees is often helped when children can bring in adult parents or parents can bring in adult children so that families can be reunited?

Alistair Burt: I have not seen the content of the Bill, so I cannot give a response on that. I will, if I may, say something about children and family reunification a little later.

Human rights matter because they aim to protect the innate dignity of every human being. They promote freedom and non-discrimination, fairness and opportunity, but all too often it is the absence of those rights that drives people such as Yasmin from their homes. The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury is right that the series of challenges now facing the world in relation to the number of people moving is immense and probably more complex than ever before. It is no longer the case that refugees move simply because some natural disaster has forced them from A to B, nor is such movement simply the result of some worldwide conflict, which is what drove refugees post-1918 and
post-1945. There is a series of issues in play, from demographics to lack of opportunity and individual conflicts.

In a sense, the movement back from the post-1945 world order, with the challenge to rules-based organisations, is compounding that in that we cannot find answers. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) asked about what the UN should do given that if there is a veto in the Security Council, no action is taken. That has been demonstrated to be even more significant in recent times because of the conflict in Syria, but it can be raised in relation to other places. These is challenges the complexity of which we probably have not faced in our time, and they set the baseline against which we will all be judged.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that regional organisations such as the African Union, not just the United Nations, have an incredibly important role to play? If we think of the peacekeeping work that AU forces have done in Mogadishu and elsewhere on the continent, we see what they can do. However, they still need to do a great deal more, and perhaps we can support such work when UN action is not possible or is lacking.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he knows a great deal about the region and what he says is certainly true. The problem of the failure to deliver of those charged with these responsibilities in the past means that new opportunities have to be taken if we are not to leave more people in the circumstances that we have described. This is the way the world works: if an avenue to peace and the resolution of conflict is closed by the actions of some, we must look to open up new ones to prevent such a problem.

Turning to the some of the key challenges we face, I want to talk about conflict and the impact it can have. I assure the House that the UK Government remain committed to doing all we can to address the root causes of conflict and crises, and to redouble the efforts to find peace. I will address the particular areas that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury mentioned.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said last month, not only is standing up for human rights the right thing, but it helps to create a safer, more prosperous and progressive world for us all. This is what global Britain stands for. Promoting, championing and defending human rights is integral to our work. Similarly, the UK’s leadership in tackling a changing climate and protecting the world’s natural resources is vital for global prosperity and poverty reduction.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Just last week, the UK Committee on Climate Change warned that we were on track to miss our international targets on reducing emissions. Unless this Government take urgent action, the effects of climate change will be felt more acutely in developing countries, causing them even more hardship and suffering. Will the Minister seek to discuss this internally and take action?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific wants to refer to climate change in his winding-up speech, but our determination on climate change has, again, provided a sense of leadership. We have played an influential role in reaching international climate change agreements, including the Paris accord, and we are among the world’s leading providers of climate finance. We are committed to the Paris agreement limits, which aim to limit global temperature rises to less than 2 °C. Wherever there are areas in which we can continue to improve, we shall do so, but on climate change leadership, the United Kingdom’s position is very clear.

On international humanitarian rights, I reiterate the UK’s commitment to international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. As a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention and its additional protocol, the UK has a long tradition of providing assistance and protection to those who need it most. We are the first G7 nation to have enshrined in law our commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on aid, and that aid provides a lifeline to millions.

The first change I want to put to the House is that refugee crises are increasingly counted in decades, not months and years, and the humanitarian system is overstretched. This is why the UK is now leading a global shift to longer-term approaches to refugee assistance and protection. It is one that restores dignity to refugees and offers them a more viable future where they are, and one that ensures sustainable jobs, livelihoods and access to essential services both for refugees and the communities that host them. We aim to embed this approach in the UN global compact on refugees due to be adopted later this year.

Gareth Thomas: One graphic reminder of the global refugee crisis is the plight of refugees, particularly unaccompanied minors, in Calais. Will the Foreign Office Minister encourage the Home Office to deal more quickly with cases such as that of the 14-year-old brother of one of my constituents, who is still waiting for the Home Office to respond to his application to come and rejoin his brother, my constituent, under the Dublin III convention? If I write to the Minister, will he take up the case with the Home Office for me?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman should keep in direct contact with the Home Office in relation to that case. In 2016, the UK transferred more than 900 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Europe to the UK, including more than 750 from France as part of the UK’s support for the Calais camp clearance. I have some figures to give later about the 49,000 children who have been settled in the United Kingdom since 2010, including a number in the category that the hon. Gentleman has raised. However, processes have to be gone through, and I am quite sure that the Home Office intends to carry out its resettlement work as swiftly as possible. We have resettled a substantial number—that number is often not appreciated by the public at large—and I will talk more about that in a moment.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When we are talking about the dignity of people seeking asylum, is it worth considering, and will the Government consider looking again at, the current rules denying asylum seekers in this country the right and the ability to work during the year, or perhaps even longer, when they are seeking asylum? Would that not save the taxpayer a lot of money and put an end to much of the indignity—and, frankly, the destitution—that exists in our asylum-seeking community?
Alistair Burt: I have spoken for 12 minutes already, and I could speak for a lot longer. If I was to go into asylum support and the benefit system, I would be at the Dispatch Box for a lot longer. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, that matter has been taken up by the Department—it is a complex issue, as he knows very well—and I do not intend to go into it now.

For people contemplating the perilous voyage to Europe, our long-term focus has been on improving conditions where they are, so that they may decide to take opportunities locally, rather than to undertake dangerous journeys. At the same time, we are taking steps to assist vulnerable people who are already on the move. I share the deep concern and alarm expressed by Members of the House about modern-day slavery. That was not a key part of the speech of the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury, simply because one cannot cover everything. The conditions migrants face in Libya—we have seen them most recently in the CNN reports on modern slavery and slave auctions—have been appalling, and they have reminded us how acute the crisis is.

We welcome the Libyan authorities’ commitment to investigation. I met the Libyan Deputy Foreign Minister recently to discuss the issue. I assure the House that the Government are doing all they can to go after the criminal gangs and networks of traffickers who profit from this human misery. The Royal Navy has destroyed 173 smuggling boats and saved more than 12,500 lives since Operation Sophia began, and Border Force vessels have provided vital search and rescue support, rescuing more than 4,500 people to date.

We are protecting the most vulnerable people on transit routes, including through a new £75 million migration programme focused on the route from west Africa via the Sahel to Libya. So far, our programmes have enabled 1,400 migrants to voluntarily return from Libya and reintegrate successfully into their home countries, while providing much-needed emergency interventions for more than 20,000.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) mentioned the International Organisation for Migration. I met Bill Swing, the charismatic director of IOM who will, sadly, complete his final term later this year and who has done so much to manifest the qualities of that organisation. We had a conversation about what we are all doing in relation to that process from west Africa through to Libya. If we are to challenge these gangs, we have to tackle every part of the process, as well as think more directly about what we can do about them when they reach Libya. It is important to cut off and prevent the process. We discussed the different ideas that different agencies are contemplating and already doing. This is a serious issue to which the House will return.

Lady Hermon: Before the Minister leaves the issue of Libya, I am sure he will agree with me that the most fundamental right of all is the right to life. There are people in the United Kingdom who suffered grievously as a result of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA Semtex bombs. Will the Minister assure me that, as well as the other human rights crises in the Mediterranean, that human rights issue, which affects people right across the United Kingdom, is still discussed with the Libyan Government?

Alistair Burt: I assure the hon. Lady that that is indeed the case, and we have discussed it with MPs from the area as well. It is absolutely not a matter to be forgotten. The Foreign Secretary and I have already met colleagues to discuss it. It was part of the conversations I had with the Libyan Government when I was previously in office, and there is still the opportunity to discuss it further. We can try to get to an agreement to find some accommodation that recognises the part played by the Gaddafi regime in the violence, but also to find a solution that brings people together, because both the Libyan people and the people of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, suffered grievously from the attacks. Something that binds people together as a result might be the most effective answer. It is very much still on all our minds.

I will say a little on the issue of children, which the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury did not focus on but I want to raise it. [Interruption.] Okay, a little bit more—the right hon. Lady cannot cover everything and that was not a criticism.

Emily Thornberry: Aren’t children in Yemen dependent on aid?

Alistair Burt: Yes. I never had the right hon. Lady down as being thin-skinned. I do not want to get into that too much.

The UK has contributed significantly to hosting, supporting and protecting vulnerable children. We are the largest contributor to the Education Cannot Wait initiative, the first global movement and fund dedicated to education in emergencies. That builds on our extensive work in the Syria region through the No Lost Generation initiative.

In the year ending September 2017, the UK granted asylum or another form of leave to almost 9,000 children—in that year alone—and has done so for more than 49,000 children since 2010. We have committed to transferring 480 unaccompanied children to the UK from France, Greece and Italy under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016, and last week the Home Secretary announced an amendment to the eligibility date to ensure that the most vulnerable unaccompanied children can be transferred to the UK.

We will resettle 3,000 vulnerable refugee children and their families from the middle east and north Africa by 2020. That is in addition to the commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. So far, we have welcomed more than 9,300 people through the scheme, half of whom are children.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous. I praise the fact that children have been resettled in the UK; some might say that the numbers are not what we had hoped for, but, even so, some have been resettled. If some of those children who have been resettled in the UK have an opportunity for family reunification, will the Minister try to take those other family members and allow them to join those children?

Alistair Burt: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman’s position, but let me say that we of course support the principle of family unity and have several routes for families to be reunited safely. Our family reunion policy allows a spouse or partner and children under the age
of 18 of those granted protection in the UK to join them here if they formed part of the family unit before the sponsor fled their country. Under that policy, we have reunited many refugees with their immediate family and continue to do so. We have, in fact, granted more than 24,000 family reunion visas over the past five years. Family reunification really matters. Of course, colleagues will always argue for more, but that is a substantial figure. I will certainly suggest to colleagues that they look very carefully at the hon. Gentleman’s Bill.

Let me speak about one or two of the crises mentioned by the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury. We have committed £1.3 billion to meet the needs of refugees and host communities in the Syria region, and it is here that we have pioneered a more comprehensive approach to refugee assistance, which includes a refugee compact with the Government of Jordan that aims to create 200,000 jobs for refugees.

Of course, resolving the conflict remains the top priority. We are using all our diplomatic tools to call on all parties to protect civilians from harm, to open up humanitarian access and to support UN political talks aimed at ending the conflict. I was in Paris yesterday and met Secretary of State Tillerson in the margins of a meeting to find accountability for those who use chemical weapons in Syria. I met Staffan de Mistura in Geneva just the week before, and of course my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is doing even more at his level.

Syria is incredibly complex. The recent incursion by Turkey into the north of Syria complicates matters still further, but it is a crisis that can be resolved only by further political talks through the Geneva process. Our approach to Sochi is to say that it has a value only if it directs people towards the Geneva process. That is the determination that we and others have made.

We remain deeply concerned by the Rohingya crisis, where people are still crossing the border every day with stories of unimaginable trauma. This is a major humanitarian crisis created by Burma’s military. There has been ethnic cleansing and those responsible must be held accountable.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend, like me, welcome the fact that the proposed repatriation has now been suspended, as announced on Monday? The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) did not refer to that. I welcome it because absolutely no guarantees have been given on the safety of any returning Rohingya.

Alistair Burt: The honest truth is that people are having to recognise that we are talking about a long-term, protracted refugee stay in Bangladesh. There is no quick return. We cannot ask people to return to a situation after they were expelled with maximum force, violence and horror. Although the agreement between the Governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh to return people over a two-year period is a welcome sign of intent, it cannot possibly have any serious basis unless we know that people are going to be safe. People cannot be returned on any other basis. The honest truth is that we have to be prepared for this to take time. We are pushing not only for the work that we do in Cox’s Bazar itself, but for a role for the international community in monitoring any return, with the UNHCR taking the lead.

We are one of the biggest donors to addressing the crisis. We have provided an additional £59 million since August and our aid is making a huge difference on the ground. The first tranche of funding to our partners includes support for emergency shelter for more than 130,000 people and counselling and psychological support for survivors of sexual violence. That is not an add-on to work that is already done. Counselling those women who have been victims of gender-based violence is absolutely crucial. We and other parts of the international community now give much more attention to psychological support for those who have been caught up in it. We are already co-ordinating work on the ground. We do not have as many people there as we would like. It takes time to get people in, but it is a matter of great concern and interest to us.

Anna McMorrin: The Bangladesh Welfare Association Cardiff and friends of the Rohingya in Wales are in Cox’s Bazar refugee camps, unloading trucks full of food parcels, blankets, baby food and medicines. They have encountered devastating scenes of hardship and heartbreak and have heard first-hand accounts that no one should experience: people losing loved ones, suffering violence and experiencing squalor, overcrowding and deprivation. Some 48,000 babies are due to be born in the refugee camps this year. Does the Minister agree—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If the hon. Lady wishes to make a speech, there is plenty of time later. The Minister does not have plenty of time.

Alistair Burt: I take the hon. Lady’s point. The scale of the crisis is extraordinary. I have not been able to visit the refugee camp, but a number of colleagues have done so, as well as the Secretary of State for International Development. We are not only trying to provide for what is already there but we are planning for the future. We recognise the number of births that are due. In addition, we have taken pre-emptive action on disease. The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury mentioned diphtheria in a different context, and I shall come on to that. I pay tribute to the emergency medical team that was sent by the Department for International Development in December. Two waves went out over the Christmas period to provide support for people suffering from diphtheria and to prepare vaccinations to prevent others from being infected. We have an outstanding record on that. The work that we are doing is looking ahead, as well as looking back.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Minister has mentioned, as have other speakers, sexual violence in conflict, and the Government have taken a number of initiatives in this area. Can he say whether or not the prevention of sexual violence in conflict will appear on the agenda of the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London?

Alistair Burt: As far as I am aware, the agenda for CHOGM is not yet set. I assure my hon. Friend and the House that the horror of violence against women, particularly in areas of conflict with which Commonwealth countries have a connection, is well understood. Without speaking about the agenda, it is a matter of the utmost importance to the United Kingdom, as has been demonstrated a number of times, so I take the point that my hon. Friend is making.
In looking ahead on Bangladesh, may I make a call for other donors to step up support? We are working closely with the Bangladeshi Government to identify acceptable solutions that protect and respect the rights and freedoms of the Rohingya people, as well as those of their Bangladeshi hosts.

The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury raised three issues: Yemen; the Occupied Palestinian Territories; and Lebanon. Yemen remains a matter of determination for the United Kingdom to seek a political solution. She opined on the opinions and views of Saudi Arabia and those who lead it—that is not a matter for the United Kingdom. We have made it clear publicly that a negotiated solution is the only answer. We support the UN process, and we are working towards that. Owing to the efforts of many, not least my right hon. Friend Secretary of State for International Development, the opening up of Hodeidah port for 30 days, reconfirmed yesterday, has made a significant difference to the passage of food and fuel. Again, that is another complex dispute that involves people from outside who have launched missiles towards Saudi Arabia and others, so achieving a negotiated end is complex, but it is the most important thing, and the United Kingdom is fully determined to do so and is working hard to secure it.

On the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, I mentioned during questions last week the fact that United Kingdom support this year is £50 million. I saw the director of UNRWA a month or so ago, before the US decision, and we have expressed concern in relation to that. We support UNRWA; we are working hard through it; and it remains a determination for us. We are talking with others about whether or not there can be further financial support, bearing in mind what the United States has said, but it has only withheld money at this stage. There is still an opportunity for this to be passed through to those who need it, and we sense that the consequences of not having that support at a crucial time are deeply worrying.

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On that, you are saying that the United States has put it on hold. I hope you will commit to continue to apply pressure on the United States, and in the meantime will you consider increasing our contribution—

Richard Burden: There can be no greater friend of Palestinians than the hon. Gentleman who is going to speak.

Richard Burden: I am grateful to the Minister, but will he be more specific in relation to UNRWA? One country has already agreed to bring forward its contributions to UNRWA to get over the short-term financial crisis that it faces. First, will the UK do so, too, or increase its contribution? When can we expect a firm answer on that? Secondly, in talking with other countries, will the Minister agree to an international conference—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I stopped the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin). The hon. Gentleman cannot make two interventions at once.

Alistair Burt: I gave a response on UNRWA. We are in conversation with others about resources. We are concerned about any withdrawal rather than withholding of funds—that is a matter of great concern. Our contribution this year was £50 million. Other contributions have not yet been assessed, but it is vital that UNRWA’s work continues.

Finally—the House has been generous with its time—may I conclude on Lebanon? I have been to Lebanon and have seen the work that DFID is doing there, particularly in relation to education. I met Minister Hamadeh, the Lebanese Education Minister. A number of colleagues may have seen mention this week of the Lebanon education forum. Lebanon, like Jordan, works double shifts to accommodate Syrian refugees in its schools. We have provided substantial support for this process, and our work is orientated towards supporting refugees where they are as much as possible, because that gives them the best chance to return. The stability of Lebanon matters hugely to the United Kingdom. It has come through a difficult time, and it appears that Prime Minister Hariri’s position has been strengthened as a result of recent experiences. There are elections to come; the security of Lebanon matters; and it is important that Hezbollah does not increase its influence in relation to that or other regional issues, which was the purpose of a dissociation agreement that was recently signed.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific will respond to the debate, and he will deal with climate change in more detail. I have mentioned violence against women and girls and modern slavery. I could also mention lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
rights, which are increasingly important for the United Kingdom to stress—we will continue to do so—and freedom of religion and belief. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is in the Chamber, but her colleague, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), a consistent advocate on this issue in the middle-east region, is not. If he were, he would want to hear again that the UK is determined to make sure that freedom of religion and belief assumes even greater importance.

All our experience in the middle east shows that a lack of tolerance is at the heart of so much and that the lack of tolerance of one faith for another is the breeding ground for so much that can then be exploited. This is not a minor issue of interest only to those who have faith, but a matter of interest to those who understand that this is a region where faith matters so much and impacts so much on everyone and that it has to be much further up our agenda in the west than perhaps it has been. We are determined to do all we can on that.

In conclusion, humanity is measured not by the strength of the strongest, but by the vulnerability of the vulnerable. The Government’s vision is of a world where no one is left behind and where all women and men, girls and boys—no matter who or where they are—have equal opportunity to realise their rights, to achieve their full potential and to live in dignity, free from extreme poverty, exclusion, stigma, violence and discrimination. That is central to the UN’s global goals and to securing a prosperous world. We are a big-hearted, open-minded and far-sighted nation—all of us—and our foreign policy reflects that.

2.40 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I welcome the choice of debate and the motion, and I particularly welcome the call for effective action to alleviate the refugee crisis. With 23 million refugees worldwide and more than 40 million displaced internally, this is indeed, as has been said, one of the toughest global challenges of our time. There is no silver bullet to solve it, but Governments working together can achieve a great deal to alleviate the dreadful suffering and misery that it has brought—through efforts on conflict resolution, international aid and crucially, through the provision of safe legal routes for those fleeing persecution.

In my view, the report card on the Government’s response is mixed, with significant room for improvement. Let me start on a positive note with the role of the Department for International Development. As the Minister said, there is no doubt that UK aid in countries such as Lebanon has been hugely significant. In that respect the UK is playing its part, and long may that continue. However, it cannot and must not be the case that playing a part through international aid absolves any country of the responsibility of hosting a share of those who have fled persecution. In fairness, I do not think anyone is arguing with that, but on the question of whether the UK has played its part in sheltering its fair share of refugees in response to the crisis, I still believe that the Government have fallen short. Can we and should we be doing more? Undoubtedly, the answer is yes.

From the outset, the Government’s approach to resettlement and relocation of refugees and asylum seekers went essentially from strong resistance to extreme reluctance, only then to find that once the programmes were up and running, they can be genuine successes and make a genuine contribution to the international crisis. A case in point is the Syrian refugee resettlement scheme, which the Minister pointed to. It was introduced by the previous Prime Minister following what can only be described as a summer of resistance from the Home Office. Only after immense public and parliamentary pressure, magnified by the tragic pictures of little Alan Kurdi’s body washed up on the beach at Bodrum—who can ever forget them?—did we finally see a hugely welcome announcement that the UK would accept 20,000 vulnerable Syrians by 2020.

No scheme is perfect, but as I think everyone in this Chamber would agree, once up and running it has proved an extraordinary success. Across the UK, we have been very pleased to see more than 9,000 refugees arrive. As part of that, we were delighted to see the 2,000th arrival into Scotland just last month, and our thanks and congratulations go to all involved in making that happen.

Resettlement works and can make a crucial contribution to the task of the UNHCR. I hope that the Government’s initial reluctance towards resettlement schemes is now a thing of the past. As the Home Affairs Committee recently recommended, it is important that the Government establish a more general resettlement scheme for the future, echoing calls from the UNHCR, which estimated that 1.19 million people were in need of resettlement globally in 2017. It has asked the UK to aim for 10,000 places each year.

Whereas the Government’s report card on resettlement would say, “Solid start but could do better,” their record on solidarity with our European neighbours has fallen further short. It is worth remembering that at the outset, the Government even opposed the introduction of the Dubs scheme before being forced to accept a watered-down compromise. Despite that scheme having been significantly watered down, it is another example of one that can work and transform lives, as we saw when the Home Office was eventually pressed into urgent action by the impending demolition of the camps at Calais.

Although the recent change to the cut-off date applied to the Dubs scheme is a step in the right direction, this Parliament should insist on revisiting some other restrictions that the Government have placed on it, including, most obviously, the desperately inadequate “specified number.” We should insist on the necessary investment to make it work properly. We should find the children in Greece and Italy, and not make them resort to using people smugglers or travelling to Calais.

It is not only children who need protection, but men, women and children all require safety. Long before the Dubs amendment was tabled during the passage of the Immigration Act 2016, my party argued for UK participation in EU proposals to relocate refugees and asylum seekers from Italy and Greece to other member states. It is to our huge regret that efforts at establishing a relocation scheme have continued to flounder.

As we have heard, what does exist is Dublin III. It is far from perfect, but it is there and must be made to work much more quickly and effectively. The recent agreement that the Government reached with France seeks to significantly reduce the processing times for take-charge requests, and that is very welcome. However, huge problems still exist with accessing the asylum...
system altogether. We should not be waiting for children to come to us, but actively seeking out those who may have grounds for transfer to the UK. Otherwise, it is inevitable that there will be further deaths as young people and children undertake hazardous trips to join family here.

We need to work faster in other countries, too—notably in Greece and Italy, where it can take up to a year for the Dublin process to run its course. If we can do more to fix delays here and to find potential applicants in those countries, we will undoubtedly save men, women and children from hazardous onward journeys, people smugglers and exploitation.

Resettlement, relocation, and Dublin are three examples of safe legal routes that we support that can help to prevent dangerous journeys and alleviate suffering, but let me mention one more: family reunion. Scottish National party Members have repeatedly argued that rights to refugee family reunion in the UK are simply too restrictive. People with family in the UK are clearly the ones who are most likely to try to get here, but by making it virtually impossible for too many categories of family members to qualify for family reunion, including siblings who are over 18, too many are left with no choice but to make dangerous journeys.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very good point about family reunion. Does he agree with me and my constituents, including children from St Mungo’s Academy and Garnetbank Primary School, who see the absolute logic of being reunited with their family? They do not see the difference between someone being a day under 18 or a day over it—they are their family. Does he agree that we need to do so much more to ensure that those families can stay together? If children at primary school and secondary school can see the logic, why do the Government not see it?

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree, and I urge hon. Members to support the private Member’s Bill that has been introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I very much hope that it is passed. He has support from the Refugee Council, the UNHCR, Amnesty International, the British Red Cross and Oxfam, among others.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Indeed, the Red Cross, Oxfam, the Refugee Council, the UNHCR, Amnesty and the UNHCR have said that having this Bill is their priority. Does my hon. Friend welcome the warm words that I detected from the Minister regarding this Bill on family reunification—for codifying what is happening and giving people the legal right and assistance from legal aid, which is also in the Bill? That important part of it would enable the rights that hopefully the law would bring. I think the Minister is warm to it, at least.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a series of valuable points. In Scotland a degree of legal aid still is available to support these applications, which are not straightforward, as a recent report from the Red Cross made absolutely clear. Ensuring that those who need legal aid have access to it would be a hugely welcome development.

On another day we will debate our asylum system for those who seek protection once they are here. Suffice it to say that on the SNP Benches, we see massive scope for improvement. Regular reports are critical of asylum casework, with backlogs and under-resourcing contributing to poor decision making. The Compass contracts for housing are little short of a disgrace. Levels of support are shocking, the right to work is ludicrously restricted and the move-on period after a positive asylum decision is a sham. In Scotland, we recently launched our second refugee integration strategy. The Welsh Government have one and it is now time for this Government to produce one. Talk of a two-tier asylum system must be shelved, as must dangerous talk of seeking to redefine the very concept of what it means to be a refugee.

The crisis is not going away anytime soon. As the motion says, conflict resolution must be central to our foreign policy. I highlight, for example, the Scottish Government initiative to train women from conflict zones around the world on peacekeeping and conflict resolution as the sort of initiative that Governments across these islands can take. And we have barely begun considering what climate change will mean for migratory flows. New Zealand is considering a humanitarian visa category for people displaced by climate change. That is the sort of conversation we will have to have here as well.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I neglected to say in my initial intervention—it is perhaps worth an intervention on its own—that my private Member’s Bill will be considered on 16 March. I encourage Members to be here to support it and constituents watching to write to their MPs to make sure that they are.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is quite right. I hope we see a busy House on that date.

In conclusion, I wish to make one further point. Sometimes in these debates we speak as if hosting refugees is necessarily a hardship for our country. It is important to put it on the record, therefore, that, given the chance, refugees far more often go on to make incredibly positive contributions to their communities and new countries and to bring great joy to their new friends and adopted families.

Stephen Kerr: I endorse what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the response from the refugee families who come and live in our communities, but may I also point out what it does to the communities themselves in rejuvenating a sense of civic responsibility, caring and community, which is vital to our future as a society?

Stuart C. McDonald: I welcome that intervention and agree with it wholeheartedly. These refugees are determined to take advantage of the amazing second chance given to them to live a life free from persecution. We can make that happen—the UN convention on refugees is the framework that allows it to happen. I simply urge the Government to work harder than ever to support that system and to deliver as many opportunities as they can.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon, but there is limited time
because we have another debate afterwards, so I am afraid I have to impose an immediate time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.51 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Given my role as chair of the all-party group on Bangladesh, I will confine my remarks in this short time to the experience of those fleeing persecution in Burma and living in Cox’s Bazar. The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) seemed to imply that the Government needed to get their finger out, as if this were something that had just happened. I think the House needs a little history lesson. The first major push against the Rohingya was in 1978. Then the Burma Citizenship Act of 1982 left them out of the list of 135 ethnic minority communities, thus denying them their state—so this has been going on for a very long time. In 1992, their political party was also outlawed. I understand that by that point 47 individuals—four of them women—from the Rohingya community had served as MPs in the Burmese Parliament.

This process has, then, been going on for an extremely long time. Those of us who have visited the sites and camps—right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House—have seen the atrocity conditions these people are being forced to live in. We would all accept that a basic human right is the freedom to worship as we see fit. The one thing that joins the Rohingyas in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Bangladesh is their religion. Unfortunately—it is a sad story to tell—the Buddhist community is complicit in and accepting of the driving out of the Muslim population that are the Rohingyas. Yes, some Hindus have been forced out as well, but overwhelmingly it is the Rohingya, who are Muslims, who are being driven out. It is that link—of humanity and religion—that opens the arms of Bangladesh.

I am pleased that repatriation is no longer being considered, because the memorandum of understanding did not mention the word “Rohingya”. How can there be no voice for the Rohingya at the negotiating table? It is totally unacceptable that the oppressors, who are land-mining the border and driving people out with machine guns, and who have denied these people their rights since 1982, should be divvying up the role of the Rohingya and their future. It is no surprise that there have been marches and resistance on the camps to any talk of repatriation. How can anyone accept being asked to go back to a country where they have been shattered for so long, is that somehow the Rohingya be given a voice. I understand that Ata Ullah is not an acceptable voice, as he is leading a resistance group, but there must be someone who can speak up for the Rohingya. They are a “talked about” and “done to” group, and that cannot be right.

I encourage the UNHCR to do all it can, but the reality is that Burma is blocking, and while I can understand Bangladesh’s need to solve this crisis, it is not a signatory to the 1952 convention; it is acting out of humanity and love for its fellow Muslims. That said, it is a poor country. It is in receipt of a lot of international aid, but it cannot continue with this on its shoulders. We must keep driving forward to find someone who will sit at the table and say what the Rohingya want to happen, otherwise the rioting and unrest in the camps will continue. The worst thing we can do is insist that people go back to a country where they are denied even their existence.

2.56 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). I agree with what she said, particularly on the importance of the Rohingya voice being heard in this debate.

In September 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the New York declaration for refugees and migrants, which seeks a commitment by member states to strengthen and enhance their mechanisms to protect people on the move. It is a significant achievement, but the challenge is to turn words into action. As the International Development Committee report, which we published last week, pointed out, the Rohingya crisis has tested these commitments to destruction.

I echo what others have said today about the Rohingya crisis. One lesson we must surely learn, which is relevant to the excellent motion before us, is that prevention is always best. As the hon. Lady reminded us, this did not come from nowhere: we have known for years about the threat to the Rohingya people. In recent years, there have been early warnings from Human Rights Watch and the Holocaust museum in Washington. I also echo what others have said about repatriation. It cannot be on the agenda in the foreseeable future, and I hope that the Minister will reaffirm that in his closing remarks.

In the case of the Rohingya and others, such as Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, the increasing rhetoric about refugees being expected to return to countries that are simply not safe to return to is deeply concerning. We need to recognise that in many cases people are going to be in these countries for many years. One of the ideas given to the Select Committee was that we learn from the Jordan experience with Syrian refugees and look at whether Bangladesh could adopt a special development zone to provide economic prospects for both the Rohingya refugees and the local population to limit the danger of resentment among local people towards the refugees.

The average time someone can expect to be a refugee is 10 years. Many are refugees for far longer. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said in opening the debate, we have an increasing number of complex and protracted crises. We need to learn from experience elsewhere, and
I want to cite again the example of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. It is vital that its crucial work be maintained, but I want to make a slightly different point. We can learn from it in responding to protracted crises in parts of Africa or the Rohingya crisis, for example. UNWRA’s amazing work to support Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the west bank, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan over almost seven decades is something from which we can learn lessons for other crises.

An aspect of this debate that is sometimes overlooked is internal displacement; there are more internally than externally displaced people. The situation may be much harder for an internally displaced person than for a refugee. Syrians who are still in Syria may have a much tougher time than those who make it to Lebanon, Turkey or Jordan. That needs to be a larger part of our focus.

The theme of the global sustainable development goals is “Leave no one behind”. Disabled refugees often face some of the biggest challenges. The Select Committee has taken a great deal of evidence on that subject—for example, when we looked into the Syrian refugee crisis during the last Parliament. DFID is about to publish its policy refresher on education, and it is crucial for the educational needs of children who are living as refugees or IDPs to be at the centre of that.

I, for one, have always argued that countries in the region ought to be doing more to help that process. However, it is also right for us to bring the most vulnerable refugees here. I am pleased that we have a defined route: we take vulnerable people, particularly children, directly from the camps. We are committed to taking 23,000 of those who find themselves in this most desperate of crises. That prevents them from making the perilous journeys that should be made unnecessary.

I appreciated the commitment, made last week during President Macron’s visit to the United Kingdom, to extend the scope and the criteria that we have been applying, including the date, so that, as part of the wider effort in relation to France, Greece and Italy, we are now in a position to take more of the young people—especially children—who turn up on our continent.

All that ties in with the remarkable charitable effort that we have seen in this country. I can think of examples in my own constituency, such as the clothing and toy collections in Oundle, and the relocation in our town of a refugee family who have been made to feel incredibly welcome and part of our community. I am very proud of that. I am also proud of the fact that the Government have been matching the charitable donations that have been made throughout the crisis. As a country, we have a long history of standing up, being counted and doing the right thing. I believe that our response to this crisis lives up to the expectations and obligations upon us.

3.4 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). I rise to support the motion, and I also speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees.

Taking a human-rights approach to refugees means treating them as human beings who have rights, but who also have skills and experience. We in the Labour party can be proud of the leading role that we played in the creation of the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees, fulfilling our legal obligations. The current Government have provided financial support for refugees in conflict zones, and that is welcome, but aid and charity, although admirable, are not a human-rights approach. They do not honour fully the spirit or the letter of the 1951 convention, and they deny the humanity of refugees and of ourselves.

The convention made it clear that refugees should be able to provide for themselves and their families by being allowed to seek work, take part in education or start up businesses. It explicitly did not seek to establish a culture of dependency, or structures of confinement or imprisonment. In Uganda, for example, more than 1 million south Sudanese refugees are being helped to get into education or work. There is an economic as well as a legal argument for a human-rights approach. Those refugees are not dependent on aid, are able to keep up the skills that will help them when they return home, and contribute to the local economy. Moreover, they are probably potential customers for our exports.

As well as the legal and economic arguments, however, there is a moral argument. In an ever more closely connected world, we are all neighbours in this rock in a corner of the universe, we may all need each other one day. I hope that if we in this country were ever to experience the difficulties faced by people in Syria,
with record numbers of civilian deaths from airstrike,
we would receive the help from our neighbours that we
should be proud to give to others. Do we want to be
seen as the one who is ready to help when tragedy
strikes, the one with the emergency food who will also
help our neighbours to get back on their feet, or as the
one whose doors are closed, whose walls are high, and
who does not stretch out a helping, enabling hand? I
know which I would like as to be seen as.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con) rose—

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Thangam Debbonaire: I respect the right hon. and
hon. Gentlemen, but time is limited.

I hear criticisms of the human-rights approach, and I
have read them on social media. People say that when
we welcome refugees we are letting in terrorists, and we
should beware of the pull factor. For a start, there is no
good evidence of a pull factor; there is evidence only of
the determination of refugees to support themselves
and their families, and to escape to wherever they can
best do that. I strongly urge Members to come to the
House on 16 March to support the Refugees (Family
Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, which will be presented by the
hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan
MacNeil).

It is important to unpick the argument about terrorism.
The 1951 convention makes a clear distinction between
refugees and criminals. Being a refugee is not a crime,
but being a criminal, or of criminal intent, means that a
host country is entitled to restrict or cease its hospitality.
However, leaving people trapped, with their movements
restricted and their human rights held down, risks turning
once desperate people into very angry people—and
anger is a breeding ground for those who would recruit
followers to ideologies of hate who wish to harm us. So
my fifth and final rationale for a human-rights approach
to refugees is a national-security one.

On the basis of moral, legal, economic and national-
security arguments, and also for the sake of our standing
in the world, we urgently need the Government to take
a human-rights approach to foreign policy in general
and refugees in particular. I think that we in the United
Kingdom are proud to be instinctive humanitarians. We
all represent people who want us, in Parliament and
in Government, to take every opportunity to broker
peace, promote human rights and treat refugees as
human beings. I urge the Government to support the
motion.

3.8 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): In the
limited time available to me, I want to cover three
points.

First, I am proud of the help that we have given to
refugees in the region. Like my hon. Friend the Member
for Corby (Tom Pursglove), I will focus my remarks on
Syria. I also listened carefully to what was said by the
hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).
We have indeed been very generous: we have helped
5 million people to have access to clean water in the
region, and our money—the £2.5 billion to which my
hon. Friend referred—has helped millions of people
there.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen
Twigg), the Chairman of the Select Committee, referred
to disabled refugees and those in need. I am proud that
we are taking people directly from the camps. If we take
only refugees who make the dangerous and perilous
journeys, we largely take only fit young men, not the
more vulnerable and those who need our help. I am
pleased that we have chosen the approach we have. In
addition, a clear case is made for meeting our international
aid obligations so that in crises we are able to be
generous, as the hon. Member for Bristol West said, and
to help those who need our help, without having to take
money from domestic budgets.

I do not think the shadow Secretary of State answered
the question put by her hon. Friend the Member for
Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) about the United Nations and
what we do when a conflict is supported by one of the
permanent five members of the Security Council with a
veto. One of the features that has made the UN almost
useless in dealing with the Syrian conflict is that one of
the P5 is an active supporter of the Syrian regime.
We have tried hard and the British Government continue to
try, but we have to confront what happens when the UN
cesses to be useful. George Osborne, the former Member
for Tatton, drew attention in a powerful speech in this
House in December 2016 to the fact that, although
there are costs and risks when we take action, there are
costs and risks when we do nothing. One could argue
that, on Syria, the decisions this House took—or rather,
did not take—on sending a clear signal to the Assad
regime have made the crisis worse and made sure that
there would be hundreds of thousands—perhaps
millions—more refugees, who we will have to deal with.

Finally, I want to say a little about our asylum
system. I am disappointed that the hon. Member for
Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who expressed
great concern about the system, was not concerned
good enough to trouble himself with the debate or to stay
to hear an answer to the point he raised. Despite the fact
that not a single Liberal Democrat is in the Chamber,
I will answer his question. There is a clear reason why
we do not allow asylum seekers to work: if we did,
unfortunately, a lot of people would then come to
Britain as economic migrants claiming to be asylum
seekers.

To pick up on the point made by the hon. Member
for Bristol West, when we accept that someone is a
refugee, we let them work, we give them education, and
we would receive the help from our neighbours that we
should be proud to give to others. Do we want to be
seen as the one who is ready to help when tragedy
strikes, the one with the emergency food who will also
help our neighbours to get back on their feet, or as the
one whose doors are closed, whose walls are high, and
who does not stretch out a helping, enabling hand? I
know which I would like as to be seen as.
[Rosie Duffield]

constituencies, but as elected representatives of the United Kingdom, we have a wider duty too. It is that sense of wider duty that makes me speak today. I buck the motion tabled by my great colleagues, calling upon the Government to stop turning their back on the reality faced by millions of dispossessed, injured, separated and suffering refugees across the world.

As an island nation, we have never really had to face millions fleeing into our country as other nations have and have done throughout history, but although the land we stand on may well be surrounded by sea, we must remember those famous words, “No man”—or woman—“is an island”. For each person who endures suffering and persecution anywhere in the world, we have a duty to help. Being part of mankind is to be just that: kind. As my colleagues have pointed out, there are now more refugees and displaced people around the world than at any time since the second world war. Untold millions have been killed, injured and displaced through recent wars, terrorism, extremism and sometimes unjustified military intervention.

In my constituency of Canterbury, which is one of the closest to Calais and the other refugee camps in France, there are some excellent groups, such as the Kent Refugee Action Network, working with people who arrive in our corner of England. We also have the Whitstable Calais Solidarity campaign and the excellent Refugee Tales, whose volunteers make sure that we hear the lost or forgotten voices of refugees. The young men and women I have met through those organisations often arrived here frightened, lonely and in need of kindness, welcome and care. I am humbled by the wonderful people of Kent who, through organisations such as these, offer their time, resources and expertise to help to settle people into a new place a long way from home. We as a nation are not overburdened by refugees. Refugees should never be seen as a burden. We must remember that more than eight refugees in 10 are being hosted by the world’s poorest countries. What must they think when they look across the seas to this land of relative plenty?

I went to a wonderful photography exhibition last year in Whitstable. The photographs were taken by a very talented constituent of mine, a photographer named Marcus Drinkwater. He spent a month on an Italian rescue boat in the Mediterranean, rescuing refugees from Libya whose boats had often been cast into international waters, without power, by the smugglers. His photographs capture the survivors, and indeed the terror of those crossings—I urge hon. Members to look online to find his work.

Smugglers set off from Libya in the darkest parts of the night. By around 8 am, their boats have reached international waters. The smugglers themselves go back to shore, leaving the boats choking full of people to be found drifting. What I remember most from Marcus’ exhibition is not the facts, but the determination and the terror in the eyes of his refugee subjects. Many of the people he photographed have been refugees since the Darfur crisis—since 2003. They have been without a place to call home for 15 years.

In Libya, the breakdown of effective government means that the rule of law has been absent for years. People escaping from parts of Africa further south are often captured by slave traders when they get to Libya. There are slave markets in car parks and public areas in Libya now. Young women are forced into prostitution to earn their freedom and their boat fare to Europe. I therefore join with my hon. Friends and colleagues here today in calling upon the Prime Minister and her Government to take more action—to offer more homes to more persecuted peoples and refugees from across the world. I urge the Government to lead international efforts through the United Nations and to allow Britain to set an example that other western nations can follow.

3.16 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): On 29 October 1992, I was the British United Nations commander in Bosnia. Outside my camp, I saw an increasing flow of people passing. The sentries counted 10,000 before I told them stop. There were women, children, old men, people in suits, people in carts, people in overloaded cars—I even saw a woman pulling a goat along. That sight gave me the main reason why we were in Bosnia: to save lives. I reckon that is a pretty good mission for the Department for International Development.

In the time available, I will mention my escort driver, so that his name is remembered. On 13 January 1993, I gave him instructions to take four women to hospital through the front lines. As he did so, he was shot and killed. The women made it to hospital and were saved. They were refugees. I remind the House of his name because he died doing perhaps the noblest thing anyone can do: saving people’s lives.

The refugees we helped in Bosnia normally stayed in the region, and that is important for refugees, because the chances of their getting home again are in inverse proportion to the distance they travel away from it. That is the reason for having the camps.

Stephen Kerr: Will my hon. and gallant Friend tell us the name of his escort driver?

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. My escort driver’s name was Lance Corporal Wayne Edwards. Forgive me, I was emotional enough to forget to mention it. When Wayne died, I was there. We tried to save him. I thought he was alive, but he was not. He is commemorated in Bosnia by a bridge called the Lance Corporal Wayne Edwards bridge, and I was lucky enough to be there to open it with his family. I have lost my place, thanks to that intervention!

I shall finish now, because I know that many people want to speak. I have dealt with refugees and displaced persons, and I believe that we have a duty to care about those people and to ensure that they are protected. We have a duty to ensure that they get food, clothing and shelter. I commend the Department for International Development and our Government for ensuring that they also get education in the camps in the middle east, because that is crucial for the young people’s future when, as we hope, they go home. It is crucial that we do our very best to look after people. I commend the Government for trying to keep them near their homes, but if we get refugees here, we have an equal duty to look after them.
3.20 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I thank him for sharing his story; I think we all felt quite emotional on hearing it. The plight of refugees across the world remains a deeply tragic and often shameful summation of our ability as an international community to create a safe and prosperous environment. The individual circumstances of a conflict that causes displacement, or of the threat posed to vulnerable citizens, can seem insurmountable, given their different causes and effects. The conditions that lead to the movement of people across borders to seek sanctuary will not go away anytime soon. Those conditions include persecution, war, climate change and other complex economic and social factors.

Britain has the power to play a leading role in setting a co-operative, internationalist agenda that puts human rights at its centre. The plight of Syrian refugees is a prime example. The more recent resettlement schemes announced by the Government are to be commended, but we still are trailing in comparison with our European neighbours. It will be almost a decade since the civil war in Syria started by the time the UK is even close to meeting its targets, while an overstretched region handles the crisis from afar.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marsha De Cordova: Time is short, so I will not.

As the Member of Parliament for Battersea, I must mention the work of a previous MP for the area, Lord Alf Dubs, whose tireless campaigning for child refugees will, we hope, finally undo the Government’s refusal to change the family reunion rules. Mothers and fathers in the UK are unable to sponsor their adult children to join them here. Refugee children in the UK are forced to live apart from their parents, and refugees are unable to bring elderly relatives to live here with them in safety.

In my own borough, I have seen the failure of Conservative Wandsworth Council, which has housed a mere two Syrian refugee families.

I spoke recently in a Westminster Hall debate on the enslavement of black African refugees in Libya. The Minister has spoken in detail on that subject. I must also briefly mention the refugees in Yemen. We are creating that situation ourselves through our arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

I cannot talk about UK foreign policy and refugees without mentioning one of the oldest United Nations refugee missions in existence: the refugee camps in Palestine. I have visited the camps in Bethlehem, part of the occupied west bank, where three generations of displaced Palestinians continue to face statelessness. Now more than ever, it is important that Britain shows leadership on this issue. The conditions include persecution, war, climate change and other complex economic and social factors.

I came to this place after having stood for election on a platform of local issues, but my eyes have been opened over the past three years through travel and by speaking to other people. There was the woman in a Rohingya camp who had seen her sons murdered and the man who had had the back of his head staved in with a machete that morning. There was the Yazidi Christian who had made a dangerous boat crossing with a 10-day-old child during which the boat had been capsized before the navy cutters came to pluck them out of the water.

I have spoken to a CNN journalist who had risked her life by going undercover to film slave auctions in Libya. I have met Venezuelan opposition politicians who had been beaten up due to their political beliefs, and there are now a reported 140,000 refugees in neighbouring Colombia. I have of course been to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, where I saw the hall of names of those who died in the Shoah, which really goes to the crux of things when we talk about suffering.

I do not have the time to do justice to the Government’s policy on Syria, where we are the second-biggest donor to the camps in neighbouring countries. We are supporting people as close to their homes as possible in anticipation of them being able to return, which they want to do, when it is safe to do so. By doing that, we are able to help hundreds of thousands of people there, including many children, instead of waiting until they attempt a boat crossing.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Scully: I will not due to the time, and I know that the hon. Gentleman’s private Member’s Bill is coming up on 16 March.

I do not have enough time to talk fully about the Rohingya. If we use too blunt an instrument in our diplomacy, we risk the country closing off. Ethnic conflict is already intensifying in northern Shan state and Kachin state, where the situation is actually backed by the popular support of the Burmese people, who already do not believe what the western media is telling them about the ongoing atrocities.

I cannot do justice to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East, who responded to the recent debate on the petition on the slave trade in Libya. He is making proactive moves to consider the petitioners’ demands and to speak to as many people as possible to address the causes, which include the migrant path from sub-Saharan Africa.

The conflict, security and stability fund, which has been allocated more than £1 billion for this year, aims to stabilise areas, but only by sorting out conflict, such as ending the war in Syria and appealing to the Burmese Government to ensure that the commander-in-chief ends the situation for the Rohingya, can we start to tackle some of the ongoing situations in Nigeria and other countries and prevent people from feeling the need to leave. It is through soft power, trade where appropriate, quiet and calm diplomacy in the UN and the Council of Europe, where the UK delegation is working this week, and all manner of other ways of mobilising the international community that we will start to succeed.
3.28 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is of course a pleasure to speak in this debate. The global refugee crisis is one of the world’s greatest challenges. The unthinkably large number of displaced people across the globe—approximately 65 million were recorded in 2016, and I imagine that the figure has only increased—is daunting and obscures the human story behind each, man, woman and child who has had to leave their home, and I am sorry that more people are not here to debate this important subject.

With my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and the previous Member for Glasgow North East, I travelled to the camps in Calais, and it was without a shadow of a doubt the most heartbreaking experience of my life to witness men, women and children—some of the most vulnerable people imaginable—in destitution, desperation and horrible conditions.

The situation is abhorrent and unnecessary. The Government must accept that they have a vital role to play, and they must play that role on the world stage. It is worth remembering that refugees are often fleeing persecution—persecution often sanctioned by the state—for having certain political or religious beliefs, for belonging to certain social groups, for expressing their identity, such as being part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, or for their ethnicity.

I am proud that Scotland has been able to take many refugees, and we have already made a significant contribution to the UK’s Syrian resettlement programme. Scotland met its target by the end of last year, and it has now more than met its target. It is incumbent on all local authorities across the UK to exceed their current ambition and to try to ensure that more people can be resettled in local boroughs in areas that, as we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House, have failed to step up to their duty.

Although the motion addresses the international aspects of conflict resolution and tackling climate change, many aspects of domestic policy here in the UK could be improved. I do not stand here simply to beat the drum, but it is worth the Minister accepting that the UK has a role on the global stage and that we are one of the more privileged, fortunate and well-off nations, so we have a responsibility. Both the Scottish Government and the Home Affairs Committee have recommended on many occasions that the move-on period of 28 days is not sufficient and should be extended. I hope that the Minister will give that some consideration.

The refugee crisis goes beyond race, identity, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and sexual identity, and I take this opportunity to recognise the staff and services across South Lanarkshire that have played such a vital role in ensuring that the resettlement programme is such a success in my area.

Scotland is doing good work in this area, and we have built a system that has inclusion and fairness at its heart. However, as this is a reserved area, Scotland’s progress constantly relies on the asylum policies of the UK Government, so I must ask the Minister to keep in mind the words of today’s motion and of this debate. Will he please consider the UK’s global role and lead? Many others should then follow.

3.32 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate. The motion calls for the Government to lead international efforts to ensure that human rights are protected and upheld across the world. We have global influence and reach, and we have a moral obligation to ensure that freedom is not just a notion of which people dream but one that they live.

Our freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom to practise our own religion—we take all those things for granted in this country. I am proud of all this Government’s great work, and I believe it is imperative that we improve lives in countries across the world.

We are leading the way, but we need more nations to follow our lead. Today, I will concentrate on the situation that has been endured for five harrowing months by the Rohingya people in Burma. A few months back, I met a group of local Muslims in my constituency who showed me some of the distressing images taken on mobile phones—images that were much worse than those shown in the media, including of a cart full of the severed heads of young men. The images still haunt me today.

I can only begin to imagine what life is like for those who have been forced to flee their home with nothing and for those who have been left behind to continue living out the nightmare in Burma. Ten thousand people have been confirmed dead, but the actual figure could be immeasurably higher. Some 830,000 refugees are estimated to have crossed over to Bangladesh, which is 11 times the number of people in my constituency. Those refugees must be allowed to return to Burma, but only when it is safe, which is far from the current situation.

Currently, 95% of refugees are drinking untreated water, risking cholera; 40% of children are malnourished; and women and children who have suffered rape or assault are forced to continue without the support they need. That is why I am proud that the Secretary of State for International Development did the right thing in prioritising this situation—this humanitarian crisis—and I welcome the £59 million that the UK has committed since August.

We do have a vital role to play, and we are playing it, but we also need to continue to encourage other nations to do more. The UK was the quickest to act, with a third of all aid pledged by November 2017, and we are in fact one of the largest donors, while Bangladesh has opened its doors and is now at breaking point. It is estimated that international funds will run out by February, but that was why I was delighted that, in response, the UK provided £12 million for urgently needed food. But the reality is that international funds will run out, and our Government have repeatedly pressed the Burmese military to end the inhumane violence and guarantee unrestricted humanitarian access. However, we must also use our international position to demand greater action from our international partners, particularly India and China, to support their neighbour.

The UK cannot turn its back on people suffering, and we must continue to send a clear message. We must not tolerate the humanitarian crisis in Burma, and we must continue to lead the way with aid and action, but other nations must follow our lead, and soon, as money is running out. It has been 70 years since the universal
declaration on human rights, and now we must all honour that declaration, work together to save lives and protect humanitarian rights and freedoms for our fellow humankind.

3.36 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): In camps from Calais to Cox’s Bazar, there are hundreds upon thousands of people who have fled persecution, violence and disaster. They have not left their homes out of choice; they left their homes, their countries, everything that they know, because they were forced to. Many have suffered beyond our worst nightmares, with children burying their parents and parents burying their children.

I have worked for many years in refugee camps, but as an MP last year, I visited the Zaatarí refugee camp on the border of Syria and Jordan. The people I spoke to there had one simple wish: to return home, to the home that they knew and the lives that they had—to return home to who they truly are. So, when the Bangladesh and Myanmar Governments say that plans are in place to return the Rohingya to Myanmar, it may sound like the first move to returning peace to the country, but we in the UK must be very clear that it is not.

Forcibly repatriating the Rohingya to Myanmar would be tantamount to sending them back to their deaths. Who will ensure their protection—the very military who killed their babies, tortured their menfolk, and who have systematically raped the women? The military who forced parents to make the decision whether to go and rescue their children from burning fires or—the ones who are still alive—to run and flee? We cannot once again turn a blind eye to human suffering—to people living in an apartheid state where citizenship is unattainable and where religious persecution has long been the status quo.

The challenge to the international community and to us is clear: how do we create the conditions, not just for the Rohingya, but for all stateless and persecuted minorities, to rebuild their homes without fear of persecution? This country’s response to that challenge goes to the essence of who we are as a people. I believe—I know—that British people are kind, courageous, brave and compassionate. Our Government should be acting to live up to that idea of the very best of Britain, but too often they have failed in the courage of their political convictions. Too often they have turned a blind eye.

I welcome the £59 million in aid to support the Rohingya refugees, but that is tantamount to putting a sticking-plaster on a gunshot wound and allowing the shooter to roam free. When will our Government have the courage to take the people who are the perpetrators of these atrocious crimes to the International Criminal Court?

Creating the conditions for refugees to return to their homes will have been achieved only once the fear they have in their hearts has gone. We can really lead the way through fierce, active diplomacy, and our Government must use all their leverage to bring about peaceful resolutions.

Our position on the world stage comes with immense responsibility. I hope that hon. Members across the House will join me in calling on the Government to take a much more active role in bringing the international community together, to provide those across the world fleeing war, facing danger and suffering in squalid camps not fit for the inhabitation of insects with the dignity and humanity they deserve.

3.40 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who made an excellent speech. For the past two decades, Great Britain has had an excellent track record of putting its money where its mouth is on human rights and refugees. We are the second biggest contributor to the United Nations and the sixth largest donor to its peacekeeping budget. We operate one of the world’s largest conflict resolution funds and we are at the forefront of the global fight against female genital mutilation and modern slavery, not forgetting the seminal work done on eradicating polio.

The international aid budget does have its critics, though. Anyone among us who knocks on doors regularly knows that the country’s commitment to 0.7% of GNI is significant. In certain circles, perhaps owing to misinformation from the likes of the UK Independence party, it is seen that any problem could be solved by redirecting that cash. It is politically brave not to have listened to those siren calls over the past seven years, and we should pay tribute to the Government in that regard. I am proud of our commitment.

Well-judged humanitarian interventions help not just to combat immediate suffering but to head off acute crises that may require much more expensive—perhaps even military—responses. The reach of our aid and our help internationally has very positive effects; we have no idea what could have happened if that was not there. Investing in overseas development can build alliances, change attitudes and help to place British values at the heart of a 21st century in which the west will probably not play as dominant a role as it has in past centuries.

I turn to the effects in my constituency. Although Solihull is far from Calais, it has plenty of experience with refugees and asylum seekers. Birmingham airport is nearby—and, indeed, it is an important employer for the town. We are also home to one of England’s 14 immigration reporting centres at Sandford House. I am proud to say that, in my experience, that has elicited only a positive response from local residents, many of whom go out of their way to provide comfort and support to people going through the asylum process.

The leadership of the 0.7% pledge has filtered through into the charity community and also within the black, Asian and minority ethnic community. I am involved with several local charities such as Sewa UK that look for DFID’s support in bringing about projects in countries overseas. The challenge is being met and carried on by all groups within our society, and we need to welcome that.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I want to add to the hon. Gentleman’s point about what is being done here on the ground. I do not know whether he knows about Freedom from Torture, which I was lucky to volunteer with for a number of years. I worked with torture survivors in a writers’ group, where there might be a person whose children had been taken from them by a child soldier alongside another child soldier, eating and working together. Does he agree that
asking torture survivors to go through their torture to prove they have been tortured is a problem because it might raise their post-traumatic stress disorder?

**Julian Knight:** I did not realise that was going to be such a long intervention, but I thank the hon. Lady. I am aware of and really welcome the work that she mentions, and what she does in support of that group is absolutely fantastic.

One group that I wish to mention briefly is Solihull Welcome, a project run by Churches Together in Central Solihull. In the hall of St Augustine’s Catholic church, a team of volunteers regularly offer refreshments, friendly conversations, advice and even children’s clothes and toys, to people who attend the nearby UK Border Agency centre. I visited one of their sessions recently, and it was really inspiring to see local residents taking such positive, practical action to help those who come through the church’s doors.

I should also mention the Reverend Tim Fergusson and his congregation at Olton Baptist church, who offer practical advice, including legal advice. I am happy to say that my office has helped with that work on several occasions, as did my predecessor, because we recognise the good that comes from ensuring that people have a proper hearing. The church has not only been highly engaged in the asylum policy debate but administers practical programmes such as Crossing Points, an allotment project with the aim of helping members of the church to befriend asylum seekers.

Partnerships such as those I have described, involving civil society groups and local government, are vital if the Government are to fulfil their stated ambitions for the resettling of asylum seekers and refugees.

3.45 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This debate is as relevant and important today as ever. The refugee crisis in the Mediterranean continues apace, with more than 3,000 people estimated to have drowned in 2017 and the number for this year already exceeding 100. On the international stage, we see refugees being attacked by President Trump, Nigel Farage and other notable buffoons like them. People of all ages who are fleeing war and persecution do not deserve to be abused or shamed by us; instead, they deserve and need our help and friendship.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned, Scotland has managed to adopt a different approach to the treatment of refugees. In fact, the UN has endorsed Scotland’s vision for refugee integration in our New Scots strategy and praised the way the Scottish Government have fully involved refugees themselves in crafting our inclusive vision for Scotland. The UK Government should follow the lead of the SNP Scottish Government. That is not my suggestion—although I completely agree with it—but that of the all-party group on refugees.

So far, Scotland has accepted one in five Syrians who have come to the UK through the vulnerable person resettlement programme—that is more than double the share for our population. Scottish councils have been important and willing participants in the UK Government’s VPR scheme. My own local authority, Renfrewshire, has welcomed and resettled 28 families since the scheme started, and more than half of those resettled are children under the age of 18. The families have had the chance to rebuild their lives, with the support of the local authority and other support services. They have been able to reassemble successfully and, importantly, they are able to live independently in local communities.

All the children are now settled into school, and many of the adults, young and old, are attending college, doing work experience or have secured employment. A number of the Syrian teenagers have been volunteering in the local community. In return, the local community has been keen to step up to support the families, by themselves volunteering to provide homework clubs, football coaching and fun clubs for the children, along with social groups for the adults. That is just a small example of what can be achieved when refugees are supported properly and the local community gets involved.

Those who look to make the UK their home are economically active and want to make a positive contribution to society. Giving people the opportunity to work helps asylum seekers to settle in the local community and improve their language skills, and it often allows highly-trained professionals to keep practising their profession. It seems entirely nonsensical to leave working-age people, many of whom have valuable skills and are motivated to work, to sit on their hands doing nothing for several years while they wait for a decision on their asylum application. Refugees and asylum seekers can add real value to our country, in both financial and societal terms. We should treat these people appropriately and give them a chance to fully take part in society.

The UK Government could do so much more. I hope that they will support the well-trailed private Member’s Bill on family reunion, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). Many schools in Renfrewshire have been working on a project on refugees and family reunification. This week, I was sent some of the comments of pupils at Bargarran Primary School in Erskine, and I would like the Minister to hear them. Holly says:

“Refugees should have the right to a normal life.”

Anna says:

“Please give refugees a family. They still have a right to a family.”

From Ryan, we had:

“Every child has a right to be safe and happy.”

Ben says:

“Refugees should have the same rights as us.”

I could not agree more, and I hope that the Minister was listening.

3.49 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my former friend from the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). [Interruption.] I am glad to hear that he is still my friend. I welcome this debate. To be fair to the Opposition Front-Bench team, it is welcome that the motion is one on which we can reach relative consensus, while we discuss the many issues that it raises.

When we discuss human rights—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is in Westminster Hall talking about the freedom of religious belief—it is
important that those of us with a faith of our own stand up for the right of those who do not have a religious faith to hold that belief as well. It is as much a right to say, “Actually, I do not have a religious belief,” as it is to practise one’s faith. Sadly, as we saw when Open Doors published its latest watch list last week, there are still far too many countries where the simple act of professing one’s faith as a Christian can bring death or severe retribution and punishment. The point I make regularly is that it is no coincidence that the regimes where leaders like to put themselves in God’s place are also countries that clamp down on every other form of personal freedom and on human rights.

I wish to focus on conflict resolution, which, rightly, is mentioned in the motion today. It is easy to look at what has gone wrong in the international system—some of the intractable problems with which the UN does not seem able to grapple—and miss the greatest achievement of the UN, which is that the major industrialised powers have not gone to war since 1945. There has not been the same type of major conflict across the globe in which, sadly, our grandparents and great-grandfathers had to fight, and in which those on the home front also had to suffer. That has been achieved by the creation of a clear rules-based system that allows many disputes to be resolved, including working in regional groups such as the African Union and also the western military alliance in the form of NATO. We can think of the role of peacekeeping. Our own forces have spent many decades in Cyprus as part of the mission there. Although there is not yet a permanent solution and there are still long-running and very serious issues to be resolved, our forces are still working effectively to ensure that the fighting and killing in that dispute are now, thankfully, a distant memory.

Importantly, we should see conflict resolution as about not just ending warfare, but being part of long-term rebuilding process, which is where our aid budget comes in. There is little point going into a place where there has been conflict and instability, with whatever has motivated that, and almost enforcing a peace in the hope that everything will turn out all right. It is about making sure that we have a long-term commitment to the area as well.

Let me look now at how things have changed. On Friday, I will be in my constituency with a lady called Isabella Webber, who is a holocaust survivor—one of the last ones still living in Torbay. It is hard to think that, in her lifetime, as she was growing up, she saw a situation in which might was seen to be right. It was a time in which a Government thought that they could legalise genocide and in which its main actors could hide behind the system of international law, and just walk out the door and abandon the situation completely. Thankfully, the Nuremburg tribunals set a new basis for international law, as did the UN Charter and the way in which the main nations of the world have related to each other since then. That is why this motion is welcome. There are still challenges, but we have come a long way in conflict resolution. I welcome the work that the Government and other nations do to make this a reality for so many people today.

3.53 pm

**Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** I support the motion but I also believe that we have a special role to protect those who seek refuge and support in the UK. We see many countries in the headlines and in the briefing materials, including northern Africa, Afghanistan, Syria and Myanmar, but others are on the move, too. Some people from those countries are trafficked while others, such as the Palestinians, feel like refugees in their own country as more and more of it is illegally annexed.

Our Government need to be a leading voice in efforts to ensure that human rights are protected and upheld around the world, but I worry that we could be shifted to the margins as we take decisions to work less co-operatively and even to cut back on the resources to play our full role.

While I stand in solidarity with the millions of refugees fleeing conflict and war, and urge this Government to do more to stand up for those refugees, I would also like to see a greater focus on the injustices faced by many refugees and victims who seek help here in the UK. A young woman in my constituency is a victim of sex trafficking and is now a refugee as a result. She had travelled to western Europe hoping to pursue her goal to work as a model—a goal shared by many young people across the world—but it was not to be. She was abducted by two men, kept captive for two months and raped, and then trafficked to the UK. She found herself in another country that she was not familiar with, where she was once again used as a slave for sex—right here in the UK, where it is our responsibility. Yet when she escaped, the British authorities refused her the status of a trafficked victim until my team set them right and she started to get more of the support that she needed.

That young woman now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and is seeking refugee status. One would think that any compassionate Government would do everything they possibly could to help somebody like that through such a horrific ordeal, yet her case has been refused on the grounds that her home country is judged to be able to provide protection against the persecution of its own nationals. This is not good enough. The Home Office has ignored our arguments that she believes that her own father will kill her should she return home, and that the trafficking organisation has the ability to find and recapture her. Not only that, but she has faced numerous barriers when fighting for the right to stay in the UK. It took 15 months for the Home Office to reach its decision, which means that my constituent has been unable to settle or begin to rebuild her life after going through huge trauma.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Sadly, I have dealt with very many similar cases, and Home Office statistics show that delays in asylum applications have been going up steadily over the past few years. That is why it is so important that we have community groups that support these people. In my constituency, Oasis Cardiff and Croeso Penarth are working to support refugees and those seeking sanctuary, particularly when such delays are occurring.

**Alex Cunningham:** I appreciate that intervention. I think that many of us on both sides of the House could write books about the problems faced by refugees.

How can any Government who supposedly support human rights and the protection of vulnerable people be sending a woman like the one I have described back to her country, in fear, and at a time when she is battling mental health problems?
Justice First in Stockton backs the Right to Work campaign, which calls for everyone to have the right to work after six months of lodging an asylum claim. This provides dignity and respect for those who want to make a contribution yet whom we still expect to live on a pittance. I share the concerns of Justice First that Brexit may well result in our withdrawal from humanitarian legislation and treaties, and the European convention on human rights, as well as the dismantling of the Human Rights Act 1998. This will have a detrimental effect on its clients and my constituents, and many others too.

Others have talked about examples of voluntary work. Stockton Parish church, Stockton Baptist church and Portrack Baptist church in my constituency, to name just a few, are providing clothing, shelter, English lessons and meals for vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, really helping them to integrate into their new communities and providing support in their hour of need. Where the Government fail, the volunteers pick up the pieces.

I am an outward-looking person, I am an internationalist, and I share the need of colleagues in all parts of the House to stand up for the vulnerable. We do have that need to play a role on the world stage, influencing, persuading, and often directly intervening to try to bring peace to our world and an end to the conflicts that result in the international crisis we have today. Refugees and asylum seekers are treated like numbers, and it is often forgotten that they are people—people who have been through things in their life that many of us in this Chamber could not even begin to imagine, although some of us have seen that suffering personally. Every one of the 22.5 million people confirmed as refugees is an individual, whether a single young woman trafficked for sex or one of thousands fleeing a war zone. Yes, let us influence at international level and show a lead on human rights, but let us not forget that we also have a duty of care to those who end up on our shores.

3.59 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The motion is one that no one can disagree with. The fact is that the UK already leads international efforts in the field of refugees. Listening to some of the speeches by Labour Members, people might wonder whether they have actually looked at the briefing on this subject. There are many aspects of Britain’s reputation around the world in this field about which we should be very proud. We should also be very humble about the fact that we as a country have the resources and the compassion to be able to play this important role on the world stage. I very much come to this subject on the basis that I sincerely believe we are indeed our brother’s and sister’s keeper.

I want to mention my own constituency. We have taken some refugees—not as many as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) mentioned in Renfrewshire, but it has nevertheless been a positive experience for the people of Stirling. This came about because of the leadership from the community, as well as the support from the local authority. In Stirling, we have a company about which I would like to share some information with the House. It is a geographic information system company called thinkWhere. It does an amazing job, working with the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team, in providing mapping services in areas that have been hit by disaster or conflict. Such maps are vital in providing help and support for aid agencies on the ground—and the work on the ground is the most vital.

As has been mentioned, the UK is one of the main contributors to refugee camps across the world—we pay for support and help for refugees where and when they need it—and we can be proud of the work that we do on this issue as a country. However, we should never forget, as has just been said, that the people behind the numbers mentioned are actually individuals, just like us and our families. They are people who are fleeing for their lives from conflict and oppression, from genocide and natural disasters. Their personal stories are harrowing, and put into perspective all we say and do in our own station in life.

When I intervened on the Minister for the Middle East, I should have mentioned my involvement with the all-party group on the prevention of sexual violence in conflict. I stress to the Minister for Asia and the Pacific the importance of that subject. I congratulate the Government on the initiatives they have taken, but I implore them to continue to put impetus behind this matter. The subject is uncomfortable and distressing, but addressing it is an issue that we as a country should champion. Lord Hague and Angelina Jolie have been instrumental in raising its profile, and the Government need to continue to do that. I would like that subject to be on the agenda for the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit coming up in a few weeks’ time.

To go back to the point about how well we are doing as a country, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has said that the United Kingdom is doing “remarkable things”. There is infinite demand for the compassion of the human race, because that is the kind of race we are. We are a welcoming country, and we have a long history of looking beyond our borders to provide help around the world. Many of the international charities that help in this area were founded here and operate from a base here. However, we as a country must constantly renew our commitment to aid refugees and support global initiatives to prevent people from becoming refugees. We should never turn our back on the world, and we must remain outward looking to build on the legacy of what is a proud history in this area.

4.2 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century, but the current climate raises serious questions about our ability to uphold those human rights in an ever-changing world. We have seen a rise in populist nationalism across Europe, and particularly in the United States. Some of the traditionally liberal democrats states have increasingly treated refugees very poorly and overlooked state-led human rights abuses for financial benefit. Such is the case with our Government’s arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

It is the UN’s responsibility to uphold human rights around the world, and the UN is weakened by the membership—and the vetos—of Russia and China. It is the UK’s responsibility to prioritise human rights in
our policy towards refugees. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, has recently announced that he will not be seeking a second term because, as he stated, that might involve bending a knee and lessening a voice. His view seems to be that the UN’s founding members and key human rights advocates are favouring at best silence, and at worst complicity in the current state of affairs.

Meanwhile, the Rohingya face forced repatriation and a return to state-sponsored violence in Myanmar. Thank goodness that a pause has been put on that—for now. The Yemeni people face slaughter and starvation, already displaced people in the Central African Republic are being killed, and 5,000 children have died, including of diphtheria.

There are also known to be 500,000 Palestinian refugee children living in the west bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Last week the US Government cut their financial support for those children by half—$65 million gone from children in desperate need, all because the President felt he had been shown insufficient appreciation and respect. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) wrote to the Foreign Secretary about the issue last week. I was going to ask what measures he plans to take, but the Minister advised my right hon. Friend earlier about the efforts to encourage the release of the $65 million and to augment it with finance from other nations. That is desperately needed.

We must stand up and fight for the fundamental human rights that equalise us all and for the refugees, among the most vulnerable people on earth, who need us to advocate for them. The world has changed, and it has changed substantially. The bipolar world is long gone, and multipolarity has replaced it. The UN must adapt accordingly and we must work collectively to sharpen its teeth when it comes to human rights.

The UN declaration of human rights was conceived at a time of consensus about the direction in which the world should head. We may never see its like again, but no matter how fast our world may be changing, and no matter what technology may be designed in the future, that does not mean that we should abandon those ideals. We need to explore how we can change, and we need to adapt. I therefore call on the Government to uphold those rights.

4.6 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am glad to see you back in the Chair.

I will start by sharing with the House the case brought to me by the Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network, a charity that works tirelessly to support asylum seekers in Leeds and for which I used to be a short-stop host for asylum seekers who were destitute. Network staff told me about a freezing cold Friday afternoon in December when they were phoned anonymously by a member of Home Office staff, tipping them off that the Home Office had just sent a woman on to the streets of Leeds, where she was wandering around crying. When they arrived they found a woman named Akifa holding a piece of paper in her hand with a map of Croydon, which was some 230 miles away.

After some effort by LASSN and other charities, they managed to locate an interpreter and they heard her story. Akifa did not know where she was. She spoke of looking for a maternal aunt in the Netherlands, but the person who had brought her to the UK was no longer around. This was a story that LASSN had heard many times before—a textbook case of trafficking. Because of her unclear immigration status, no social or homelessness services could take her and keep her safe. Some hours and 20 phone calls later, the police arrived. To their great credit, they did not arrest Akifa for illegal entry to the UK, but instead took her to a place of safety, which was a great relief as arrest was a very real possibility.

Akifa was Eritrean. She was trafficked into the United Kingdom, where she did the right thing and reported to the Home Office. She was then turfed out on to the street and left to fend for herself. How did we get here? How do we end up in a situation where a vulnerable person is abandoned first by her own nation and then, sadly, by ours?

Eritrea, like so many other countries across Africa and Asia, has experienced a sharp increase in the number of people attempting to flee in recent years. Despite there being no ongoing war in Eritrea, huge numbers of men and women trying to escape national service in the country resort to routes that take them through war-torn countries and deserts and across deadly sea crossings. That is because, unlike military conscription, boys and girls aged 16-plus are often expected to serve indefinitely, with many refugees equating conscription to a life sentence of forced labour.

Physical abuse, including torture, occurs frequently, as does forced domestic servitude and sexual violence by commanders against female conscripts. There is no redress mechanism for conscripts. Attempts to flee are sternly punished. On 3 April 2017, new conscripts trying to escape from a convoy in Asmara were shot at by guards, killing several. President Isaias rules without institutional restraint. There have been no elections since 1991 and no legislature since 2002. The judiciary is subject to Executive control and the constitution is unimplemented.

UNHCR reported 475,000 Eritreans globally to be refugees and asylum seekers—that is 12% of the population—yet the UK policy has been to pass the buck to countries already facing problems of their own, shirking our own responsibility under international law. As The Guardian reported last year, Home Office documents obtained by the Public Law Project detail efforts by the Government to seek more favourable descriptions of human rights conditions in Eritrea. The notes relate to a high-level meeting that took place in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, in December 2015 between senior Eritrean Government officials and a UK Government delegation. A diplomatic telegram, written by the then UK ambassador to Eritrea, said that a meeting was held to “discuss reducing Eritrean migration”, and sought to find evidence on human rights “to evaluate whether we should amend our country guidance”.

We should be ashamed of those actions. It took a tribunal case to overturn that guidance.

We accept that there is a problem, yet we have failed to provide a solution. The case of Akifa and Eritrea presents a broad problem with British refugee policy.
4.11 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): As Nelson Mandela said while addressing the US Congress on 29 June 1990, “To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”

Today, as we debate refugees’ human rights, we must remember his words. Refugees’ rights are human rights—it is as plain and simple as that. As a country we have a proud history of standing up to dictators and those who wish to take those rights away from individuals. Today, we have a duty to stand up for the rights of refugees too. No one should face being trafficked to a strange country. No one’s family should be ripped apart by war. No one should profit from human suffering and hurt.

We see the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Palestine—and it also affects the stateless Rohingya Muslims. We see the bodies washed up on the beaches. Those people face devastating human rights violations. We say that human rights are refugees’ rights. As a country, we must take the lead. We must make sure that we use our place in the world to make the voices of the vulnerable heard: their rights should be defended. Protecting the rights of people who seek asylum in the UK allows them to participate fully and to flourish.

I would like to commend the work of Sanctuary Kirklees and Destitute Asylum Seekers Huddersfield, known as DASH, for the work that they do in Kirklees to support asylum seekers and refugees. I offer a warm welcome to the newest members of our community, who settled in Kirklees after their arrival from Syria last week as part of the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme.

For the next minute or so, I want to talk about the Buzz Project in Marsden in my constituency of Colne Valley. It is a great example of how we can support people who are fleeing persecution. It was set up by Dr Ryad Alsous, a world-renowned bee-keeping expert and former professor of agriculture at Damascus University. Ryad came to Britain as a refugee, escaping from Damascus in 2012. With help from Kirklees Council, Sanctuary Kirklees and the Canal and River Trust, he set up a bee-keeping project. The aim of the Buzz Project is to help local refugees and job seekers to find a place and purpose in the community by keeping bees.

When I met Ryad at the opening of the Buzz Project in my constituency of Colne Valley, he spoke about how those 10 wooden hives represented hope for the future and proof that second chances sometimes come in the unlikeliest places. Ryad’s words on this subject are far more powerful than mine can ever be:

“I know how hard it can be when you are displaced. You carry with you an emotional tension, and the experiences and memories of what went before can make you feel isolated.”

A number of Members have contributed to the debate, and more wish to do so, so I will finish quickly. Let us remember the words of Nelson Mandela in 1990:

“To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”

We need to stand up for refugees’ human rights, but we also need to give them a second chance in life, just like Ryad is doing with the Buzz Project.

4.14 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). As the last speaker before the winding-up speeches, I will keep my remarks short, but I want to take a moment to talk about unaccompanied child refugees. Although they have been mentioned, it is worth our focusing on them in this last Back-Bench contribution.

At this very moment, unaccompanied children are sleeping rough in Calais and across Europe, desperate to be reunited with their family in the UK. The kids in Calais are just an hour away from this place. It takes longer to get to Plymouth than it does to get to those children, but they are too often out of sight, out of mind. I am still horrified and genuinely haunted by my experience of visiting them in northern France in September, with my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith). Many of the children I spoke to have most likely experienced, or continue to experience, hunger, sickness, depression, police violence and, in many cases, sexual abuse. Research by UNICEF showed that the No. 1 fear for those unaccompanied children is rape. That is only an hour from where we are now. It should be unacceptable to our entire society.

I welcome the progress that was made last week at Sandhurst between the Prime Minister and the President of France, but we need more information about that. The detail is important, because the Sandhurst treaty represents a step forward, but only if the brave words can be matched by actions. I understand that the Minister does not necessarily have all the details, but I would be grateful if he answered the following questions.

When will the remaining 250 places on the Dubs scheme be filled? Will the Government drop the mean and embarrassing cap of 480 places on the scheme? Will the Minister tell us how these young children will move from waiting eight months to be reunited to 25 days? That seems an awfully big jump, so what extra resources will be put in place to ensure that those children can do that?

Extra money is being given to France for border security. What oversight can this place have over that money? I met young accompanied children who told stories about how the French police were tear-gassing them in their tents, stealing their tents, taking their sleeping bags and deliberately making them feel unwelcome. If it is true that the funding for those police officers comes from the UK Government, how can we in this
House have proper oversight to make sure that our money is being spent well? Keeping young unaccompanied children safe is absolutely vital.

Will the Minister also look at what support is being given to those children to help them to understand that the process is being speeded up? Mohammed Hassan is a child who died under a truck last year trying to reach Britain or informed of his rights under Dublin III. There is much confusion about Dublin III and what will happen with Brexit. It is important to provide clarity for Members of the House, the public out there and unaccompanied children in particular to enable them to understand what their rights will be on being reunited with their family in the UK. An awful lot of warm words are said about this issue, but I hope that the Government can match those with action, because these children are depending on us.

4.18 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. This afternoon, we have had a broad, well informed debate on the global refugee crisis, which continues to grow and which can at times seem intractable. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) spoke with his customary passion and authority on this issue, as Chair of the International Development Committee. When he said that prevention is always best, I believe he spoke for all parts of the House. Likewise, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who has campaigned tirelessly for the rights of Palestinians, again made a powerful case for renewing our resolve and taking ambitious action.

As an illustration of the cross-party concerns on these issues, we heard forceful and eloquent contributions from the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who told us that the rights of the Rohingya must be at the forefront of future negotiations; the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who mentioned the importance of supporting disabled refugees; and the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who gave a first-hand account of refugee camps. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Solihull (Julian Knight) spoke about the desperate need for a human rights approach when helping refugees. They and the many others who have spoken in the debate are united in desiring an end to the death, suffering and sexual violence, an end to the lost generation of refugees unable to leave the camps.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) spoke eloquently about the terrible impacts of crisis and conflict in Myanmar, Yemen and other countries in the middle east. I want to turn briefly to the situation in Africa. Conflict has displaced millions of people in South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia and other countries across the continent. One million refugees are now in Uganda in one of the most progressive arrangements anywhere on the planet, but last year at a pledging conference, international donors could provide only a quarter of the funds needed to sustain it. In Libya, hundreds of thousands of refugees from across Africa live in detention camps, in brothels or on the streets, facing the believable risk of being sold at the market into slavery—this in the 21st century.

The crises we have talked about today are still only the ones on the tips of our tongues. CARE International recently released its report, “Suffering in Silence”, and profiled the 10 most under-reported crises around the world: North Korea, Eritrea, Burundi, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Vietnam, the Lake Chad basin, the Central African Republic and Peru. We must not forget them.

Who can forget the picture of the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi? If we fixate on the suffering, that can be overwhelming. We in the House have a responsibility not simply to promise charity and express outrage at the crisis of the moment, but to redouble our efforts and resolve the long-term situation. Our humanitarian work cannot and must not depend on the ebb and flow of pity and shock. That is why today we need international action and respect for international laws and norms more than ever before. Let us remember that we already have the universal declaration of human rights—70 years old this year—the 1951 refugee convention and the sustainable development goals.

Then along came the President of the United States. In a matter of months, he has withdrawn the American people from the Paris climate agreement, which is the only thing standing between us and massive climate displacement; tried to turn the USA inwards with his Islamophobic travel ban; and cut, just recently, $65 million from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency—the lifeline for millions of Palestinian refugees and workers.

The world’s long-term plan for managing migration and forced displacement sustainably and fairly is due to be crafted and signed up to later this year at the UN, through global compacts on migration and refugees. That is the only and best plan we have, but in December Donald Trump pulled the USA out of that as well. It is absolutely shameful.

If it was not already clear what the supposed leader of the free world thinks about refugees and migrants, Donald Trump then uttered his worst words of all about African and central American countries. I am loth to repeat them in the House, but I must as they have to be quoted directly and refuted: “shithole countries”. That is racist, and it sows fear, not hope.

The Britain that I believe in stands shoulder to shoulder with those countries and not against them, so let me say something about the UK’s role. A Government who consistently stand with Donald Trump, a Government who refuse to stand up against him, a Government who invite him on a state visit, a Government who on every occasion make the expedient choice and not the right one will be called out by Labour Members.

Our party believes in hope, not fear. We take pride in the UK’s pledge to spend 0.7% of its national income on aid to help the world’s poorest and most vulnerable and to save millions of lives each year. Labour is committed to a foreign policy that has human rights at its heart, in defence, diplomacy and development, reinforcing rather than weakening that fragile international order.
I call on the Government to do more. I call on them to plug the funding gaps that are hindering refugee responses, to localise humanitarian funding—as we said we would do in 2016 at the world humanitarian summit—to double the UK’s efforts to negotiate and agree ambitious global compacts for migration and refugees and to put the needs of the world’s poorest before short-term national interest when it comes to spending our aid budget.

The truth is that these multiple crises are preventable. Their symptoms are solvable. The motion makes a simple case, which we hope can command the support of the whole House. Let the message go out from the House that the UK will put refugees at the heart of its foreign policy and uphold human rights around the world.

4.26 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The Government welcome such a heartfelt parliamentary debate on subjects as topical as conflict prevention, climate change and the protection of inalienable human rights. I have listened carefully over the past few hours to the contributions from Members in all parts of the House, who have underlined the fundamental importance of those matters. I shall try to summarise what the Government are doing and respond to some of the points that have been made today; I fear that I shall have to deal with others in writing.

I thank all Members who have spoken, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and my hon. Friends the Members for St Albans (Mrs Main), for Corby (Tom Pursglove), for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Solihull (Julian Knight), for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr).

Human rights are the guarantors of freedom, non-discrimination and the innate dignity of every human being. The UN’s universal declaration of human rights makes clear that those rights and freedoms are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible, and that they apply equally to the whole of humankind. Promoting, championing and defending human rights are, and will remain, part of the everyday work of all British diplomats across the globe. It is the right thing to do, legally, ethically and morally, but it is also firmly in the national interest. Societies in which human rights are restricted tend to be less stable, less democratic and less prosperous. By contrast, those that protect collective opportunities and freedoms tread the path towards long-term prosperity and security.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s annual human rights report gives examples of our work, concentrating on some 30 priority countries. Our 2017 report will be published during the next few months. In the context of today’s debate, it may be helpful for Members to know that it will include a section on migrants.

To achieve the maximum impact, we are prioritising our human rights efforts in a number of specific areas, including promoting girls’ education, tackling modern slavery and promoting and defending freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and freedom from all aspects of discrimination.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made combating modern slavery, which has an intentional impact on some of the most vulnerable of our fellow human beings, one of the UK’s top foreign policy priorities. That is why she convened world leaders at the UN General Assembly in September to launch a call to action to end forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. More than 40 countries, working together, have already endorsed the call to action, and the number is rising. As a number of Members have pointed out, heart-wrenching, shocking instances of this crime occur here in the UK. Indeed, they occur within a short distance of the House, in my own constituency. The UK’s stance on modern slavery is not some patronising plea to the developing world; it is a recognition of the global reach of this most tragic issue.

The UK also leads international initiatives on ending conflict and promoting stability, including through our permanent membership of the UN Security Council, where only last week in New York I represented the UK in debates on Afghanistan and nuclear counter-proliferation. Research has shown that countries with the highest levels of gender-based discrimination are more likely to be afflicted by conflict. That is why our work on conflict had a strong focus on the role of women and sexual violence.

Climate change presents the most urgent and existential threat. It is indisputably one of the major drivers of migration and global insecurity. In 2016 alone, three times as many people were displaced by natural disasters as by conflict. In recent months, we have seen many extreme weather events, from drought in Somalia to hurricanes in the Caribbean and floods in India and Bangladesh. Last week at the United Nations, I heard impassioned pleas for help from the representatives of small island developing states, whose countries are already being affected by climate change.

We must change how we live our lives to prevent climate change from accelerating; we must adapt to the changes that have already taken place; and we must build resilience for the future among the world’s poorest communities, which suffer a disproportionate impact. That is why climate change remains a foreign policy priority. We are helping to maintain international momentum to raise our ambition. We have consistently encouraged robust international action on climate security, and as part of the Paris agreement, we pledged to provide at least $7.5 billion of international climate finance over five years.

I would love to say more about other elements of the debate, but there is no time. Throughout, we have heard moving testimony about the situation facing many hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence in Burma in recent months. Since 28 December, the UK’s pledge of some £59 million has helped to fund an emergency medical team of 40 doctors, nurses and midwives, paramedics and firefighters, who have been deployed to the frontline of the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, to help to combat the diphtheria outbreak.

In my role as FCO Minister for Asia, I remain persistent in our lobbying the Government of Burma to allow the Rohingya back to their homeland with sufficient guarantees on security and, importantly, on citizenship that they will be able to rebuild their lives. As I have said before, that can begin only when conditions allow for a
safe, voluntary and dignified return. My hon. Friend
the Member for St Albans spoke passionately about the
importance of Rohingya representation in that process.
If the returns are to be genuinely voluntary, there must
be a consultative process to establish the refugees’ intentions
and concerns. This was raised by the hon. Members for
Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and for Liverpool, West Derby
(Stephen Twigg). We are encouraging the UNHCR to
develop a more systematic process for consultation with
refugees, and we will call on Governments to incorporate
the refugees’ views in repatriation processes as they
develop. I assure the House that I am also working
within the international community to develop a coherent
strategy that will begin to hold to account those who
have committed what independent observers regard as
crimes against humanity.

Opposition Members are understandably frustrated—the
shadow Foreign Secretary expressed that frustration in
her speech—but, as I have learned in the past eight
months as a Minister, diplomacy requires patience.
Progress can be slow and painstaking. The frustration
can be unbelievable, but we have to work within the
framework we have got. We have to compromise. I will
not stand here and criticise the United States because
we have to work with that country, and Presidents come
and go. One of the biggest frustrations arises from the
simplistic view of politics—that we can compromise
easily and that people can easily express their views in
tweets. The process is painstaking and requires patience.
For all its failings, the United Nations is the only game
in town. We have to work with the international community.
All the issues that have been addressed here today and
all the problems around the world can be solved only if
we work together as an international community.

Rest assured, it has always been the UK’s role to take
a lead on these matters. Today’s debate has been fierce
at times, and there are many here who wish we could do
more, and more quickly. I am aware of that concern,
and my door is open to everyone who has concerns,
particularly those relating to my own brief of Asia and
the Pacific. Please be assured that we are doing our level
best, quietly and painstakingly behind the scenes. Sometimes
we take three steps forward only to have to take two
steps back, but working within the international community
is the only way forward if we are to bring about some
sort of peace to ensure that human rights are properly
protected.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that conflict resolution, climate
change and the protection of human rights should be at the heart of UK
foreign policy and that effective action should be taken to alleviate
the refugee crisis and calls on the Government to lead international
efforts through the United Nations and other international
organisations to ensure that human rights are protected and
upheld around the world.
Carillion and Public Sector Outsourcing

4.36 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I beg to move.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the assessments of risks of Government Strategic Suppliers by Her Majesty’s Ministers referred to in the Answer of 19 December 2017 to Question 114546 and any improvement plans which Crown Representatives have agreed with such strategic suppliers since 2014 be provided to the Public Accounts Committee.

Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. My thoughts, and I am sure those of everyone in the House, have been with you during this very difficult time for you and your family.

Time is running on, and I am going to attempt to be brisk, but I am not going to be non-partisan, because the Government have been negligent in the exercise of their duty to protect the public purse. In the past two hours, the Government have attempted to pre-empt this whole debate by sending a letter to every one of us. The purpose of the letter is to attempt to whitewash a way in which the Government have conducted outsourcing, particularly in relation to Carillion. Those who have had the chance to study the letter will find the names of six companies that are going to take over the public sector contracts that Carillion was administering. I have only just had a chance to look at it myself, but that list is quite extraordinary. What a catalogue of failure!

One of the six firms donated money directly to the Tory party. Two of the firms are known for blacklisting workers. Amazingly, one of the firms is currently under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office for suspected offences of bribery and corruption. Another has previously been caught red-handed mispricing contracts, underestimating their eventual cost. As a consequence, £130 million was wiped off its share value. Another of the companies operates in the Cayman Islands and has been shown to use that location as a way of avoiding tax. Another of the firms is part of a group that has reportedly abused and exploited migrant workers in Qatar. My reaction to all that—I do not know whether it is unparliamentary—is to use three letters: WTF! What were the Government doing producing a list of that kind?

The truth is that, as it is now with this list, so it ever was with this Government. Back in 2017, while the Government were sleeping on the job, I submitted a written parliamentary question asking how many strategic suppliers had been rated either green, amber, red or black according to the severity of the risk posed by the suppliers. I did not ask the Government to tell me what my question should be about, but I was asked to give it another thought. However, I will get to that in due course. However, the hon. Gentleman did not defend the practice of Crown representatives handing money to the Conservative party. Not only is the Crown representative for the energy sector a Tory party donor, but that person donated £15,000 to the Prime Minister, who took the money.

Court testimonies submitted over the past few days as part of Carillion’s liquidation show that its key clients, lenders and insurers were already pulling out of the business and getting well clear of it months ago. The private sector clearly saw a fire, but the Government did not even detect smoke from a company that appeared to be then, and obviously is now, going up in flames. My reaction to all that was why the Government failed to appoint a Crown representative for the three crucial months at the end of last year when it became clear that Carillion was in deep trouble and was issuing profit warnings left, right and centre.

Short selling is a practice whereby so-called investors bet on the collapse of a share price. It is as if the Government accept that the serious business of financing large enterprise is nothing more than a casino, with people betting against the price of companies. One firm, BlackRock—remember its name—was shorting so much that at one stage it owned nearly 10% of the entire company. The fact that that happened is troubling, but we then discover that Mr Osborne, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer who signed off the Government deals with Carillion, is now being paid £650,000 a year by BlackRock. While it was common knowledge that Carillion was one of the most shorted stocks on the exchange, the Government, seemingly wholly ignorant of everything going on around them, continued to hand contracts to Carillion to the tune of billions of pounds.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) rose—

Jon Trickett: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I ask him to answer the following question. Does he believe it to be right and proper for the governing party to receive donations from a person who is currently exercising a supervisory public function as a Crown representative on the Government’s behalf? Does he think that that is right?

James Cartlidge: It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to tell me what my question should be about, but I was going to ask him whether it is his policy to take all the contracts in-house.

Jon Trickett: I will get to that in due course. However, the hon. Gentleman did not defend the practice of Crown representatives handing money to the Conservative party. Not only is the Crown representative for the energy sector a Tory party donor, but that person donated £15,000 to the Prime Minister, who took the money.

Court testimonies submitted over the past few days as part of Carillion’s liquidation show that its key clients, lenders and insurers were already pulling out of the business and getting well clear of it months ago. The private sector clearly saw a fire, but the Government did not even detect smoke from a company that appeared to be then, and obviously is now, going up in flames. My reaction to all that was why the Government failed to appoint a Crown representative for the three crucial months at the end of last year when it became clear that Carillion was in deep trouble and was issuing profit warnings left, right and centre.
Crown representatives are appointed to monitor, on behalf of the taxpayer, the contracts of key strategic suppliers to Government and to ensure that everything is running smoothly. I have already referred to one Crown representative, but the House may be interested to know about the backgrounds of some of them, because they are curious. A number of them—this is unbelievable—actually oversee contracts that relate to their own private sector work and yet they are appointed by the state to look after outsourcing on the public’s behalf. As I just mentioned, one of them donated £15,000 directly to the Prime Minister herself. I will use some strong language here: the ordinary man or woman in the street can draw only one conclusion, which is that this has been a complete racket.

Carillion posed a clear and present risk to the taxpayer, but not only did the Government fail to act, they had a cosy relationship with the key decision makers, some of whom were active Tory supporters.

The problem goes well beyond Carillion, so let me widen the argument. The Government have failed to think strategically about the risks to the economy, as well as the risks to the taxpayer and public services. The Government handed over 450 separate contracts to Carillion, which employed 20,000 workers and used 30,000 separate subcontractors. This was a major industry that had an impact everywhere in the country, yet the company was clearly deep in trouble for some time. Frankly, I have no confidence at all in the statement rushed out by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) in the last couple of hours before this debate. The assurances in that document are pretty feeble. We want an absolute guarantee on behalf of the people employed directly or indirectly by the company that both their jobs and the services provided by the company will be protected.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jon Trickett: I will give way but, in doing so, let me ask her the following question. [Interruption.] This is a debate.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (David Rutley): Well, let her ask you a question.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have the greatest respect for the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), but we do not normally have a Whip joining in. I am sure he will not be joining in again later. The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) is giving way. Let him give way, and I am sure we can get on with the debate.

What I am bothered about is that a lot of people want to speak, so please let us not waste time attacking each other.

Jon Trickett: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is not Question Time, and we are not the Government. This is a debate, and I am perfectly entitled to ask questions and to make points. Does the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) believe that companies with public contracts paid for by taxpayers’ money should pay tax in the United Kingdom, yes or no?

Rachel Maclean: The short answer is yes. The hon. Gentleman says that he has no confidence in this Government’s ability to award public sector contracts. Does he therefore have any confidence in the previous Labour Government, who awarded billions of pounds of contracts to private sector companies, and in Labour-run Leeds City Council, which did the same? Does he have no confidence in his Labour colleagues?

Jon Trickett: Carillion did not go bust eight years ago, when Labour was in power; it went bust last week. The fact is that the hon. Lady has not answered the central point, which is that 13 of the 20 biggest Government contractors have subsidiaries in tax havens—[Interruption.] And the Minister is prepared to defend it. It is outrageous. [Interruption.] Leeds City Council, in which I no longer play a part, did not hand over a contract to Carillion the other week.

Thirteen of the 20 largest Government contractors have subsidiaries in tax havens. Those companies are happy to take taxpayers’ money and make a profit, but it seems that they are not prepared to pay tax back, which is morally incorrect and should not be happening. In fact, it is a scandal.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) put a question to my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on local authorities. Does he agree that the reason local authorities are too often forced down the route of contracting out services is that the Government have starved them of funding for the past seven years, meaning that local authorities simply do not have the wherewithal to do the work themselves?

Jon Trickett: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and unanswerable point.

We want a categorical assurance that the jobs of the subcontractors and employees are protected and that the services will be sustained. Is it not clear that the Government have starved them of funding for the past seven years, meaning that local authorities simply do not have the wherewithal to do the work themselves?

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jon Trickett: I will give way, but I want to make some progress.

Dr Huq: I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell): it is a pleasure to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) shared my horror today at pages 4 and 5 of the Daily Mirror, which report:

“‘Greed and lunacy’ as Carillion paid shareholders £500m while pension...hole spiralled out of control.”
Surely any company of this magnitude should meet its statutory obligations before paying out dividends to shareholders.

**Jon Trickett:** My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. In the 16 years up to 2016, the dividends paid to shareholders increased every single year, while the pension pot and the conditions of work and the pay that the workers received was diminishing. By the way, Mr Deputy Speaker, I met a subcontractor of Carillion the other day, who told me that the company had a policy of not paying anybody in December, because on 1 January the bank wanted to look and see how much liquidity was left. Is that not shocking?

Maybe the Government’s devotion to outsourcing is the real reason why they have failed so monumentally in relation to Carillion. They had a blind assumption—and still have—that contracting out works efficiently, and that the market always knows best, which we know is not the case. If they do not learn from the repeated failures of outsourcing, there will be another Carillion around the corner, and then another and another. One needs only to look at companies such as Interserve and Mitie, which deliver public services, to see how fragile some of these Government contractors are.

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):**

**Jon Trickett:** I could stand here and reel off a long list of outsourcing companies that have been guilty of fraud, tax avoidance, blacklisting, failure to pay contractors, and even, shockingly, billing the taxpayer for tagging people who had died. They have presided over, and have been vehemently committed to, a failed and failing ideological project. That is my charge today.

My opposite number, who I am pleased to see in his place—the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—has personally shown lots of enthusiasm for handing out Government contracts—

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):**

**Jon Trickett:** I am trying to make some progress. [Interruption.] Well, they will be glad that I am making progress, then.

In the Minister’s role at the Ministry of Justice, what did he do? He awarded a £25 million Government contract to G4S. But that company was under investigation for fraud against the taxpayer. He snuck out plans to privatise the collection of court fines, and he even proposed giving private companies the power to arrest our fellow citizens. His Department bailed out a private probation service with an additional £277 million over seven years, and he failed to deliver the promised £115 million that he said would be delivered by outsourcing two prisons.

We need to change direction. Let me briefly set out the case, because outsourcing of procurement has boomed under this Tory Government. It is now worth £242 billion. Nearly a third of public expenditure—of our taxes—is being put at risk by a Government who are blindly following a dogma.

To be clear, there never was a true market in outsourcing. It is an oligopoly. The course of action that the British Government set out on has led only to the creation of a handful of mega-corporations, almost too big to fail, and those corporations have penetrated nearly every aspect of the state, both central and local. This so-called market works well for a handful of companies making huge profits out of the taxpayer, but it is not working for anybody else.

We want the Government to see the facts as they are, not through the lens of a tired, stale, outdated, dogmatic view of the world. Jeremy Corbyn, our leader, commenting on the Carillion debacle—

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** He’s gone!

**Jon Trickett:** Well, we still pay tribute to our leader, unlike some of the Government Members, who seem to be making up a point about it. Let us see how many of them—[Interruption.] My party leader said that we have now reached—

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?**

**Jon Trickett:** I am coming to an end. He said that we are now coming to a turning point, and he was right. He caught the mood of the country. The public are tired of outsourcing. They want democratically accountable, quality services, which are run effectively and efficiently in the interests of the public. Every poll we can look at shows the same thing: the people are completely disabused of this whole process. That is why the House of Commons must take up the task that the Government have failed to act on. Where else could we start but by referring the matter to our excellent Public Accounts Committee? That is what the motion recommends.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?**

**Jon Trickett:** I will not—I am finishing. The Prime Minister and her Government have squandered taxpayers’ money on a failing dogma. They have run out of new ideas. They have proved unable to grasp the change that our country desperately needs. Even her own MPs agree. The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) says:

“Where’s the bold and the brave?”

He is talking to the Prime Minister. He says, “it’s dull, dull, dull.” He is absolutely correct.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I preface my remarks by saying what a pleasure it is to see you back in the Chair? The Opposition spokesman has referred to the “excellent” PAC. I am its deputy Chair, but he will not let me intervene. How can the debate be fair if he will not let me intervene?**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** The hon. Gentleman knows that, from chairmanships in many other areas, that is not a point of order. It is up to the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) whether he wishes to give way, as we will later find out when other Members want to intervene.
Jon Trickett: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), if I may call him my hon. Friend for a moment—we used to be pairs, back in the old days when pairing worked. I must not say this in front of any Whips, so I hope they are not listening: there were occasions when he and I arranged our escape plans to avoid some of those late votes. However, in this case he is entirely wrong. In any event, should he really speak on a motion that says that the matter should go to the PAC?

I was finishing my speech. “Dull, dull, dull!” With those words, I commend the motion to the House.

4.56 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): Mr Deputy Speaker, I take comfort in the fact that I can at least join the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) in expressing a wholehearted welcome to you, Sir, on your return to the Chair of the House.

I want to start by addressing the motion and to make it clear that, if the motion passes, the Government will of course comply with the will of the House. The Public Accounts Committee, as the House will know, already possesses powers to require the Government to supply it with papers. Whether or not the motion passes, it is my intention to share with the Public Accounts Committee as much information as I reasonably can that will help it with its inquiries. I hope, too, that in debating the motion hon. Members on both sides will understand that the information cited in the Humble Address is highly commercially sensitive.

I agree that the Public Accounts Committee is a vital mechanism by which Parliament can hold Government to account, but the Government also have an overriding obligation to ensure that information is not placed in the public domain when that would be either improper or give rise to particular risk. There are important considerations not only for Government but for the House to consider about the impact of releasing the documents.

First, we must bear in mind the impact on markets, whether good or ill, of making such documents public. Because the information requested is highly commercially sensitive, if made public it could have damaging impacts not only on market confidence, individual suppliers and the Government’s ability to manage our relationship with those suppliers effectively, but more widely on the jobs of people employed by those companies—constituents of Members on both sides of the House—the delivery of public services and, potentially, the broader economy. We also need to act in a way that is consistent with our legal obligations and mitigate any litigation risks to Government. If the motion is passed, I will undertake to discuss in short order with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee the best way to make information available to her and her Committee, while ensuring that those genuine risks are minimised.

In his speech, the hon. Member for Hemsworth asked several questions about the Government’s contingency planning ahead of what turned out to be the collapse of Carillion a couple of weeks ago, and he also asked about the role of the Crown representative. To be clear, a new Crown representative was appointed in October last year and started work in November. He was appointed just after the regular quarterly list of named Crown representatives was published. The new list, which will include the name of the new representative, is due to be issued imminently, so the House will then be able to see the name of the new Crown representative to Carillion, along with all the others.

There was a longer-than-usual delay in the decision on the new nominee because, in the wake of Carillion’s first profit warning in July last year, my predecessors rightly took the decision that, rather than a Crown representative who was experienced in finance, they wanted somebody who was experienced in the restructuring of corporations: it was apparent that Carillion would need to undertake some considerable corporate restructuring and refinancing if it was to get its house in order, as it was then confident of doing.

Crown representatives are experienced board-level executives—they are not civil servants—who work on a part-time basis in the Cabinet Office to advise on commercial matters with suppliers and sectors. They help the Government to act as a single customer, but they do not advise suppliers on their finances or future business strategy. In the course of normal events, they do not have access to privileged information. Given the hon. Member for Hemsworth’s remarks, I should make it clear that Crown representatives are not politically appointed. They are contractors assigned to companies where they have knowledge of the sector and where there is no conflict with other concurrent roles that the individual man or woman may have. They have no authority to take procurement decisions.

Gareth Snell: Does the Minister agree that, even if it is within the letter of the law, the perception of people who have donated money to a political party subsequently getting a paid Government position looks bad and undermines the integrity of the work they are trying to do?

Mr Lidington: As I have already said to the House, these are not political appointments so there is no political intervention in them. It is quite right that donations to all political parties are made public. That is what the House has voted for and embodied in legislation, and it makes the situation clear to everybody.

Let me turn to Carillion’s liquidation. Along with all my fellow Ministers and, I believe, the whole House, I recognise that the collapse of Carillion has caused huge anxiety for the people who work for Carillion companies, the people in Carillion pension schemes, the suppliers and subcontractors and, of course, the people who use the public services provided by the company’s workers.

I reiterate the priorities that have animated the Government throughout the process. They have been: first, to make sure that public service delivery continued without interruption, which has been the case, as no public bodies have reported any major service disruptions; secondly, to reassure the workers employed on public service contracts that they will continue to get paid for their work; thirdly, to make sure that the right support is in place for pensioners; and fourthly, to protect taxpayers from an unacceptable bail-out of a public company, the risk of which is rightly borne by the shareholders and the banks that have lent to it.
Mr Lidington: The situation today is that the official receiver is now effectively running Carillion, and in the course of time his investigations will show exactly how the company ran into trouble. Although Carillion was under some financial pressure from three UK public sector construction projects—two hospitals and a road scheme in Scotland—it is already clear from the company’s statements to the stock market and from information that has become public since the liquidation that the problems it faced lay largely in its overseas construction projects and in the level of financial risk that it took on.

Within days of the first profit warning in July 2017, the Government retained legal and accountancy support and started an intense period of contingency planning. Preparing these plans involved considerable effort by officials from right across Government. The Department of Health and Social Care co-ordinated a similar exercise for NHS bodies, including trusts, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government worked with local authorities that had exposure to Carillion. The key aim of all these contingency plans was to ensure that public services were kept running safely and smoothly in any possible scenario. The solution had to be specific to the contract in question, had to be affordable and had to be capable of being executed, if necessary, at short notice.

As a result of that planning, the work covered by the service contracts has continued with minimal disruption: the school meals have been served, the hospitals have been cleaned and the maintenance staff have continued to go about their work. With regard to the construction contracts, some infrastructure work, such as that on the Aberdeen bypass, now continues uninterrupted. Other construction sites where work has paused have been put into a safe state so that work can be resumed quickly. The official receiver is working hard to resume work on these sites at the earliest possible date. This work requires customers to find new project management firms that can oversee the completion of their projects.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way and for the information that he is providing to Members of Parliament. The Midland Metropolitan Hospital has a site management in place and a series of contractors. Given that those contractors are now locked out of the site, they will be going off to undertake other work, so increasing costs will have to be borne. There will also be disruption to the work from the delay on an already delayed hospital, which has nothing to do with the workforce.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly serious and reasonable point. It is crucial that we do all we can within our power to minimise the impact of delay on the public sector construction contracts, and to retain the knowledge held by the Carillion staff employed on those contracts who, in most cases, are undertaking a project management role, managing the work of a number of different subcontractors. In particular, the development of our future hospitals must continue. This is something that the Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), is working on day by day.
Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for explaining the process. Given the concerns raised by the shadow Minister, will he confirm that there is no testing of whether a company is engaging, or has engaged, in the practice of blacklisting?

Mr Lidington: The issue of blacklisting is itself a matter of debate internationally about how the various criteria for blacklists are being drawn up. We have a set of criteria that are published in respect of each and every bid that is submitted for a contract being let out to the private sector.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: Carillion announced that it had won eight public sector contracts after its first profits warning in July last year. Three of those, for facilities management for defence establishments, were awarded before the profit warning, but Carillion chose to make the announcement some weeks later. Two out of the remaining five were awarded by HS2 Ltd. Those contracts were awarded to a joint venture including Eiffage—a major French construction firm—and Keir, as well as Carillion. The three companies bid together as a consortium, and as a result all shared responsibility for completing the work. After the profit warning, we asked the board of each of the partners for written assurances that if one partner failed, the other partners had a contractual obligation to pick up the work. Those assurances were given. Since the announcement of Carillion’s liquidation, both Eiffage and Keir have confirmed that the contracts will continue uninterrupted, and the former Carillion employees working on the contracts have been offered jobs with one of those other partners.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: As a further assurance following the announcements of the profit warning, external due diligence was commissioned by HS2 Ltd. This revealed that at the time of award in July last year, Carillion did have the financial capacity to continue with its part of the contract. HS2 let the two contracts to the joint venture because it was confident that the joint venture arrangements were robust, as has proved to be the case.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The Minister is outlining very coherently the rigorous process that has to be gone through to deliver quality public services on behalf of the taxpayer. Does he recall that it was a Conservative Government who introduced the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, which required Ministers to look at a wide range of factors and also to think about social, environmental and economic benefits for consumers and the taxpayer?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The tests we routinely apply take account of quality, not just cost, in assessing bids. I am sure there will be lessons that we want to examine, particularly as we learn about what happened to Carillion from the official receiver. It is interesting, as my hon. Friend points out, that it was a Conservative-led Government who put in place arrangements that had not been so made during the 13 years of a Labour Administration.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: The remaining three announcements concerned contracts with Network Rail. These were not new awards or new contracts, but variations to contracts that had been let three years earlier—in 2014. Two were for electrification work and, in a similar construct to the HS2 work, were let to a joint venture between Carillion and an electrification specialist, SPL Powerlines. One contract variation, for civil work in connection with the London to Corby upgrade, was let directly to Carillion. That is the only public sector contract, post the July 2017 profits warning, that was neither a joint venture nor something already decided and awarded before the profits warning was issued. Network Rail judged in this case—

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am aware that it is up to the Minister whether he gives way, but would it not be courteous to the House if he actually indicated that he was not going to take any interventions, because he just seems to be reading his speech—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. That is not a point of order, and I am not going to spend any time on it because a lot of people want to speak. There is no more courteous a Minister in this place than this Minister.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have given way a number of times already, and I want to make some progress. I certainly intend to give way again, but I am conscious that we have finite time available for the debate, and the time taken up by taking interventions is speaking time taken away from Back Benchers.

Network Rail judged in this case that Carillion was best placed to do the work, because it had been engaged on the project for three years already and had completed all the design work successfully. By agreement with the official receiver, former Carillion employees and suppliers continue to work on these rail projects, and today they are progressing as planned.

Since the liquidation on 15 January, the Government have responded promptly and appropriately, supporting the official receiver to manage the liquidation. We have also made funds available to allow an orderly wind-down of the company’s affairs. It is worth my explaining that this company was in such trouble that it could not even fund its own administration. If the Government had not stepped in and agreed to cover the costs of the official receiver, there would have been a real threat to public services in schools, hospitals and prisons. Staff would not have come to work last Monday, as they would not have been paid.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way—at last. In his letter today, he refers to an investigation into the conduct of Carillion’s directors. Is the chair of Carillion, Philip Green, still an adviser to the Government on corporate responsibility?

Mr Lidington: No, and he ceased to be an adviser after the Prime Minister took office.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Minister mentioned that the Government are funding the cost of the liquidation. What is the Government’s estimate of that cost?
Mr Lidington: It is not possible to give an estimate because that will be a net figure that has to take into account both the willingness of joint venture partners to step forward and take over the projects in which they were involved—that seems to have been the case—and the speed at which the official receiver is able to find alternative contractors, or in-house contractors in certain cases, to take on the provision of particular public services. Our overall estimate can be only quite an uncertain estimate at this stage, but we are confident that it will in any case be very significantly less than if we had had to cope with the costs of an unplanned, unmanaged liquidation, had the Government not stepped forward and agreed to pay for the official receiver’s administrative and legal costs. Because of the funding we have provided, we have kept those public services running, and that has also provided a breathing space for private sector customers such as the Nationwide building society to continue receiving services while they decide how to react to the crisis.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The partners are going to take over the work, but who will fund it—the partners or the official receiver?

Mr Lidington: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is referring to the partners involved in the special managers at PwC or to Carillion board members.

Mr Cunningham: I am referring to Carillion’s partners who were involved. They have an undertaking to take over the work, but who will pay the costs?

Mr Lidington: Administrative costs fell to the official receiver in the short term. With the HS2 contracts, for example, there was an obligation on the partners to step forward and meet the Carillion’s obligations at the cost that they, collectively as a consortium, had negotiated and agreed with the Government. That contract was with the consortium as an entity. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman’s question.

Nationwide building society has since offered jobs to 250 Carillion employees and contracts to the subcontractors that employ a further 1,500 people. In total, more than 90% of Carillion’s private sector facilities management service customers have indicated that they will provide funding through the official receiver to maintain interim services while new suppliers can be identified to deliver them, ensuring the retention and employment of staff on those contracts.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): TUPE does not apply when a company goes insolvent, but given the way in which Carillion collapsed, should not the Government make an exception and allow TUPE to apply to private sector employees?

Mr Lidington: PwC, as the special managers working with the official receiver, is looking at such cases to see whether it can offer arrangements whereby workers are no worse off than they were under the terms of their Carillion employment. The hon. Lady and I met yesterday to talk about the constituency concerns that she and other parliamentary colleagues have about the Wolverhampton headquarters. The alternative of a chaotic, unmanaged collapse and liquidation of Carillion would have been far more difficult for the workers concerned, because the liquidator in those circumstances would have had a statutory obligation to terminate all contracts and lay off all workers straight away, not to continue with the provision of public services. That would have been more costly not only for the individuals involved but, obviously, for the public purse.

I welcome the initiative taken last week by the Construction Industry Training Board to help the 1,400 apprentices employed by Carillion. Those apprenticeships were primarily in bricklaying, carpentry and joinery—skills that the country vitally needs to build homes and solve our national housing shortage. To date, the CITB has matched 400 of those apprentices with new employers, and it continues to assess the large number of industry offers it has received to find placements for the remaining Carillion apprentices.

Unfortunately, there will be some redundancies as a result of this company failure. That is why Jobcentre Plus mobilised its rapid response service, and it stands ready to support any employee, at any stage, who is affected by this announcement. I am aware, too, that a significant number of small and medium-sized businesses—either suppliers to or subcontractors of Carillion—will be affected by this collapse because Carillion owed them money. We are doing what we can to keep continuity on service contracts for those companies, and as I said earlier, we are having some success, particularly on the facilities management side.

In addition, we are looking to restart work on construction sites at the earliest safe moment. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with the assistance of my the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who has responsibility for small business, has personally led efforts to do what we can to mitigate the risks to subcontractors and suppliers through a taskforce to monitor and advise on mitigating the impacts of Carillion’s liquidation on the sector through practical measures that will help SMEs and employees alike. My right hon. Friend has met the banks, and I join him in welcoming their undertakings to take special measures to help those affected, including overdraft extensions, payment holidays and fee waivers.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend said in his letter to all colleagues that the Government was providing £1 billion-worth of funding to small and medium-sized enterprises, which is a useful start to keep some of them in business. Can he give any indication how that £1 billion is likely to be distributed?

Mr Lidington: The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), may be able to say more when he responds to the debate, but that help will involve things such as credit facilities and loans to enable those companies to trade their way through this period of difficulty, particularly until there is greater certainty about what happens to the contracts on which they were engaged.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I understand that some subcontractors have not been automatically recouped as result of the process that is under way, so organisations such as county councils and so on cannot provide a new contract. I would appreciate it if the Minister looked into that.
Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady writes to me with details, I will ensure that she receives a response from the appropriate Department. When I spoke to the Insolvency Service and PwC yesterday evening, they were able to say that some companies in the Carillion group appeared to be solvent. Those companies will still be able to continue trading, and that may be the case with the contracts that were brought to her notice.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the minister explain the advice he would give to SMEs subcontracted by Carillion in cases where Carillion services have been brought in-house to a local authority and where invoices have been unpaid? Should they apply to the official receiver for payment?

Mr Lidington: The practical advice I would give is to go to the website operated by special managers on behalf of the official receiver. There are links for the various categories of people affected, so those SMEs should follow the one for suppliers or subcontractors for advice and frequently asked questions. If they have specific concerns there is an email link to make direct contact with the special managers. That is the best way forward, because every case is slightly different.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the Minister, but there has been some consternation about the taking of interventions. The Minister has been quite generous in doing so. Twenty people wish to speak in the debate. There is an hour and 31 and a half minutes left. Members will also wish to hear the winding-up speeches. Some people have been sitting patiently in the Chamber all afternoon. The prospective limit on speeches at the moment is three minutes, but it is likely to go down, and some people will not have an opportunity to speak at all, so let us allow the Minister to say what he has to say.

Mr Lidington: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try to make progress.

Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will provide practical advice and guidance to those affected through its Business Payment Support Service. That may include help such as agreeing instalment arrangements, suspending any debt collection proceedings and reducing payments on account.

I should say a brief word about the concerns of members of Carillion’s defined-benefit pension schemes, who, understandably, are seriously worried at this time. Existing pensioners will continue to receive their pensions at agreed levels, but the significant funding deficit in Carillion funds will mean that some future pensioners will see their pensions reduced. At present, seven Carillion schemes, covering 6,000 members, have moved to the Pension Protection Fund assessment period, which occurs automatically when a sponsoring employer becomes insolvent. The remaining 21,000 members are in schemes that have at least one sponsor not in insolvency and are therefore not in the PPF. When a scheme moves into the PPF, the worst-case scenario is that the fund ensures that all pensions in payment continue to be paid at 100% of their value, and people who have benefits in such schemes for the future will lose those benefits at 90%, at least, of their expected value, subject to an overall ceiling on the amount that any individual can receive from a pension.

The Prime Minister restated on Sunday that the Government will shortly consult on tough new rules to tackle the behaviour of executives who try to line their own pockets by putting their workers’ pensions at risk—behaviour that she rightly labelled “an unacceptable abuse that we will end”. The official receiver has also taken immediate action to stop severance and bonus payments to former Carillion directors.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has written to the Insolvency Service and the official receiver asking that their statutory investigation into the conduct of Carillion’s directors is fast-tracked and extended in scope to include previous directors. He has also asked the Financial Reporting Council to conduct an investigation into the preparation of Carillion’s accounts past and present as well as the conduct of the company’s auditors. I can assure the House that no payments have been made to board directors or the former directors who had severance agreements since the date of liquidation. Directors with such severance agreements became unsecured creditors from the moment of liquidation.

Finally, in his opening remarks the hon. Member for Hemsworth touched—probably more than touched—on the overall questions about the outsourcing policy of this and other Governments. It is worth pointing out that outsourcing, whether in construction or the provision of services, is something that successive Governments—Labour, coalition or Conservative—have been doing since the 1990s. The services provided to the public sector by private companies include IT, back-office services, facilities management and other business services, such as running call centres. In many cases, those services have now been delivered by private sector companies for 10 or 20 years, and many have built up specialist expertise, skilled staff and investment to deliver public sector contracts.

This is a matter not just of cost, but of quality and innovation. If we look at a project such as Crossrail—the largest infrastructure project in Europe—that railway will open on time and on budget later this year. To deliver that project on time and within budget, Network Rail and Transport for London worked with a range of private sector companies—including Costain, BAM Nuttall, Balfour Beatty, Morgan Sindall and others—and use their specialist expertise, which is something, frankly, that civil servants are not trained to have.

I could list a long catalogue of examples of such successful use of private sector companies to deliver capital investment into our hospitals, schools and transport infrastructure and successfully to deliver the provision of public services in all aspects of the public sector. What I found to be such a pity about the hon. Gentleman’s contribution was that he resorted to ideology, instead of looking at the people—our constituents—who actually use the services and who benefit from the better value for money and innovative quality that private sector contractors are able to bring, and have brought successfully, to that work.

Not only that, but in an enchanting display, the hon. Gentleman disavowed his party’s entire history of 13 years in government. Let us not forget that the majority of outsourcing in the NHS took place under the Labour Governments between 1997 and 2010, as part of an initiative that was championed, in particular, by the current Mayor of Greater Manchester.
Let us look at what the Labour party has said since it left office. The shadow Communities and Local Government Secretary praised Carillion as an example of “good public procurement practice”, and the shadow Foreign Secretary praised it for offering apprenticeships to her constituents. The shadow Housing Secretary has said that PFI helps to deliver better and more cost-effective public services, and the shadow International Trade Secretary described it as “a staggering investment in the future of...children and...excellence”. —[Official Report, 15 November 2002; Vol. 394, c. 308.]

The shadow Northern Ireland Secretary said PFI provided “good value for money”. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] It is very interesting that Labour Members feel they have to conform with the new dear leadership that the hon. Member for Hemsworth wanted to celebrate, but they should have the courage of the convictions they expressed when in office and since about the value of a proper constructive partnership between the public and private sectors in the interests of the constituents we are sent here to represent.

The shadow Health Secretary says that NHS experts accept that only a “handful” of PFI contracts are causing hospital trusts a significant problem. Labour council leaders in Manchester, Birmingham and Hounslow have praised public-private partnerships for delivering growth and urban regeneration in their areas. For all the denunciations of Carillion, one third of the contracts that the state sector still had with it at the time of its liquidation were awarded by the Labour Governments of the early 2000s—Labour Governments in which the hon. Member for Hemsworth served as Gordon Brown’s right-hand man in No. 10 when that outsourcing work was at its zenith.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the public sector continues to benefit from the best of private sector innovation and skills. We do not put ideology first; we put the service user and the citizen first. That is the policy that the Government are committed to and which we intend to continue.

5.37 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I will start by talking about all those affected by the collapse of Carillion, not just those directly employed by it but those who have pensions, having previously been employed by it, those who are subcontractors or are employed by subcontractors and those who are receiving services provided by Carillion that have been stopped overnight and now are being provided by somebody else or by some other vehicle.

I want to talk a bit about what the Scottish Government have done to ensure that in Scotland our constituents and those living around the country receive a continuing service in the aftermath of the collapse of these contracts. The Scottish Government have set up helplines for employees of Carillion and its subcontractors. In addition, Skills Development Scotland is speaking to apprentices concerned about the future of their apprenticeships. The biggest Carillion project in Scotland that we know about, and which the Secretary of State mentioned earlier, is the Aberdeen bypass, on which project Balfour Beatty and Galliford Try are subcontractors. Because of how the contract was written, they are jointly and severally reliable for the delivery of the project, which means that there is no risk to the project and there will be no additional cost to the taxpayer from its continuation. I say that just to reassure my constituents, in particular, who are desperate to see this bypass, which, as many have said many times, is already 40 years too late—but at least we are getting there. We are pleased to hear that that contract will continue, and hopefully those who are working on it in Aberdeen and the surrounding areas will be reassured. It is estimated that the project will generate more than £6 billion of additional income for the north-east: it is a major infrastructure project.

We do, however, feel that serious questions must be asked of the UK Government about the decision to continue awarding contracts to Carillion. The Scottish Government have not awarded it any contracts since the first profit warning was given in July last year. Since the warnings, both the UK and Welsh Governments have agreed contracts with the company. In the days after the first warning, the UK Government awarded contracts worth £2 billion, including the huge High Speed 2 and Ministry of Defence contracts. At the time, the then Transport Secretary said that he hoped Carillion would overcome its problems. He said:

“My wish is that Carillion get through their current problems but we’ve made sure that it’s not an issue for these contracts.”

I hope that that is the case. I hope that people will continue to be paid, and continue to be able to deliver the work.

After the third profit warning, the UK Government’s Education and Skills Funding Agency awarded a £12 million school building contract to Carillion, and the Welsh Government went ahead with a contract for work on two junctions on the A55. The questions that we must ask are these: if rigorous processes were in place, why did Carillion continue to be awarded contracts, and what other firm has continued to be awarded contracts despite not being in a position to deliver on them?

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I am pleased about some of the measures that the devolved Administrations have taken. If Carillion had been of such concern, however, would not Scottish National party Members have mentioned it more than twice in the last six months of 2017? Moreover, the Scottish Government have put £5.7 billion into 82 projects through Carillion. This should not be a criticism only of the UK Government. The problem exists in all the devolved Administrations, and we must all work together to fix it.

Kirsty Blackman: As I have said, the Scottish Government have not awarded any contracts to Carillion since the first profit warning. Yes, the SNP has raised the matter twice in the House. Given that the contracts that have been awarded since the profit warning have not been awarded in Scotland, it is amazing that the SNP is standing up for Members’ constituents throughout the United Kingdom.

Let me say some more about what the Scottish Government are doing and the direction that they have taken, particularly in relation to private sector contracts. They have said that they will use private sector partners only when that is the best way in which to support
public services, which is why fewer Carillion contracts have been awarded in Scotland than elsewhere. In 2008, the Scottish Government stated their intention to phase out private contracts relating to, for example, those providing services in hospitals. As a result, all cleaning in NHS hospitals is now carried out by in-house workers. We in Scotland have also announced our intention to build a publicly owned competitor to bid for the ScotRail franchise.

We support the continued use of procurement processes to ensure that the Scottish Government can continue to seek the living wage. We have made it as clear as possible that those who are contracted to provide public services for private companies must pay the living wage, and, wherever possible, the Scottish Government have taken action to ensure that that happens. I hope that the UK Government will follow suit. They talk about what they describe as the national living wage, which people cannot actually live on, but I am talking about the real living wage. To provide that for all public sector workers and all those who are contracted to provide public services would be an incredibly important move, which would help to deal with the wage stagnation that we have seen in recent years.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) mentioned blacklisting. We have argued against it on a number of occasions, both in the House and elsewhere. We have made it clear that it is completely unacceptable. Companies should not engage in the practice, and the Government and other organisations should make that plain to them. They should treat companies that apply for contracts differently if they are proved to have engaged in it.

As I have said, the UK Government need to look at all their contracts. They need to assess the financial stability of all the organisations that provide vital public services, especially those in the private sector.

I cannot believe that the directors of Carillion sat in board meetings looking at the accounts and believed for so long that the company was solvent. I do not understand how the directors could genuinely have believed that, because it is so clear to everyone—now that the profit warnings have been issued, the accounts are being discussed and the company is in liquidation—that the position was totally unsustainable for quite a long time. I do not understand how the position was reached where the directors were not taking their responsibilities seriously, taking decisions and making changes—actually saying to the Government, “Sorry, but we can’t bid for these contracts, because we don’t think we are in a position to deliver.”

The Minister talked about the processes whereby services are outsourced and contracts granted to private sector companies. Whatever the process gone through, it was clearly not rigorous enough. In future, a more rigorous process must be applied. Carillion employs 19,000 people; we think about 1,000 of them are in Scotland. That is a significant employer to collapse. We do not want smaller employers that may not have so many public sector contracts but are in financial difficulties to fall too, in a domino effect. It is incumbent on the Government to check that the private sector companies that have public sector contracts can deliver those contracts, so we do not end up again in a situation where people are scrambling.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes some important points. Do not the Government need to send a strong signal to public sector bodies that are issuing contracts that best value does not necessarily or always mean the cheapest? The problem is that companies undercut each other because they think that is how to get the contract, and the local authority thinks it has to take the cheapest, rather than the best value that will deliver the best quality service.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree. As a local authority councillor, I worked under the best value regime looking at contracts and tenders. I judged them, not just on the best price, but on best value and the quality of service provided, and whether the companies would be able to deliver what they said they would when they tendered for a contract. Something has gone wrong in the system. I do not know if that is because of Tory austerity, which has resulted in a squeeze on contracts in the public sector and a drive to ensure that contracts are awarded to the cheapest bids, rather than those that provide best value. Given the collapse of Carillion, the Government need to look carefully at the reasons behind awarding all those contracts to ensure that this can never happen again.

I see you shooogling in your seat, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will just take another minute. The Public Accounts Committee warned of the risks of contractors paid from the public purse becoming too big to fail; unfortunately, the Government did not heed the warning and continued to award the contracts. I think—I hope—the Minister would agree with me that it is disgraceful that the contracts were awarded and Carillion continued to line the pockets of its shareholders despite not being in a position to fulfil the contracts. Clearly there are major structural issues with the awarding of contracts. I hope that this is the beginning of the UK Government looking seriously at the matter and making proper changes to ensure that these events can never happen again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. There is now a time limit of three minutes.

5.48 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I start by saying that I am disappointed by the motion before the House, not just because there is clearly a mechanism through the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise these matters, but because there are tens of thousands of people involved and politics should not be put before people. Regrettably the whole cut of the Opposition’s spokesman’s jibe was ideological—private bad, public good. That is not the debate that we should be having. We should be debating what will happen to the people affected by the situation and what went wrong with Carillion. We need to hold the people involved to account and discuss how we can help those who have been affected. We also need to talk about how we can provide and sustain the important public services and projects involved in this situation.

The Government’s initial response has been positive. Working with the official receiver, as well as with a number of Carillion’s joint venture partners, the banks and finance providers, public service providers and the trade unions, they have ensured the continuity of the
vast majority of services and projects. We should not forget, however, that we need to keep the dialogue going to ensure that services are maintained for as long as possible and that there is a soft landing for most of those contracts. If there is not, we risk losing more jobs.

In the short time available, I want to mention pensions. It is good to see that there is protection for the vast majority of the workers involved in this case, but it is clear that Carillion was not putting as much into its pension deficit as it should have been, and we need to look at pensions in the context of public procurement. We also need to look at small and medium-sized enterprises. The Government have a strong target of a third of public sector contracts going to SMEs, and we should ensure that that happens so that we have a more diverse sector. We should also ensure that big companies such as Carillion do not keep small companies to 120-day payment terms. We should do more to ensure that small companies and the people who work for them are protected, that services are maintained across the piece and, importantly, that workers are supported throughout this problem.

5.51 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab):

When the news broke last week that Carillion was going into liquidation, it was a dark day for the company’s 20,000 employees across the UK, including the 450 people at the company’s headquarters in Wolverhampton. Many others are affected across the west midlands region, including those who were working on the Midland Metropolitan hospital site, the many small businesses in the company’s vast supply chain and the many subcontractors who have not yet been paid and who probably will not be.

I welcome the assurances last week that the 450 people at the company’s headquarters will be paid until the end of January, but many of them are now worried about what will happen on Thursday next week. Perhaps the Minister will be able to give us some clarity about that. After all, those people have mortgages to pay, family budgets to plan and meals to put on the table.

The Government still have serious questions to answer about their handling of this matter. Why was the Government’s Crown representative absent from August to November last year? Surely that was a crucial period for the company, and the Crown representative should have been overseeing its 450 Government contracts. Why did the Government continue to award contracts after the company’s first profit warning? How many people will ultimately stand to lose their jobs? How much will the collapse of Carillion cost the taxpayer?

The directors of the company have serious questions to answer, too. It was clearly wrong that the senior management were being paid big salaries and bonuses while racking up debts of more than £2 billion. Only a year ago, the then chief executive, Richard Howson, received a pay package of £1.5 million a year. I was taken aback by the media reports that the remuneration arrangements were amended to prevent the clawback of salaries and bonuses. When I raised this matter with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster last week, he assured me that the official receiver had the power to impose penalties on the company’s directors. I hope that such penalties will be imposed.

Many experts believe that it would be difficult—and, possibly, legally expensive—to prove either “wrongful trading” or a breach in the duties of the directors. It seems more likely that Carillion’s senior management will be let off the hook, as so many directors of failed banks were following the financial crisis. Surely this has to change. We need stronger penalties for directors who breach their duties. I hope that lessons can be learned about public procurement, and that urgent reforms will be made to corporate governance to prevent those at the top of failing companies from lining their pockets and simply walking away when the companies collapse.

5.54 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con):

In the time available to me, I want to say a few words about a business in my constituency—a subcontractor that has been dealt a hammer blow by Carillion’s collapse—and to make three points. First, I will identify the human impact, which is perhaps taken as read but bears repetition. Secondly, I want to shine a light on the fact that the collapse has exposed market abuse by the big players against small businesses, which we need to look at. Thirdly, there is the potential to recover the situation, so I want this to be a constructive contribution.

My constituent Josh Lee is the director of Larc Construction and his business partner is James Crisp. Both of them are former soldiers and saw action in Afghanistan—in the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Anglian Regiment respectively. One of them was blown up for his troubles but, happily, he recovered. Larc Construction, which is a small contractor, won a contract with Carillion in July 2017 to provide service trenching and ducting at the Midland Metropolitan hospital in Birmingham. As one of the smallest contractors—here is the rub—making its way in the construction world and seeking to establish its reputation with a new client, it did everything that could reasonably be expected of it. It completed its work on time and to a high standard and helped out with additional jobs on site and so on. What is more, to establish its credentials further, it agreed to Carillion’s request to delay the drawdown of its monthly invoice payments for 120 days, because Carillion wanted it to do that to prove that it was creditworthy. The irony is overwhelming.

The upshot is that Larc Construction has been paid for its work to the end of October, but is now owed £200,000. That is not profit; it needs that money to settle its own invoices. If it does not receive a significant proportion of the money by the end of the month, there is every chance it will have to fold, putting colleagues, some of whom are former comrades, out of work. To make matters worse, Larc is in a Kafkaesque situation whereby its plant and machinery, which is costing £1,500 a week to rent, is currently impounded on the site. It cannot get it back so is unable to return it to the hirer to at least defray some of the ongoing costs.

If Mr Lee and Mr Crisp can somehow get through this month and pay their bills, they will survive. It may be that they will have to forgo every last penny of profit from the first half of their contract, but if they can get into a position to be able to continue with the second
half—I am delighted that the Government have indicated that they want people to be able to do that—they will at least remain in business. They may end up doing the whole project at cost, but at least they will be able leave the site this year in charge of a going concern and with an enhanced reputation as a contractor that has completed a professional job in difficult circumstances.

Mr Lee and Mr Crisp are not the moaning type, and they are not interested in retribution. They just want a bit of help to be able to carry on trading. I will be grateful if the Minister indicates what support could be provided, and I am grateful to those Ministers who have taken calls on Saturdays to help me with this problem.

5.57 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Carillion’s problems have been well trailed: major construction projects running over budget and leaving the company with losses; a huge pension deficit; and work done overseas for which it has not been paid. All that ultimately led to the company’s creditors losing confidence and its collapse into liquidation.

As has been said, the corporate headquarters is in Wolverhampton, where it employs some 450 people. What reassurance can the Minister give to the staff at the HQ, who have been described as the nerve centre of the company? I understand the implications of an insolvency, but an assurance that they will be employed until the end of the month is not good enough when there is only one week of the month left. The staff need more than that.

There are other critical questions about pensions, subcontractors and those who were charged with the stewardship of the company, but in the two minutes I have left I want to concentrate on the collapse itself. Court documents filed by the chief executive last week show that Carillion was engaged in a desperate effort to keep open lines of credit with its banks. From the outside, it is of course difficult to judge whether those efforts may have borne fruit or whether they were always a lost cause. In any case, the liquidation has decided the outcome. However, those discussions involved not just Carillion and the banks; the Government were involved, too.

What exactly did Carillion ask the Government for in the days running up to liquidation? In what form was that help asked? Was it a loan, or was it the underwriting of activities in case cash-flow projections did not materialise? How did the Government take the decision to refuse these requests? Which Ministers were involved, and what was the process for ultimately saying no? Crucially, when the decision to refuse was taken, was any comparison made between the likely cost to the public purse of keeping the company going and the cost of turning down the request for financial help and seeing the company collapse?

Much has been said about the wrongness of using public money to bail out companies. Company failure is, of course, an inescapable feature of any market economy, but in this case the taxpayer was not free to walk away, as we have seen and as has been confirmed. The taxpayer is paying the costs of liquidation.

We want answers to those questions, if not today then certainly in the Select Committee inquiries that follow.

Bim Afomali (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): In the time available to me, I will make a couple of points that have not yet been fully brought out in this debate.

My first point is about the action and place of KPMG, Carillion’s auditors. Roughly 40% of Carillion’s balance sheet is intangible assets, largely made up of goodwill. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and I see fellow members in the Chamber; I hope we will get a chance to ask questions about why KPMG did not impair the goodwill on the balance sheet when it was fully aware of the group’s difficulties.

Indeed, many questions have been brought up on both sides of the House about using the private sector in outsourcing the delivery of public services in general. For what it is worth, it seems straightforward to me that using the private sector to provide public sector contracts works best when there is a proper market and competition in the service, so that we can get private sector dynamism and innovation—the things the Minister talked about in his speech. It also works best when the difference between a good service and a bad service, or between good performance and bad performance, can be fully measured on a quantifiable basis.

Will the Minister give a bit more detail on the Government’s view about the role of public and private sector interaction? It is incumbent on the Government to defend the principle of using private involvement to deliver services for the public, because the Opposition’s view is clear: they believe we should nationalise or renationalise everything. When we add up the £55 billion to nationalise energy, the £86 billion to nationalise water, the £5 billion to nationalise Royal Mail and the £30 billion to nationalise the private finance initiative, that is roughly the defence budget and the NHS budget combined—for ideological reasons alone.

I ask the Opposition these questions, if I am permitted to do so. Where is the evidence that nationalisation will mean that services are better or cheaper to run? Why would a state-run monopoly always inherently perform better than a competitive market in this instance? Why, indeed, is it better for the British taxpayer, rather than a private company, to take all the financial risk?

The Opposition claim that somehow the bad bankers and rich fat cats have got off scot-free. The shareholders have lost money, the bondholders have lost money, the bankers have lost money and the British taxpayer—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Louise Ellman.

Bim Afomali: The British taxpayer—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Afomali, please let us not test the patience of the House. A lot of people want to speak.

6.4 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will focus on the impact of Carillion’s collapse on the completion of the new Royal Liverpool Hospital. I am extremely concerned about subcontractors that have not been paid for work done, apprentices uncertain of their future, pensions at risk and the prospect of workers...
losing their jobs. However, in the short time available I will focus on the importance of securing a date for the completion of the new Royal, where 90% of the £365 million contract has been completed. I am told that the “hospital company”—the private finance initiative company set up to build the hospital—can appoint a contractor to complete the job, and that the cost will be met from insurance, but no date has yet been given.

There is an added complication. The hospital company is owned by PIP Infrastructure Investment Ltd and Carillion Private Finance (Health) Ltd. Carillion Private Finance (Health) Ltd is controlled by Carillion Private Finance Ltd and is a “subsidiary undertaking” of Carillion plc, and Carillion plc is one of the Carillion companies that is in compulsory liquidation. What does this complex web mean for the appointment of a new contractor and the completion of the hospital?

When I raised this issue in the House previously, I was told by the Minister that the matter could be dealt with simply and that it was for the existing hospital to resolve, but that is not the case. Assurances that the hospital will be completed are simply not enough. I want firm dates for when a new contractor will be appointed and when that new hospital will be open for business. As a matter of urgency, the people of Liverpool need the services that the hospital will provide. Carillion’s collapse must not leave Liverpool in the lurch. I call on the Minister to give the answers, and to give them now.

6.6 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I am conscious of time, so I will keep my points as succinct as I can.

I echo the words of other hon. Members: obviously, the collapse of Carillion has impacted many small companies and individuals, and I ask Ministers to focus their efforts on supporting smaller companies throughout the supply chain, and please to put the full weight of Her Majesty’s Government behind the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and UK Finance to ensure that support is provided to those most in need.

I was disappointed that the debate was led off by the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) with “WTF”. I have been in the House for only seven months, but I am pretty sure that, on an issue as important as the collapse of a major company, our constituents expect a little better—especially when there were only five mentions of Carillion by Labour Members in the last six months of 2017, so they were not exactly ringing the bell.

Taking issue with the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), I do not think it is time for gloating by the SNP either, when just last year 7,000 students across 17 schools in Edinburgh could not return to school as a result of the failure of contracts overseen by the devolved Administration.

Carillion’s demise was the failure of a company, but there were other actors, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) mentioned, one of the key issues was the failure to axe the auditors. The auditors had been the same since 1999, and in 2016 they gave Carillion a clean bill of health. Auditors’ accounts are needed by the market, by Ministers and by individual investors throughout the United Kingdom and internationally. We need to look at the fact that not only had the auditors been sole incumbents since 1999, but that that was so in the face of Financial Reporting Council guidance issued in 2013 that auditors should be rotated by major companies, and a 2016 EU law, which I hope we will be keeping, making the rotation of auditors mandatory to ensure that companies are properly scrutinised and that objectivity is kept.

I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee. We will be discussing the collapse of Carillion and carefully considering our next steps. Government papers provide insight, but it is my view that, actually, an independent National Audit Office report would be far more illuminating. Perhaps, rather than using acronyms such as “WTF” and trying to score party political points, we could use this opportunity to walk across the House, get central and devolved Administrations working together, make sure we address the audit issue, make sure we do the proper inquiries to address the concerns of our constituents and make sure this kind of failure does not happen again.

6.9 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I shall be quick. I will focus my comments specifically on workers who find themselves potentially in limbo. In particular, I want to follow up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on TUPE arrangements. The Government made changes to employment law in the previous Parliament so that it now takes two years to accrue proper employment rights—redundancy protections in particular, but also rights such as holiday pay. When the Minister winds up the debate, will he guarantee the continuation of the service protections that so many workers may rely on when companies take on existing workers or the public sector takes on contracts previously held by Carillion, so that, should the worst happen and those workers find themselves facing redundancy at some point, they will get a payment that recognises the service they previously gave, rather than the new terms and conditions they might find themselves on?

I will touch briefly on a situation arising in Stoke-on-Trent. The city council is working on a programme to outsource to a company a number of its soft-facilities management arrangements, particularly on housing and housing support services. Will the Minister please address the fact that, across the country, local authorities find themselves having to look at outsourcing options as a way to provide public services because of the chronic and long-term underfunding they have received? Local authorities do not make those choices willingly; they do so because they are dealing with budget deficits that need to be addressed, and often the short-term solution is to enter into contracts that on the date of entry save money, but, with inflation uplift, cause them to have greater budget deficits over time. Will he please talk to his colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government—or whatever it is called now—to ensure that local government is properly funded? We could prevent future outsourcing.

Finally, when the Minister talks to those groups of workers who are looking at what their options are, rather than going down the line of a state monopoly
and nationalisation or that of a private sector contract, will he please give genuine thought to a solution whereby workers could form new worker-led co-operatives to take on that work? One of the problems with outsourcing is that we lose accountability and the people who use the services cannot genuinely help to drive what they should look like. I would be grateful if he addressed those three points.

6.11 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): May I add my comments to those welcoming you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker? I want to return to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who reminded us of the potential human cost of such collapses. That is why we should all be concerned about them. However, so far, the Government have handled the situation well and—to touch wood—it appears as though things are continuing as well as could be expected.

On that front, I would highlight three positives: the way public services have continued, which is of huge importance to our constituents; the way joint venturing has protected taxpayers and reduced the potential harm of the situation; and—we have not heard this yet—let us not forget that earlier today we saw in the labour force survey that we still have record employment. We also have record levels of vacancies. Therefore, although it is worrying what may happen to people, including my hon. Friend’s constituents, we could not ask for a better situation in which people might be out there looking for work, because a huge amount of work is available in construction and other parts of the economy. We have a strong job-creating economy and we should remember that real positive.

On the broader points, pensions are a particular concern for me. My hon. Friends the Members for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) referred to the auditors, but we should not forget the pension trustees. Up to the general election, I was on the Work and Pensions Committee, and in December 2016 we published a report on the new powers of the Pensions Regulator, given what had happened at BHS. I fear that that could happen again at other companies. We really need to look at pension scheme oversight so that schemes are not abused, as might have been the case at this company.

There is a real challenge for this country in all aspects of pensions policy. Not just in the context of this company, but in terms of the forthcoming White Paper, which I strongly welcome, we must have a joined-up look at this issue and consider how we support overall investment and the economy—we do not want to denude that—and ensure we have effective oversight of pensions so that people do not lose their pensions when companies go under and we do not pass the burden on to the taxpayer.

There are many other issues to look at, but, given what could have happened, so far it has gone reasonably well.—[Interruption.] Opposition Members are laughing, but I would have loved to see some of those hon. Members, who have almost no business experience between them, in charge of this situation. It has been well handled, and let us hope that that continues.

6.14 pm

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): In 2014, Keith Cochrane was appointed to the joint management board of the Scotland Office to advise on the strategic and operational issues in that Department and on the efficient delivery of ministerial priorities. As well as that, Mr Cochrane was a member of the Government’s network of non-executive directors. According to media reports, a Government source described Mr Cochrane as having undertaken, since he joined that board and that network,

a significant programme of engagement with Lead NEDs from across UK Government departments."

The source also said:

“Since Keith Cochrane’s appointment the visibility of the Non-Executive Board Members has increased considerably, especially across Government.”

Not only was Mr Cochrane a key adviser to the Secretary of State for Scotland and others across Whitehall, but during his three-year term as a management director and non-executive director in Government he was also on Carillion’s board, and he was latterly its chief executive officer. The long and short of it is that Mr Cochrane advised on Government policy while Carillion was being offered large and lucrative contracts in Scotland and throughout the UK. For many at home watching our proceedings, it will look like just another example of the cosy cabal that the Government are routinely guilty of entertaining.

It has been suggested that Mr Cochrane asked the Government to consider a bail-out for Carillion. As a high-level adviser to Ministers and to Whitehall, Mr. Cochrane enjoyed premium access that would simply be unavailable to someone from any other company. Small business owners who face lost contracts, unpaid bills and the prospect of having to lay off staff never had the kind of access to or voice at the Government that Mr Cochrane had. Unlike him, they will not receive £750,000 in pay while their company goes under, or £300 for every high-level meeting with Ministers.

I welcome today’s announcement that Keith Cochrane will step aside temporarily, but will the Minister tell the House whether the Government will renew his membership of the joint management board and the network of non-executive directors when his three-year term expires this year? Will the Government provide details of the number of meetings Mr Cochrane had with Ministers responsible for issuing contracts to Carillion and of whether he ever raised the prospect of a bail-out of Carillion with Ministers or Whitehall officials?

6.17 pm

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): In this country, we have high-quality public services, but the reality is that they are expensive. I am afraid the simplistic statements offered in the Labour party manifesto, suggesting that just a few rich people could pay for everything that our voters demand, do not stand up to the light of day.

The private sector has a role to play, but it must be managed properly. In my area, PFI contracts were awarded under the previous Labour Government to build a new hospital in Worcester that serves the people of Redditch. It provides much-needed health services, but it has been troubled by the financial obligations arising from the financing deal. Lessons must be learned.
The awarding of large-scale public sector contracts requires a particular skill set and should be entered into by those with the necessary training.

Removing the private sector completely would not solve the problem. It has delivered benefits to NHS patients that are freely available to all. New, innovative, life-saving equipment—such as I have seen in the new endoscopy unit at Worcester—can diagnose cancers and other life-threatening illnesses, save patients long trips, and save lives. That would not be possible without private sector involvement.

Some Opposition Members have suggested that this debate comes down to ideology. I reject that. It is not a black-and-white choice. The private sector can be managed well or appallingly, just as the public sector can. We should not make a binary choice between on the one hand the public sector as morally superior and above reproach, and on the other hand the private sector as morally bankrupt. Instead, it comes down to an organisation’s culture and values, and they have to be led from the top.

The ownership and corporate structure of an organisation does not, in and of itself, guarantee either good or bad behaviour. Every human being is flawed and imperfect. I suggest that Members read the works of Shakespeare, any of our great works of literature or the Bible, to educate themselves about the human condition. We are all flawed people. Perhaps Opposition Members are flawed, but I am certainly not. People are capable of doing bad things.

As policy makers, our role is to make laws that go as far as they can to prevent individual flawed human beings, such as those we have seen in this case, from being put in a position to flout moral codes. We must uphold those codes and expect the best from those in power. We must all focus on better corporate governance, which is a priority for this Administration that I support. I serve on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and I am looking forward to taking part in our joint work with the Work and Pensions Committee. I will be calling on the Government to act on our recommendations.

6.19 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is very good to see you back, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The ideological zeal of the Conservative party has not dimmed since the days of Mrs Thatcher. The mantra then and now is one of “public bad, private good”. I remember then leading a delegation to see the good Lord Heseltine, the then Secretary of State for Defence, to convince him that we had a public sector alternative to privatisation of the royal naval dockyards. When we asked him, “Why then privatise?” he tossed his golden mane over his shoulder and said, “Because I am a Tory.” That says it all about the enduring ideological assumption made by the Conservative party. To this day, the heir to Mrs Thatcher refuses to listen to the reasonable case put by the Opposition for taking back into public ownership failing utilities that are letting the public down.

I have always argued that the public interest should come first, but why should workers come a sorry second? Let us look at the history of what has happened, at outsourcing and at what is threatened at the next stages. On history, we have had 10 years in which the Tories refused to apply TUPE to 6 million public servants, with those public servants paying a catastrophic price as a consequence. Ultimately, the old T&G won. We took the case to the European Court of Justice to force the Government to extend TUPE to cover the public sector. Now, once again, what we thought we had won is threatened by Brexit. We have heard successive Ministers, led by the Foreign Secretary, talking about abolishing red tape. Is guaranteeing workers’ rights on transfer red tape? Nonsense. The Government have refused to guarantee in British law—statute law—that workers will be protected on transfer.

On Carillion, it was a monumental failure by Government and of governance. It is a symbol of the utter irresponsibility and incompetence of the Government, driven by that ideological zeal with catastrophic consequences. Last Tuesday, at the Apprenticeship Centre in my constituency, apprentices were sent home weeping. One said, “What am I going to tell my mum? What do I do now?” Workers were in despair. What we were seeing were the catastrophic consequences of a company that had received three profit warnings, that was still paying dividends and that was not adequately investing in the pension deficit. It is not true that pensions are fully protected—notwithstanding the welcome steps taken by a Labour Government with the Pension Protection Fund. All workers, to a greater or lesser extent, will lose on their pensions.

Finally, when we are in government, the Labour party will act to end that ideological assumption of “public bad, private good”. We will use public spending power in the best interests of the public, in the best interests of workers and in the best interests of small and medium-sized enterprises. The difference between our two parties could not be greater. We will stand up for the public interest.

6.22 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): First, I wish to share the concerns that have been expressed today about the workers who have been affected by Carillion’s insolvency. This is a troubling time for many people—those who work for Carillion, those who work for small and medium-sized enterprises that depend on Carillion contracts and those, such as my constituents, who are reliant on the local services that they provided. I am pleased that the Government have taken immediate action to minimise the impact on workers by providing the reassurance that those working on public sector contracts will continue to be paid and by ensuring that public services can continue to be provided.

Secondly, I wish to put on record the good work of Conservative-run Lincolnshire County Council. Carillion was in the process of building the Lincoln Eastern Bypass, a project that is hugely important to local residents and businesses in my constituency and in others. Lincolnshire County Council acted very swiftly to ensure that the contract with Carillion was terminated and that another company, Galliford Try, was taken on so that work could continue apace. Indeed, within one week of Carillion’s failure, work is already under way on site, with the new company making sure that the building of this bypass continues. I commend the council for its work and ask the Government to
look at ensuring that people on apprenticeships are considered in this project and can see their training continued.

6.24 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is very good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am going to make four points. First, can we take the work back in-house at a local level? As we have heard, the local government network across the UK has been hollowed out with regard to skills and ability. That is a structural problem that has developed over very many years. It is an issue for Governments to address in future if we are serious about giving local authorities the power to do things in-house.

Secondly, can we take the work back in-house at a national level? The Minister said that he did not believe that the civil service had the skills to do that anymore and that is why it is all given to the big companies. We should look across the channel at the French. They can do it. Their civil servants are educated to the very highest level at their network of écoles. If they can do it, we can do it. We should look at that closely. I recommend a book to Conservative Members to Conservative Members to everyone else in this House—“Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong”. They should read it. It explains how the system works, and it is fascinating.

Thirdly, yes, we must see what the official receiver and the private sector can do it, we can do it. We should look at that closely. I recommend a book to Conservative Members and to everyone else in this House—“Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong”. They should read it. It explains how the system works, and it is fascinating.

Thirdly, yes, we must see what the official receiver and the private sector can do it, we can do it. We should look at that closely. I recommend a book to Conservative Members and to everyone else in this House—“Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong”. They should read it. It explains how the system works, and it is fascinating.

That brings me to my fourth and final point; I chuck my speech over my shoulder like a golden mane. We must not underestimate how annoyed people out there are about what has happened. We all go on at our constituents about prudent management of their finances—that is what universal credit is all about. We say, “Save, budget and look after your money,” and then along comes Carillion. All of us, in all parts of the House, are tarnished by this. It reduces our constituents' faith in us as their elected representatives. It is even—dare I say it?—dangerous for democracy. We have to sort this out and be seen to do it publicly. Let us restore the faith of our constituents.

6.26 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): For decades now, this country has been beguiled by the outsourcing and privatisation industry. The magic formula of better services for less money has permeated through every part of the public sector. But the Carillion debacle has shown us that that magic formula is an illusion—a con trick of epic proportions.

I want to focus on one element of outsourcing: the impact on employees. When a function transfers, it is usually the case that the staff who are employed in that function transfer along with it. While TUPE does offer a level of protection, it is far from perfect and often misunderstood. Contrary to what many people think, it does not offer unlimited protection against changes to terms and conditions. If someone works for an employer who has taken them on as part of an outsourcing or privatisation project, they are far more likely to have their terms and conditions attacked, because very often the whole purpose of the outsourcing project is to save money. As employee costs are often a significant part of the contract, they are usually first in line when savings are sought.

We then see an industrial scale of cowardice as blame is passed between the old employer and the new. The new employer says, “The company we are contracting with is asking us to make savings on the contract, and the only way we can do it is by cutting your pay,” but the old employer says, “Don’t look at us—we’re just a customer now. We were told that you would be protected when you left us.” A merry dance is led, and the employees facing a wage cut, or worse, are left high and dry.

The blunt truth is that this is just an elaborate dance—a façade—because the evidence tells us that the minute the decision was taken to outsource, this was always where things would end up. People might kid themselves that their former employees will be protected and think that nothing will change, but the history of outsourcing tells us that sooner or later it is the workers who pay. How do people think that these miraculous savings will emerge? I am sure there are fields of expertise where the private sector can offer something, but really, what does a construction company know about cleaning hospitals?

Scrutiny, transparency and accountability are all jettisoned by outsourcing, as the private sector companies have none of the obligations that the public sector is obliged to adhere to, such as freedom of information. The only thing they are judged on is the contract itself. Social value, long-term investment and building capacity for the future, which ought to be by-products of a healthy public sector, are completely forgotten.

The Prime Minister said that the Government are just a customer of Carillion. That is of course true, but Labour Members expect much more than a passive role from the Government. The Government should be more than a customer; they should be the defender of public services and a vehicle for driving change in society. Outsourcing functions should not mean an outsourcing of that responsibility. We need to end the toxic cocktail of beguiling management consultants, weak employment rights and greedy bosses that leads to a race to the bottom that is accelerated by privatisation and outsourcing. It is time that Government put a stop to this instead of being a willing participant.

6.29 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am delighted to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We heard from the Minister for the Cabinet Office a lengthy justification of outsourcing, but it was rather diminished by some of his colleagues—right-wing ideologues lecturing the rest of us on ideology—who claimed that, with outsourcing, risk is transferred from the public sector to the private sector. The current situation of Carillion shows that that is just complete and utter nonsense; the risk always remains with the public sector. As I remember as a trade union negotiator, the problems of outsourcing also include a reduction in workers’ wages, and not having a comparable pension scheme because the new employer would put less into it, so there are all sorts of issues. There is, however, a general principle. The Department for Work and Pensions has issued a contract to a company, Interserve, for cleaning services, but its current financial adviser is the
same individual who was advising Monarch Airlines, so what chance have we got with some of these Government contracts?

I want to raise again the concerns expressed by the shadow Minister in relation to handing over contracts to blacklisters. In their procurement contracts, the devolved Administrations have specific rules that I think the Westminster Government should also apply: there should be an apology from companies participating in the blacklisting; they should take remedial action; and they should provide compensation to the workers who were blacklisted.

I think there is a sensible solution to the current Carillion crisis that would help the existing workforce. It can be found in the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, which was published last week and is available in all good Vote Offices. It is a visionary Bill, if I may say so, because we need to have the principle that where a subcontractor absconds or ceases trading, the principal contractor is then responsible for the wages of the subcontractor’s workers, including “any fee, bonus, commission, sick pay, maternity pay, holiday pay, redundancy pay” or any other payment. I hope the Government will look carefully at clause 3 of the Bill, and introduce emergency legislation to protect the workers of Carillion and to ensure that when subcontractors are caught up in such a situation, the principal contractor must pick up the tab.

6.32 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to see you back in your rightful place, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The reaction of many of us to the demise of Carillion was, “Here we go again!” We have seen once more the very heavy cost of privatising profit and socialising risk. The buck stops with the British taxpayer, who will once more have to bear the cost of the failure of our current economic model. The Carillion crisis has again shown the failure of the model established in the 1980s—the privatisation of the delivery of public services.

Far from making the delivery of public services cheaper and more efficient, we instead see businesses building monopolies on the back of public investment, eliminating competitors on the way and using precious public money to maximise the return to senior executives and shareholders, often on the back of huge borrowing. The result is, in the case of Carillion, that when the banks say enough is enough, the public obligation to deliver services reverts to the taxpayer and the British taxpayer has to bail out the organisation.

It is not just Labour MPs who are fed up with this situation. Conservative MPs should listen to the fact—according to the Legatum Institute, for goodness’ sake—that 83% of the British people favour the renationalisation of water services and 77% favour the renationalisation of energy services. They know they are being ripped off, and even the Conservatives are now talking about energy price caps. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a developing consensus that the 1980s model of privatising the delivery of public services is not working and needs to be changed.

As the Minister with responsibility for construction in 2009, I remember construction businesses telling me that they had overcharged by about a third on public sector projects. The largest construction businesses were very often shells, simply managing contractors in a way that some would describe as parasitic. They held on to public money for as long as possible before finally paying it over to the small businesses actually doing the work, and the executives creamed off obscene levels of salaries and bonuses from the contract. Obligations to pension funds were not respected or looked after, and all of that was certified by an ever-diminishing group of the same old accountancy firms, which do not do their job properly and do not tell us when businesses are about to go bust.

The public have had enough of this. The Labour party has listened to the public, and it is about time the Government did so too. If they do not, they should get out and we can have a Government who do.

6.35 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Welcome back, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is good to see you.

The collapse of Carillion presents us with a watershed moment, if we choose to see it as such. This large outsourcing company with responsibility for public contracts was puffed up as a vehicle to transfer public sector jobs and to seemingly create the private sector jobs that this Government like to boast as having created. The creators of boom and bust are now presiding over boom and bust.

The Government’s boasting is real, but the moment their plan hits the rocks they walk on by. The boast becomes hubris and the Government’s confidence becomes cowardice. Workers are bounced off to the jobcentre, and pensioners are sent a phone number to chase up their livelihood. It is not good enough. The response to date has been obnoxious.

Carillion amassed £1.5 billion in debts, borrowing against public sector contracts handed out by this Government to build schools and hospitals. It routinely retained fees for its subcontractors and abused 30-day payment terms by responding in an average of 126 days. That contentious practice was not welded to contract law, and a Goliath-like expectation was put on smaller companies by the large international outsourcing companies preferred by the Cabinet Office since 2010. Such companies determine their next venture not according to any deep expertise, but according to the potential profits as they consider it in a boardroom while evaluating their stock and portfolio of Whitehall contracts.

Man cannot live on private sector alone. The limitations of both sectors are known, so it should be about collaboration and playing to strengths. There is a role for private companies such as Hargreaves in Ramsbottom, which is owed for the work it completed on the Royal Liverpool Hospital. It is also owed a considerable amount for contracted work yet to be done, yet the administrators have asked it to finish the job unpaid, its retention lost.

I say to the Government: do not close the shutters and ensure that administrators secure payment for completed work first from the wreckage. The Government also need to identify where Government contracts have been awarded but not paid in full to Carillion and send them to the businesses that got the job done but are out of pocket. They need to ensure that the renewal of contracts is kept in the SME sector and lead a taskforce dedicated to stabilising them. The Government need to
get rid of this blind creed and stand up for the real wealth creators—the doers, not the doers-over. They should enforce public sector 30-day payment terms for existing companies engaged in this work and disqualify those that do not comply. Finally, they should introduce new legislative proposals to place retentions in secure, independently held deposit protection schemes, with tougher measures to limit borrowing against public contracts. I say to the Government to get a grip, get involved, step in and stop walking on by.

6.38 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The ugly side of privatisation and outsourcing has been laid bare by the collapse of Carillion. While fat cat executives have taken action to protect their pensions and pay, the workers have been shafted. With a day’s notice, workers were told to not bother to turn up to work. These are workers with mortgages and families to feed, and the platitudes from this Government will not comfort them.

Make no mistake: this is an ideological obsession of this Government. We have got to the farcical point where Oxfordshire County Council is forced to put firefighters on standby to deliver food in our schools. Private capital has seen all the benefits, and the state has taken the burden of the collapse again. It is estimated that subcontractors will receive only 1p of every pound owed to them. They also have families to feed and bills to pay. What do the Government have to offer them? Nothing. They are obsessed and determined to push ahead with the privatisation and outsourcing of the £1.2 billion HS2 contract. There has been more privatisation and outsourcing in Ministry of Defence contracts, and in school projects. When will they ever learn? We privatised the reward and we nationalised failure. It is the absolute reverse of socialism.

This is a crisis of capitalism. Workers are treated with utter disdain in the pursuit of capital accumulation. This is an ideological issue. Outsourcing, not just by Carillion, has brought our state to its knees. Southern Rail, schools: it is time that this experiment was brought to an end. The smoke and mirrors of PFI and outsourcing are no longer there.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): In his criticism of capitalism and PFI, does the hon. Gentleman recognise that Labour, between 1997 and 2015, put in a capital value of £49.4 billion, compared with the Conservatives’ £7.9 billion. Labour is more responsible for this problem than the Conservatives have ever been.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is right. The public will not fail to notice that the Labour party is under new management. We will build on the positives of the past, and discard the negatives. PFI, I am afraid, was a bad mistake that the Conservatives began under Major, and which we failed to stop. We will stop it this time, because when Jeremy Corbyn gets in and we have a socialist Government what will end is this—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It is one thing to test my patience but it is another to name Members. The hon. Gentleman cannot name the Leader of the Opposition. He can say “the next Prime Minister”, but he should not use his name.

6.42 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I am delighted, Mr Deputy Speaker, to see you in the Chair. The House will share my sentiments in sending our love and prayers to you at this difficult time.

Given the limited time available, I will not refer to all the poignant speeches that we have heard. We have heard Members in all parts of the House relate tales that have resulted from the aftermath of a week of crisis. Last Monday morning over 20,000 direct employees and pension-fund holders, as well as over 30,000 subcontractors, suppliers and their staff, awoke to find they might be facing financial ruin. In the hours that followed, the cataclysmic effect that Carillion’s collapse could have on people’s lives became clear, along with the chaos it could cause to public services across Britain. One of the most scandalous stories to emerge in the aftermath was how much the Government knew, and how much they ought to have known, about the risks that Carillion posed, and how little they did to mitigate them.

In the last six months of its existence, Carillion issued three profit warnings. Indeed, the Government knew that those red flags were serious. Their own strategic risk management policy directed them to deem a business as high risk if it issued a profit warning. It specifically directed that for high-risk businesses, all Government Departments should be advised to reduce additional work with that business where possible. Despite that, the Government continued recklessly to award Carillion contracts again and again and again. They failed to monitor Carillion properly. The position of Crown representative was vacant from August to November 2017, and there were no meetings between senior UK Government Ministers and Carillion in the months immediately after the first profit warning. But that is not all. Even Government Members will think that what I have said so far is simply astonishing, but sadly—

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Given the time I have left, I am afraid I cannot—I would love to.

Sadly the Government’s culpability also extends to the reckless treatment of Carillion’s suppliers and subcontractors. The late payment of suppliers by Carillion was no secret, and the Government knew this. In July last year, both the Specialist Engineering Contractors’ Group and the Federation of Small Businesses highlighted to the Government how risk was transferred to suppliers at Carillion; that it was not paying suppliers on time and extended its payment period to over 120 days; how the Government were not enforcing the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 that ensure that subcontractors with a public sector contract should be paid within 30 days; and how Carillion made money off the back of early payments by charging fees.
The Government were also advised on suppliers’ retention moneys—a security deposit held by Carillion until project works are completed—which were not ring-fenced, despite these organisations advising the Government of the risks. They were even advised by Labour back in 2014, when my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)—the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—stated:

“There is evidence that cash retainments have been used to shore up the working capital of... tier 1 suppliers... if tier 1 suppliers become insolvent, the small businesses in the supply chain are at risk of losing their retainments.”—[Official Report, 18 November 2014; Vol. 588, c. 210.]

Today, those retainments are estimated at a whopping £1 billion, which suppliers may never, ever see again.

Then there was the Government’s aversion to project bank accounts to protect project moneys from insolvency and ensure prompt payment to subcontractors. Both Her Majesty’s Treasury and the Cabinet Office have historically recommended that project bank accounts are used by public sector organisations on appropriate projects, so why was that not enforced in Carillion’s case? The simple fact is that suppliers were mistreated again and again, and the Government did not care. They did not step in and act. They must now support subcontractors and ensure that all the issues that I have referred to are dealt with in both existing and future Government contracts.

Then there is the workforce—the good people the Government have asked simply to keep coming to work every day. They have stepped up in this crisis, but what security were they offered? Carillion was a company renowned for its poor treatment of workers. It was found guilty in court of widespread blacklisting that destroyed livelihoods and the lives of many workers’ families, yet the Government continued to award contract after contract to it, no questions asked. Through the lack of protection for subcontractors, they again put workers’ lives at risk. What they also failed to tell us last week is that under a compulsory liquidation, all employee contracts are terminated, so the fact is that most Carillion employees do not have an official contractual relationship any more. There are no existing terms and conditions to transfer to a new contractor, so what support have they received—a hotline? Some 88% of RMT members who work for Carillion have not been contacted by the liquidator so far.

The Government must assure us that any business or provider that takes over Carillion’s contracts must also take on those employees on their pre-existing terms, or better. Until the long-term position is clear, they must assure us that the official receiver will grant formal contracts to employees to give some degree of certainty as to the period they will be employed for. They must also seek to protect agency and zero-hours contracts for Carillion workers to ensure that people can recover unpaid wages and report back in detail to us on the workforce who were affected in Carillion’s private sector arm. We also want assurances from the Government that they are doing all they can to replace apprentices within other companies that the Government have contracted with.

Finally, I want to highlight the Government’s failures to spot the alleged corporate abuse. Carillion handed £500 million to shareholders in the seven years before its collapse, while its pensions black hole spiralled out of control. It is, frankly, a national scandal that Carillion paid sums in dividends similar to what could have filled the gaping hole in its pension deficit. Did the Government request to view the company’s accounts? Did they look at the auditors’ submissions? Who knows? But even the most basic due diligence would have uncovered this.

It is a little too late, therefore, for the Prime Minister to wax lyrical about her desire to protect workers’ pension schemes by stopping payments to directors, when all the evidence suggests the Government knew exactly what was happening—that the pensions deficit was spiralling out of control. This is typical of the last seven years: a laissez-faire approach from a laissez-faire Government. It is clear that the Government knew of the risk Carillion posed and failed to do anything about it, and Britain is left worrying who is next. Is this a house of cards waiting to collapse? How secure is the outsourcing of our public services? I urge the Government to be transparent about the risks we face and ensure that the Public Accounts Committee has sight of all the risk assessments and improvement plans as a matter of urgency, and I urge them to support today’s motion.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I begin by welcoming you back to your rightful place? It is a great pleasure to see you there once again.

This has been an important and timely debate on the insolvency of Carillion. The decision by the directors to put Carillion into compulsory insolvency affects the lives and livelihoods of not just the 19,500 Carillion employees but many thousands of small businesses, contractors and employees up and down the country. This debate has been well attended, and I am sure that Members will understand if I cannot address each and every point raised. I promise to write to everybody who has asked a question, and will briefly touch on a few of them now.

The hon. Members for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) raised several issues. I pay tribute to the diligence and commitment they have shown their constituents in trying to find out what happened with Carillion and to ensure that those workers are being treated as fairly as possible. They asked when people would get paid. The special manager, as they may know, has given a commitment that staff will be paid until at least the end of the month. However, as was highlighted in the debate, Wolverhampton is the nerve centre, and if the special managers are to continue running the business to maximise the benefits to creditors and ensure a smooth transition, that nerve centre will be vital to its future. I think they can be confident, therefore, that the future for them looks more certain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) raised a point about a constituent of his. I have looked at this and been advised that PWC is talking to the directors of the company today. If it continues to have problems with the financing of the business, I ask
that my hon. Friend get back in touch with me, because I have some more information, which I will come to in a few moments.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) understandably raised her concerns about the impact on the Royal Liverpool Hospital. I can confirm that PWC has been instructed to continue paying the Carillion construction staff currently on site. That project, along with the other hospital projects, is a priority for the Government, and we are working incredibly hard to get them moving as quickly as possible. I will endeavour to keep her updated.

James Frith: Hargreaves is a company in Ramsbottom in my constituency that is contracted to put fire extinguisher equipment into the hospital. It has been asked by PWC to go in and complete the work, but PWC has also acknowledged that its retention fee is lost and that it should not expect to be paid for completing that work. Will the Minister give special attention to that issue?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point; he mentioned it earlier in the debate. I think he said it was asked to “finish the job for nothing”. I can confirm, having discussed it with the special manager, that anybody who is contracted to complete work after the date of compulsory liquidation will be paid by the special manager. I can put him straight on that one.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), when he had finished his Castro-esque anti-capitalism rant, raised the issue of apprentices in his constituency who were sobbing because they had lost their opportunity of an apprenticeship. I think that that issue was also raised from the Opposition Front Bench. The Construction Industry Training Board has taken over responsibility for the apprenticeships, and 1,100 of the 1,400 apprentices who are currently working for Carillion have had face-to-face interviews with the board and have been offered new apprenticeship roles. The board has confirmed that any of those 1,400 who wish to continue their training will be allowed to do so, which I think is very good news.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said that he was “excited”. This is probably the only occasion on which I will agree with him in the Chamber—he certainly was excited.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office set out his approach to the oversight of contracts and awards and how that process relates to Carillion, and gave a detailed explanation of the measures that had been introduced. Let me add that when it was decided to place Carillion in insolvency, the Government had two priorities: to protect and maintain the delivery of vital services in schools, hospitals and prisons and on the railways, and to support not only the 19,500 people directly employed by Carillion, but the contractors and small businesses involved.

It was because we wanted to support the people whose lives had been affected that, on the very day of the collapse, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State held a meeting with the eight largest trade bodies in the construction sector in order to understand better what we could practically do to help. They had four requests. First, they said that they wanted to be supported by their banks at that difficult time. In response, the Secretary of State and I convened a meeting of the banks, and asked them for tailored and sympathetic support for those affected. As a result of that meeting, nearly £1 billion has been made available by major lenders such as HSBC, Lloyds, RBS, and Santander in the form of loans, credit facilities and further financial support.

Secondly, many small businesses, in particular, were concerned about imminent tax liabilities. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has now said that a “time to pay” facility will be available to businesses affected by Carillion’s insolvency, to give them the support and flexibility that they need.

Thirdly, the bodies asked for a meeting with the official receiver’s specialist manager to discuss the particular needs of the supply chain. At the Secretary of State’s request, PricewaterhouseCoopers has now met them, and me, twice, in order to tailor specific support where it is needed. Fourthly, they asked for a taskforce to be established to pool efforts to help the supply chain in particular. In response we have formed such a taskforce, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, which will meet for the third time—

Jon Trickett: Another one?

Andrew Griffiths: This taskforce was requested by the trade unions because they thought that it would have value. If the hon. Gentleman does not think that that is an effective thing for us to do, perhaps he will have a word with his friend Len.

The taskforce includes representatives of business sector organisations, the TUC, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Cabinet Office, the Local Government Association and the Construction Industry Training Board. We are working together to address the challenges, and to come up with solutions that will support the affected businesses and employees.

Finally, there is the issue of accountability. There have been questions about directors’ pay and bonuses. I can reassure the House that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the Insolvency Service asking it to investigate the actions of the directors properly. He has also written to the Financial Reporting Council to ensure that the actions of not just the current directors, but previous directors, are thoroughly investigated. Powers include the ability to claw back bonuses if that is required.

We have stepped up to work with those businesses that, through no fault of their own, find themselves in a difficult position. We give a commitment to this House that at the forefront of our efforts are the thousands of people whose jobs and livelihoods, through no fault of their own, have been affected by the Carillion insolvency—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the assessments of risks of Government Strategic Suppliers by Her Majesty’s Ministers referred...
to in the Answer of 19 December 2017 to Question 114546 and any improvement plans which Crown Representatives have agreed with such strategic suppliers since 2014 be provided to the Public Accounts Committee.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Municipal Journal has published an article today stating that Whitehall officials rushed out the provisional local government finance settlement before Christmas, knowing that the figures it was based on were wrong and that the information presented by Ministers to this House was incorrect. The Municipal Journal also reveals that the Valuation Office Agency notified the then Department of Communities and Local Government prior to the statement being made.

Given that 195 local authorities are now set to lose out, with Manchester City Council understood to be the biggest loser, can you advise me whether the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has indicated that he will make statement to the House about this debacle and apologise to Members for his Department’s knowingly having given the House incorrect information? If he has not given such an indication, what procedures may be utilised to bring Ministers to the House for questioning?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): There are two ways. First, the point is now on the record. Secondly, I know that there are other avenues that you will pursue personally, Mr Gwynne, and I am sure that the Opposition will pursue them as well. I am sure that that will bring a fruitful outcome, but in fairness to the Government, the point is now on the record and they can take it on board.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. My point of order is not as exciting. I just wanted to confirm that the motion we just dealt with was passed unanimously, in which case, have you received any indication from the Government about when the Public Accounts Committee will be provided with the relevant reports?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Once again, the point is now on the record. I think we can leave it there at this stage.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002 (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 11 December 2017, be approved.
South-eastern Rail Franchise

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

7.4 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. I should like to add my sentiments to those that have been expressed to you today. It is very good to see you back in your place. Huge numbers of my constituents, including me and my family, depend on local metro train services on the south-eastern rail network for work, for leisure and as a means of accessing the wider transport network in our city, so let me start by thanking you for giving me the chance to speak on their behalf on this important issue. However, as much as I am grateful for the opportunity, I am also struck by a depressing familiarity in having to raise concerns about services on the network—a feeling that I know will be shared by a number of hon. Members on both sides of the House, including those who have stayed behind to attend the debate and, I suspect, the Minister himself, whom I welcome to his new role.

In the relatively short time that I have been a Member of Parliament, we have had several debates on this issue. I recall an Adjournment debate that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) secured in January 2016 and a well-attended Westminster Hall debate secured by my hon. Friend. Friend for Eltham (Clive Efford) in that same year, along with scores of oral and written parliamentary questions, all driven by the same basic grievance: passengers using the south-eastern rail network have suffered for too long from overcrowded and unreliable train services.

My own journey to work today was sadly typical of what many of my constituents experience every week. The 6.59 am service from Charlton to Charing Cross that I caught this morning was six minutes late, had two fewer carriages than advertised and was badly overcrowded as a result.

My argument is simple: the residents that I represent in Blackheath, Greenwich, Charlton, Woolwich and Plumstead, and those across south-east London represented by other Members of the House, deserve better from the network—a feeling that I know will be shared by a number of hon. Members. Members on both sides of the House, including those who have stayed behind to attend the debate and, I suspect, the Minister himself, whom I welcome to his new role.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I warmly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is absolutely right: we have been discussing this for a very long time, but nothing seems to have changed. Does he agree that one of the particular frustrations for constituents in suburban London is that the current franchise appears to be structured in such a way that the suburban or metro trains tend to bear the brunt of the cancellations and lack of space, and are treated as the poor relation in all this?

Matthew Pennycook: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There has been a long-standing tension on the network between metro trains and the longer services, and it often feels as though the suburban services and those who use them get a raw deal.

I think that it is fair to argue, although the Minister might disagree, that the record of successive operators of the franchise since privatisation in 1996 has not been particularly impressive. That would certainly be the view of many of those I represent. When the Strategic Rail Authority took the decision in June 2003 to strip Connex South Eastern of its multi-billion pound franchise, it did so because of concerns about the company’s financial performance, but anyone who used Connex services will recall just how dire its operational performance also was.

Under South Eastern Trains—a subsidiary company of the SRA that took over and ran the franchise for three years—we saw a steady improvement, but the SRA really only adopted a care and maintenance approach pending the new franchise. Under the current operator, Southeastern—a subsidiary of Gomia that has run the franchise since 2006—services on the network have all too often been less than satisfactory.

That is not a criticism of Southeastern staff, whom I know to be dedicated and hardworking. I recognise that Southeastern is not solely responsible for service failures. A lot of the problems on the network are infrastructure-related. They are the responsibility of Network Rail and will remain an issue, whoever takes on the new franchise. I am also very much aware that maintaining services throughout the London Bridge rebuild would have presented any operator with enormous challenges. But all that said, there have still been real failures with Southeastern.

The provision of additional rolling stock has failed to keep pace with entirely predictable local population growth and a corresponding growth in passenger numbers. Despite much earlier requests from Southeastern, supported by a number of hon. Members, only in September last year did the Department for Transport finally authorise the purchase of 68 extra carriages for the network from GTR. Even with the addition of that extra stock, 12-car trains are still a rarity on the lines that run through my constituency, and overcrowding at peak times is frequently unacceptable, if not dangerous.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for securing the debate. It is absolutely imperative that the new south-eastern franchise should deliver 12-car trains in the rush hour. The 68 extra carriages to which he refers are simply inadequate. This is the key concern for many of our constituents.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is absolutely right that, along with reliability, capacity and overcrowding are the No. 1 concerns of passengers in my constituency. It strikes me as odd, as I am sure it does her, that many of the platforms in our constituencies have had money spent on them to lengthen them, yet they will still not be receiving 12-car trains, even under the new service that will come in with the next franchise.

Periods of improvement in reliability and punctuality under Southeastern are all too often followed by periods of deterioration, such as the one we have experienced over the first few weeks of this year. While the published data bears out the fluctuating performance standards, I am sceptical about whether it paints an accurate picture. It is very good to see you today. It is very good to see you today. It is very good to see you today. It is very good to see you today.

Matthew Pennycook: I suspect we have seen over recent years is the introduction of revised timetables that, yes, have improved
Southeastern’s public performance measure, but have meant reduced services for passengers. While the latest data available suggests that customer satisfaction has increased, it is little wonder that Southeastern’s overall customer satisfaction rating is still lower than those for all but three train operating companies in the UK.

All that is happening despite Southeastern securing £70 million of extra investment from the Government in 2014 as part of the directly awarded franchise agreement. At the time, we were promised that that investment would lead to improved train performance, customer service and station facilities. The fact remains that we are still a world away from the service that passengers in my constituency expect for the fares they pay.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We would do better not to pit suburban passengers against those who travel longer distances—perhaps to and from my constituency—because we should all recognise that the franchising process is an opportunity to secure more capacity, more reliable trains and better-value services for all our constituents who rely on the railway.

**Matthew Pennycook**: I have to disagree to the extent that the thrust of my argument is that I am concerned that we will not get that from the next franchise, but the hon. Lady is right that it must be the aim.

My constituents understand that the network faces challenges, including rising passenger demand as well as complex and ageing track, junction and signal infrastructure, but they expect services to be punctual, reliable and not overcrowded, and those expectations are not unreasonable. The fact that expectations are not being met is partly due to the inherent limitations of the franchising system and the tension that has always existed between metro and long-distance trains.

Under the current system, the Department for Transport is responsible for designing and procuring new and replacement services on the network. The Department specifies, often in minute detail, service levels, timetables, rolling stock and most fares. It is a one-size-fits-all approach to rail franchising premised on franchises driven by the need to chase revenue and meet targets, rather than devolved concessions focused on reliability and investment. The latter is what I believe would have been achieved by the devolution of Southeastern services to Transport for London and, frankly, why my constituency is so incensed by the Secretary of State’s decision to torpedo Transport for London and, frankly, why I am still incensed by the Secretary of State’s decision to torpedo plans to that effect.

The plans were published jointly by the Department and TfL in January 2016 and endorsed by the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), and the previous Mayor of London, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). As we know from a leaked letter, the Transport Secretary rejected the plans due to a dogmatic opposition to rail devolution based on his belief that the services should be kept out of “the clutches of a Labour mayor”.

No detailed explanation has ever been produced, as far as I am aware, as to why the business case submitted by the Mayor of London was considered inadequate. What particularly frustrates my constituents, whatever their political persuasion, is the knowledge that if a Conservative Mayor had been elected in May 2016, they would now be looking forward to our local trains being integrated into TfL’s successful Overground network next year.

I remain convinced that the devolution of metro services in London would have led to more punctual, more reliable metro-style services. They would also have facilitated—in many ways, this might have been just as transformative—the effective integration of services with others across the capital in ticketing, fares and investment, and improved customer service, particularly for passengers with a disability, because all stations would be staffed from the first train to the last. That plan represents a real missed opportunity and, while I have little hope, I urge the Minister to think again even at this late hour about making provision for the devolution of control over metro services under the new franchise.

**Helen Whately**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Matthew Pennycook**: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not, because time is short and the Minister has to wind up the debate.

At the very least, the Department should guarantee that the service standards delivered by the new south-eastern franchise match those that would have been delivered by London Overground. My fear is not only that the new franchise will not match those standards, but that it could lead to a deterioration in the services on which my constituents rely.

Slipped out alongside an announcement that it will look at reopening lines across the UK that were lost under the Beeching cuts, the Department published its invitation to tender for the new franchise on 29 November 2017. With one operator, Trenitalia, having withdrawn from the process, there are now only three operators bidding: Abellio, Stagecoach and the current operator, Govia.

As expected, given the instant and, I suspect, co-ordinated opposition they generated from Conservative politicians across south-east London and Kent, proposals that all metro services on the North Kent, Greenwich and Bexleyheath lines will terminate only at Cannon Street have been dropped, but that does not mean all services on those lines will escape cuts under the Government’s franchise specification.

The requirements set out in the ITT include the introduction of a revised train service, no later than 2022, that will see Woolwich and Charlton stations in my constituency lose direct services to Charing Cross, and Blackheath station, along with other stations on the Bexleyheath line, lose direct services to Victoria. Those revisions come on top of the proposed replacement of two of the six hourly off-peak Southeastern services on the line with Thameslink services that I fear might be slower and less reliable and that will not stop at Woolwich Dockyard station in my constituency or at Erith and Belvedere stations in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce).

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that the Government’s reason for terminating Victoria services on the Bexleyheath line—that the services somehow create problems because they have to cross over and that the complexity is not surmountable by modern technology or signalling—is an excuse? The people who run the service are benefiting at the expense of the passengers who use it.
Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Far too much is made of the problems that undoubtedly exist at the throat point at Lewisham. Those problems do not ground the proposed service revisions under the franchise specification.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. What he says about Belvedere and Erith stations in my constituency is true: services to Charing Cross will be stopped and the Thameslink will not stop there. There are substantial new housing developments, and the people who move in will stand on the platforms at Belvedere and Erith and watch trains whizz past them, with no way for them to get to work.

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is a mind reader, because she anticipates my next point.

Viewed in the context of the Department’s serious and significant underestimation throughout this process of the scale of development and projected population growth in the area—my hon. Friend raised the point at the time of the consultation—the service revisions are of real concern and I ask the Minister to revisit them, but they are not my only concern.

It is difficult to understand why the ITT includes nothing that will encourage bidders to offer enhanced services. Indeed, it includes stringent conditions that militate against any attempt to do so. If a bidder determines to propose an enhanced service and the DfT judges that the conditions are not met, the bidder risks being penalised by having its score reduced. Surely, if one of the three bidders believes it could maintain services from, say, Woolwich and Charlton to Charing Cross to meet passenger demand, why should it not be able at least to explore the option?

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the new franchise specification is that none of the commendable aspirations set out in the joint plan published by the Department and Transport for London in January 2016 has been included. Will the Minister tell the House why options such as greater integration of fares and the staffing of stations from the first train to the last were ruled out? Given the tangible benefits those options would bring, will he reconsider including them?

Lastly, although in the circumstances in which we now find ourselves I certainly welcome the introduction of a new “one team” model of franchising that will bring the future operator and Network Rail together under a single director responsible for both infrastructure and operations, whether it will work is another matter entirely. The Minister may recall that a previous attempt to foster closer working between South West Trains and Network Rail fell apart. How confident is he that this latest attempt will succeed where that one failed?

To conclude, it is beyond doubt that passengers using the south-eastern rail network have suffered from substandard services for far too long. All of us would agree, I hope, that they deserve better from the next franchise, but I have real concerns—concerns shared by passengers and the rail user groups in my constituency—that the way the Government have approached the franchise that is to be let later this year will not deliver the level of service that passengers expect and deserve. We will all have to live for the best part of a decade, and perhaps even longer, with the franchise and the operator who secures the award later this year. It is crucial that we get it right.

I would like to ask the Minister not only to address in his reply to the debate some of the specific concerns that I have raised, but to go away and think again about some of the limitations of the franchise specification published by his Department last year and what might be done, even at this late stage, to address them. I fear that if he does not, we will all be back here next year, and potentially for many years after that, repeating concerns about services on the network on behalf of those we represent.

7.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): It is good to be here with you today, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on securing the debate and giving colleagues from across the south-east region an opportunity to make the very powerful representations that they have made this evening on behalf of their constituents. On my side of the House, strong points have been made by my neighbour and dear friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), and from the Opposition Benches powerful points have been made by the hon. Members for Eltham (Clive Efford), for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) and for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander). I sympathise with many of the points they have made and understand very much where they are coming from.

This intense and sincere engagement by Members is of a piece with the deep engagement that stakeholders have shown to the entire process of formalising the terms of the next operator for the new franchise. In addition to debates, questions and meetings, the public consultation about the new franchise, which ran from 14 March to 30 June 2017, generated over 10,000 responses. These included detailed representations from key stakeholders such as Kent and East Sussex County Councils, Transport for London, Transport Focus, London TravelWatch and, of course, hon. Members. As a result, we have designed a specification for the new franchise that serves the priorities as set by passengers, businesses and local communities from London to the coast. Turning around performance, passenger satisfaction and creating value for money are the key priorities, and I am delighted that much of this is already happening.

I would like to say a word about the planned changes to London terminal services and the benefits that those should bring for suburban routes. Our plans for services to London terminals reflect exactly our commitment to putting the passenger at the heart of decision making. Many south-eastern stations serve more than one London terminal, causing operational complexity and sub-optimal timetables for passengers on some parts of the network. In our consultation about the new south-eastern franchise, we proposed initially a redesign of the timetable that would reduce the number of London terminals served by these stations. Such a move would have allowed a more even spacing of trains and improved operational performance. However, the proposals were rejected by a majority of respondents in the consultation, many of
whom valued the flexibility and variety of London terminals served by Southeastern and many of whom had made decisions to move to certain areas because of this broad range of travel options. We listened; we evaluated; and in the end we decided not to move to implement the single terminus solution.

It is still necessary, however, to make some minor timetable changes to deliver the broader benefits that we were seeking to achieve for passengers and to improve value for money. The most important changes—some of which have been mentioned—will be as follows. For the Bexleyheath line, services will in future run to London Bridge, Charing Cross and Cannon Street, with longer 10 to 12-car trains, which will be too long for a number of stations on the route into Victoria.

Teresa Pearce: Is the Minister aware that the line from Bexleyheath to Victoria has a stop at a major hospital, and many people on that line work there or have to attend as patients? Will there not be a huge effect on that line?

Joseph Johnson: I am aware of the importance of services that go to Denmark Hill, serving King’s Hospital and the Maudsley. In developing the plans for the new franchise, the Department was acutely aware of the importance of accessing those facilities. To address that, as the hon. Lady may know, we are doubling the frequency of train services along the line from Lewisham to Victoria from two to four trains per hour all day.

We have asked bidders to operate those trains at 15-minute intervals, so that passengers will benefit from a genuine turn-up-and-go service for the first time on this route. Direct services to Denmark Hill will run on the Hayes and Sidcup lines, and passengers travelling from elsewhere will use Lewisham station as an interchange, benefiting from the new turn-up-and-go service frequency.

For those with accessibility needs, Lewisham is already a fully accessible station. However, to make the connection even easier at that station, we are asking bidders to adopt a single platform for Denmark Hill services, so that passengers will always know where to find their onward train. I hope that assures the hon. Lady of our understanding of the importance of the medical facilities at Denmark Hill.

Heidi Alexander: The Minister talked about Lewisham station as an interchange. While he is right that it is compliant with disability legislation, it is a severely constrained station. Will he say what money, if any, his Department has allocated to renovating and refurbishing Lewisham station to accommodate increased numbers there?

Joseph Johnson: I will happily write to the hon. Lady with those figures. I do not have them off the top of my head, but I commit to providing additional information on the money we are spending on Lewisham station.

To continue on the changes, Hayes line services will in future run to London Bridge, Charing Cross and Victoria. Again, a small minority of passengers will lose a direct service. Those who currently travel to Cannon Street will have to change at London Bridge. On the North Kent line, which is of particular interest to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich, services to Charing Cross via Lewisham, which serve his constituency, will run to Cannon Street, as he noted, to facilitate new Thameslink services to London Bridge, Blackfriars, Farringdon and London St Pancras along the route.

Sidcup services will continue to run to Charing Cross, with Cannon Street services moving to peak times reflecting that the principal demand for those services is commuter-driven. Outside peak hours, the small number of passengers for Cannon Street will change at the new London Bridge station.

I recognise, like all Members who have spoken, that Southeastern passengers have had a torrid time in recent years and that there is considerable room for improvement in the quality of service. A combination of major infrastructure problems such as the collapse of the Dover sea wall, the impact of major enhancement works such as Thameslink and crowding have seen the operator regrettably languish at the bottom of satisfaction league tables for too long. However, I believe we are turning the corner.

To help alleviate crowding, members will applaud the fact that 25 trains have transferred from Govia Thameslink Railway to Southeastern to add capacity to both metro and mainline services.

Robert Neill: The extra trains are welcome, but does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that it is utterly bizarre that, even with the extra trains and the fact that the stations on the line from Sevenoaks through Orpington and my constituency can take 10 and 12-car trains, rush-hour trains are still being run to Charing Cross with eight-car trains? That is just poor use of the assets that the Government have given to Southeastern.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a tireless and brilliant champion for his constituents in Bromley and Chislehurst, and he makes important points that doubtless the operator has heard and would be well advised to take note of.

The new trains are providing 5,300 additional seats in the morning and 4,300 seats in the evening peak. All metro routes have now have longer trains, and the 13 most overcrowded Southeastern trains now have significant additional capacity. The past 12 months have also seen important performance improvements, with the official public performance measure moving up from 85.9% in February 2017 to almost 89% in the most recent figures. The positive impact of all that for passengers is clear and we want to see things continue to improve in the months ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 25 January 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Plastic Waste

1. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce waste from plastics. [903535]

8. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce waste from plastics. [903544]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): On 11 January, the Government published our 25-year environment plan, which states our ambition to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste. We have already banned microbeads in personal care products, we are removing single-use plastics from Government estate offices, we are exploring a reward and return scheme, and we welcome the introduction by retailers of plastic-free aisles. We are also investigating how we can develop our producer responsibility scheme to give producers more incentives to design more resource-efficient products.

Alan Mak: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Hayling Island Beach has been recognised for its clean coastline by being awarded a blue flag for the past 26 years, partly because it is plastic-free. Will the Secretary of State congratulate Havant Borough Council and local residents, and continue to support coastal communities to keep coastlines plastic-free?

Michael Gove: I absolutely will. The leadership shown by Havant Borough Council is equalled, of course, by the leadership shown by my hon. Friend. When I had the opportunity to visit his constituency and its coastline last year, I saw his commitment to our marine environment. It is vital that colleagues such as my hon. Friend are applauded for their determined environmental work.

Vicky Ford: People in Chelmsford really care about their recycling. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what actions we can take to ensure that the end product can be put to meaningful use after we put things in our recycling?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. She has made determined efforts in not just this Parliament but the European Parliament to make recycling easier for all. We are exploring how we can better co-ordinate efforts at a local level to ensure that more material is recycled and, indeed, that more recyclable material is used.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): On a visit to Bywaters recycling centre in Bow yesterday, I saw the amazing work that the waste industry is doing to tackle our waste and heard about some of the challenges it faces. I was told that the Chinese ban on imports of UK waste has caused the price of recycled paper to fall from £100 a tonne to £20 a tonne, and I presume that the same can be said for plastic. That will have an impact on the viability of councils’ recycling contracts and will feed through to council tax bills. Does the Secretary of State agree that we can tackle the problem by setting long-term targets for the waste industry, such as the 65% target by 2035 that has been suggested by the EU?

Michael Gove: Setting appropriate targets is absolutely part of this. One of the challenges of the EU’s target is that, because weight is such an important component in how the EU measures recycling, it does not always incentivise quite the right behaviour. Even though the EU has made important strides, I am glad that our own Government have gone further by ensuring that we tackle the scourge of single-use plastics.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The UK is in a unique position to tackle plastic waste in the world’s oceans due to the number of our overseas territories. Will the Secretary of State be speaking to those overseas territories to develop a comprehensive strategy in this area?

Michael Gove: Well—[Interruption.] It was a very good question. The hon. Gentleman always asks very good questions, whether in this House or elsewhere, and he also writes very good books. He makes an important point, and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), will be meeting representatives of the overseas territories next month. He is right that there is more work to do on the network of marine protected areas around many of our overseas territories, and he is right to encourage us.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) will feel that his status not just in this House, but in the country—perhaps even in the world as a whole—will have been greatly enhanced by the generous tribute that has just been bestowed upon him by the Secretary of State.

12. [903549] Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Primary school pupils at Oxley Park Academy in my constituency have launched a campaign to replace plastic straws with environmentally friendly alternatives. Will the Secretary of State commend their initiative and, if I send him the details, will he take on board their suggestions?

Michael Gove: I absolutely commend the pupils’ initiative. The next generation often puts some of us to shame in its commitment to ensure that we have a more sustainable approach towards the environment. There is another youngster who has been leading the charge against plastic straws: the relatively newly installed editor of London’s Evening Standard, whose “The Last Straw” campaign has been instrumental in ensuring that commercial organisations ban plastic straws. He is a relatively new entrant to my profession of journalism and I commend him on his promising start.
Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State thinks that the young man is not doing too badly, and I am sure that the young man concerned will feel fortified by that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I commend the Secretary of State for the publication of the environmental strategy, which is an important and significant step, but there are still opportunities to do more. Will he tell the House why he allowed 25 years in the strategy for the elimination of non-essential plastics? If they are non-essential, surely we can do better than that.

Michael Gove: I have enormous respect for the right hon. Gentleman. The nature of the 25-year plan was a recommendation of the Natural Capital Committee and, as he knows, it covers a wide range of issues. The Government are bringing forward more demanding and more ambitious targets to reduce single-use plastics, but he is right to encourage the Government, and all of us, to do more.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I wish you, Mr Speaker, and the Minister a happy Burns day. In Scotland, there is discussion about a plastic bottle return scheme. What discussions has his right hon. Friend had with his counterparts in the Scottish Government to ensure that a system can effectively work while preventing English bottles from being paid for by the Scottish Government, and vice versa?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. On the subject of Burns day, I recently had discussions with the Under Secretary of Agriculture for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs at the US Department of Agriculture to see whether he could lift the ban on haggis. Although the American President has many faults, he has one virtue: he has a Scots mum. On that basis, I hope he may listen sympathetically.

On the equally important issue of the deposit return scheme, we will be working with devolved Administrations to ensure that we have a UK-wide approach wherever possible.

Mr Speaker: The House will certainly want to be kept informed about the haggis situation, and I am sure the Secretary of State will not disappoint us in that regard.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I am sure that you would agree that plastic pollution is one of today’s great environmental challenges. The Secretary of State has mentioned the importance of recycling a number of times, so I am concerned by reports that the Government have been opposing the new EU targets. Will the Secretary of State explain why the Government are opposing the new recycling targets?

Michael Gove: We are anxious to make sure that, across the EU, we have the right targets. One of the flaws with the EU system, as I acknowledged earlier, is that because of its reliance on measuring through weight, it sometimes incentivises the wrong approaches. I am confident that our own country has gone further than the European Union has requested or suggested on everything from banning microplastics to looking at taxes on single-use plastics and, indeed, introducing the charge on plastic bags. In all those areas we have shown that we have gone further and faster than the EU, and of course that is the Government’s ambition for a truly green Brexit.

Trail Hunting

2. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the extent to which trail hunting is used as a cover to conduct illegal fox hunting.

14. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the extent to which trail hunting is used as a cover to conduct illegal fox hunting.

Mr Speaker: With my leave, the supplementary to Question 2 will be put by the right hon. Member for Workley (John Spellar). I wish the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) well, and we hope he is in full voice again very soon.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I also hope that the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) recovers his voice soon.

The Government have made no assessment of the effect of trail hunting. However, anyone who believes that an offence has taken place during a hunt, including during a trail hunt, should report the matter to the police, as the police deal with complaints of illegal hunting. Decisions on the arrest and prosecution of those taking part in illegal hunting activities are matters for the police and prosecuting authorities.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that concerns are growing that trail hunting is being used as a cover for illegal hunting. This was recently brought into focus by the invasion of a cat sanctuary—run by the well-known Celia Hammond Animal Trust—in East Sussex by a pack of hounds from the Romney Marsh hunt. What action will the Government take against those who continue to hunt illegally?

George Eustice: The law in this area is clear. Between 2005 and 2015, 682 individuals were prosecuted and 423 were found guilty, so the law is clear and is being enforced. Even groups such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have accepted that this is a law that is being enforced.

Christian Matheson: In the four weeks since Boxing day, at least four foxes in Cheshire have been illegally killed by trail hunts. As the Government have withdrawn their plans to scrap anti-hunting laws, is it the case that someone in government has given a secret nod and a wink to trail hunts that they can continue to hunt and kill foxes with impunity?

George Eustice: No, that is not the case. The Prime Minister has made it clear that she has listened to the mood of the country and that there therefore will not be the free vote on foxhunting in this Parliament that we pledged in our manifesto. As I said earlier, foxhunting is a matter for the police and the prosecuting authorities. Anybody who believes the law has been broken should report it to the police.
Disposable Plastic Packaging

3. Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to discourage the use of disposable plastic packaging.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): In addition to the measures that I set out in my previous answers, our 25-year environment plan explores how we can better incentivise producers to design better products, including packaging. We are working with the Waste and Resources Action Programme charity and the industry to increase the amount of recyclable packaging on the market.

Catherine West: More than 200 Members signed my letter on what the supermarkets could do to improve their recycling so that they meet the targets that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) mentioned. Which supermarkets has the Secretary of State personally spoken to in order to bring them in line with Iceland, which is apparently the leader in this area?

Michael Gove: That letter was excellent, if I may say so. I have talked to not only Iceland, but Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, Tesco and Sainsbury’s. We had a roundtable before Christmas at which those retailers and others made a shared commitment to ensure that we reduce the demand for plastic, that fewer plastics are used, and that those plastics that we have more of are recycled or recyclable. A commitment was also made to work with local government to make it easier for all to recycle.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he is taking to improve and increase the capacity of recycling facilities and infrastructure across the country?

Michael Gove: We are looking at how we might reform the packaging recovery note—PRN—system to ensure that the market works better to encourage more recycling and more capacity in the waste industry.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): When I was doing my family shopping at Asda in Wrexham last weekend, I noticed the appalling amount of plastic packaging on meat products, which seems to be in place for the ease of the supermarkets rather than that of their customers. Will the Secretary of State please raise the issue of packaging with the supermarkets?

Michael Gove: I absolutely will, but while I have no wish to undermine Asda, which is an admirable retailer, I find that when buying meat, the best thing to do is to go to one’s local butcher, buy locally and invest in the local economy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Water UK on its initiative to encourage more places on our high streets to allow people to refill their water bottles, rather than buying water in disposable plastic containers?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Water UK’s initiative is wholly welcome. The idea of a nationwide network of refill stations is absolutely right.

The decline of public water fountains marked a deeply regrettable trend, so I am glad that they are making a comeback.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some 480 billion plastic bottles were sold globally in 2016. If we want to address one of the key issues, it has to be plastic bottles. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the companies to reduce the number of bottles or to have them reused—whatever the case may be?

Michael Gove: We have discussed with industry bodies representing a variety of manufacturers and with retailers everything that we can do to reduce such use. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The world’s conscience has been awoken to the scourge of plastic in our oceans by the crusading work of documentary makers such as David Attenborough, and also by an increasing awareness of how important it is that we tread more lightly on our planet. The leadership that the hon. Gentleman has been showing in Northern Ireland is exemplary.

Ivy Sales

4. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Whether the Government plan to have their proposed ban on ivory sales in place by the illegal wildlife trade summit in October 2018.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government’s consultation closed on 29 December. We had more than 70,000 responses, so we are considering them carefully. We want to act at pace—that is why officials are preparing legislation—but we need to be careful that we give due consideration to all the responses so that we introduce appropriate legislation that will end the scourge of elephant poaching in Africa and other parts of the world.

Rachel Maclean: Wildlife crime is a threat to conservation and animal welfare at home and abroad. Wildlife and Countryside Link’s report has revealed that enforcement officers are hindered by a lack of proper recording and reporting processes. As we prepare to host the IWT summit, and considering the progress that my hon. Friend has referred to regarding the trade of ivory products, what assurances can she give me and the all-party group on endangered species, of which I am the chair, about the measures being taken by the Department to address the matter?

Dr Coffey: The UK Government have been active in taking practical action to reduce demand and strengthen enforcement. We are investing in schemes around the world to reduce this pernicious trade. DEFRA and the Home Office continue to fund the national wildlife crime unit to tackle wildlife crime here in the UK. Actionable intelligence is key, and I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to make this a priority.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I support the noble aim of both the Secretary of State and the Minister in this regard, but the hon. Lady will be aware of concerns among antique dealers about the ramifications for products that contain historical ivory. Can she offer
any assurance to assuage their concerns that the sale of ivory that has been in antiques for generations will be allowed to continue?

Dr Coffey: We are considering the matter carefully, but we need to have a comprehensive ban. In the consultation, we put forward a suggestion on several exemptions, and we are looking through the responses to that particularly carefully. Nevertheless, it is important that we recognise that having ivory as a valuable object just because it is ivory is something that we simply do not want in this country or around the world, which is why we are taking strong action.

Leaving the EU: Air Quality

5. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve air quality after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am pleased to say that the Government will continue to improve air quality, supported by the new comprehensive clean air strategy that we are developing and will publish later this year. We have already put in place a £3.5 billion plan to improve air quality, with a particular focus on transport, and we have significant targets to reduce emissions of the five damaging air pollutants. The hon. Gentleman will recognise that this is a devolved matter, and the Welsh Government are actively considering how to improve air quality in Wales.

Nick Smith: By when does the Minister think that Volkswagen will face criminal charges in the UK for its emissions scandal?

Dr Coffey: I am not a Transport Minister, but we all recognise that consumers—including, I expect, people in the House today—will have felt duped by the dodgy practices that took place. Transport Ministers are actively engaged with this issue.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I represent a car-manufacturing constituency. Will the Minister acknowledge that the UK car industry has made significant contributions through its investment in low emission cars, which is a key part of the strategy to improve air quality?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have been investing in improving and cleaning up transport infrastructure. We have introduced legislation to require the deployment of far more electric charging points. I am pleased that the money we are investing is helping to clean up buses, which is key to improving air quality, particularly in urban centres.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will recognise that there is an air quality crisis now, particularly in respect of the impact on children. Some of the problem is down to the most polluting vehicles, including heavy goods vehicles and buses. What will this joined-up Government do to make sure that we get those vehicles off our roads?

Dr Coffey: This is why the Government are investing—we have been for several years—to clean up things like the bus vehicle fleet. We have the clean transport fund. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be keen to work with his council and Greater Manchester to work on an air quality plan, because it is important that we have local solutions that tackle the local issues.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Government’s air quality plans are simply inadequate, and they have been taken back to court yet again. With an estimated 40,000 premature deaths attributed to illegal air pollution every year, just how critical does the situation have to get before the Government finally act to comply with the High Court ruling? Will the Secretary of State and the Minister support Labour calls to introduce a new clean air Act to deal urgently with this matter?

Dr Coffey: We need clean air action and that is what the Government are delivering. We are working with local councils, and I wish the hon. Lady would encourage Labour councils to get on with it. I have had to issue ministerial directions to get councils to bring forward plans, and that is a real problem. I wish that we could work collegiately on this, because what matters is improving the health of the people we represent. I am keen to do that, and I would welcome the hon. Lady’s support in working with Labour-led councils to achieve that.

Flood Insurance

6. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he has made on ensuring access to affordable flood insurance for people living in high flood risk areas; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Before the introduction of Flood Re in 2016, only 9% of householders who had previously claimed for a flood could subsequently get insurance quotes from two or more insurers. By October 2017, availability had improved such that 100% of householders could get quotes from two or more insurers. Costs are down, and four out of five householders who have previously made a flood claim have seen price reductions of more than 50%.

Rachael Maskell: It is two years since Storm Eva and, with flood alerts along the River Ouse in York this week, residents living in leasehold accommodation or accommodation built since 2009, along with businesses, have been failed by the Government’s not putting in place appropriate insurance. What recent discussions has the Minister had about this issue?

Dr Coffey: I direct the hon. Lady’s attention to the record £2.5 billion that we are investing in flood defences between 2015 and 2021, from which people and businesses in York will benefit, as she knows. The rules for leaseholders are quite specific. After careful parliamentary scrutiny, a certain approach was taken so that commercially required insurance was not included in Flood Re. I continue to meet the British Insurance Brokers Association. Members have raised around five cases with me, and those are the ones that I am pursuing.
Dr Coffey: As I have said, I have taken up the issue of leasehold properties, and I have had the issue of commercial properties raised with me. Flood Re was a big and quite fundamental change in this country. In fact, every householder supports other householders for a limited period of time to help with flood resilience. It would be a massive change for businesses in one part of the country to subsidise other businesses because of their location choices. I recognise that this is not a straightforward issue, which is why we continue to work with the insurance industry to improve cover.

Dr Coffey: We are talking about water companies and the protection of assets. Surface water is the responsibility of local councils. We are working on a strategy, led by the Environment Agency, which has overall strategic oversight on this, and we will be doing more on surface water flooding this year.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Many in Cumbria who suffered flooding were affected by surface water flooding. Although the Environment Agency's flood defences must meet a once in 100-year standard, the water companies are obliged to meet only a once in 50-year standard. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that the water companies are held to the higher standard so that homes and businesses are not put at risk of the devastation and misery caused by flooding?

Dr Coffey: When the Government made the decision to have a six-year plan for funding, they dramatically changed the situation for householders and businesses. The decision allowed the Environment Agency to have long-term plans instead of having a year-to-year hand-to-mouth existence. The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that we have that in place, and we will be working on future budgets at the appropriate time.

Trade Deals: Standards

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Flood Re has really helped to cover residential properties, but what about a guest house? Is that a business or a residence? Can it actually get affordable insurance? Businesses, and small businesses in particular, are finding it difficult to get affordable insurance.

Dr Coffey: As I have said, I have taken up the issue of leasehold properties, and I have had the issue of commercial properties raised with me. Flood Re was a big and quite fundamental change in this country. In fact, every householder supports other householders for a limited period of time to help with flood resilience. It would be a massive change for businesses in one part of the country to subsidise other businesses because of their location choices. I recognise that this is not a straightforward issue, which is why we continue to work with the insurance industry to improve cover.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Many in Cumbria who suffered flooding were affected by surface water flooding. Although the Environment Agency’s flood defences must meet a once in 100-year standard, the water companies are obliged to meet only a once in 50-year standard. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that the water companies are held to the higher standard so that homes and businesses are not put at risk of the devastation and misery caused by flooding?

Dr Coffey: When the Government made the decision to have a six-year plan for funding, they dramatically changed the situation for householders and businesses. The decision allowed the Environment Agency to have long-term plans instead of having a year-to-year hand-to-mouth existence. The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that we have that in place, and we will be working on future budgets at the appropriate time.

Trade Deals: Standards

7. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to safeguard UK food safety and animal welfare standards in future trade deals.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Government are proud of the high food safety and animal welfare standards that underpin our high-quality Great British produce. We have no intention of undercutting our own reputation for quality by lowering our food and animal welfare standards in pursuit of a trade deal.

Alex Cunningham: On that basis, then, does the Minister know whether his boss, a former Education Secretary, would be content to serve our schoolchildren American chlorinated chicken?

George Eustice: The point I would make to the hon. Gentleman is that, when we leave the European Union, the withdrawal Bill will bring across all existing EU regulations, including those on chlorinated chicken. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said many times, animal welfare is the issue here, and the issue of chlorinated chicken can sometimes mask animal welfare concerns.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): British farmers will be completely undermined if we have a flood of imports from countries with lower animal welfare standards. Will the Minister now tell the House that that is to be one of the Government’s red lines in negotiating free trade agreements?

George Eustice: If the hon. Lady had listened to my earlier answer, she would have heard me say that we have no intention of undercutting our own reputation for quality by lowering our food and animal welfare standards in pursuit of a trade deal.

Plastic Waste

9. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the amount of plastic waste entering the sea.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): We are taking a series of measures to reduce the amount of plastic entering the sea. Our plastic bag charge has led to 9 billion fewer single use bags being used in England. Our microbead ban, which comes into force this month, is one of the toughest in the world, but of course we need to work internationally through forums such as the UN, the G7 and the G20.

Steve Double: As the Secretary of State is aware, on 6 February I will be hosting an event in Parliament, together with Sky TV, as part of its ocean rescue campaign, inviting Members of Parliament to pledge to reduce the amount of plastic that they use in this place. Does he agree that it is important that Members take a lead and set an example on this issue, and will he join me in encouraging them to come to that event and to commit to cut the amount of plastic used here?

Michael Gove: It is an excellent campaign that Sky has been running, and it is lucky to have my hon. Friend playing such a prominent role, as he has been an outstanding environmental campaigner on this issue for many years. Yes, there is a commitment that we can all make. I also know that the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), has written to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), the Chair of the Administration Committee,
to see what the House can do to ensure that we reduce the amount of single use plastic on the parliamentary estate.

Mr Speaker: We are indeed considering these matters, and I know that the Secretary of State will feel that there is a song in his heart at the revelation of that development.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Welsh Labour Government are the third best in the world for recycling, far exceeding their targets this year alone. I am sure that the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating them on that. Can he clarify his position on recycling? He talks a good talk but does little to demonstrate action and is in danger of missing vital EU targets.

Michael Gove: I am happy to praise the Welsh Labour Government on this occasion—there are all sorts of things that Labour in Wales gets wrong, but on recycling I think it is only fair that we say well done. More broadly, it is really important that we all do more, and I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, for the commitment that you have shown with regard to the parliamentary estate. Of course we can do more; I can do more. The critical point is that when people are doing the right thing, as they are in Wales, we should applaud them.

Mr Speaker: I will now go about my business with an additional glint in my eye and spring in my step, confident in the knowledge that I have at least some approval from a person as illustrious and distinguished as the right hon. Gentleman.

Topical Questions

T1. [903553] Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The House will have heard the very sad news earlier this month that the Nancy Glen, a fishing vessel, was lost off the west coast of Scotland while fishing in Loch Fyne. Two fishermen lost their lives. The Clyde Fishermen’s Association is running an appeal to raise money to recover their bodies and support their families. We all know the inherent risk in fishing. The DEFRA Ministers, on behalf of the whole House, would like to thank everyone who has supported this appeal. We remember the crew of the Nancy Glen, and the Secretary of State’s words are appreciated. Farming expects the Secretary of State to continue his support and to maintain standards, of course, but the question for fishing, given all the tonnes he will take from the European Union, is this: where is it going, and when?

Michael Gove: On the plates of people from the Western Isles to the south-west of England, who can enjoy the fantastic produce that our fishermen catch every day.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Good dodge.

Michael Gove: Thank you.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I am delighted that Doddington has been granted permission for 600,000 trees to be planted as part of our future environment plan. This is the largest planting scheme in England for a generation. Doddington is a great example of modern mixed forestry, but we need to ensure that this is not the end but the beginning. It is vital that the Forestry Commission supports those who want to plant more trees for reasons such as supporting sustainable river basins. I hope that the Secretary of State will undertake to make sure that this happens. I would be delighted if he would come and visit.
Michael Gove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Yes, the Doddington North Moor development will be hugely welcome, not just in ensuring that we have more woodland cover but in providing a valuable habitat for the red squirrel—a native species that I think we all want to see better protected. We will be working with landowners, the Forestry Commission and others to ensure that there is more forest cover in the years ahead.

T2. [903555] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Royal Bank of Scotland’s decision to close over 60 branches will devastate rural communities, and farming communities are really worried about it. The Prime Minister has completely washed her hands of this, but will the Secretary of State at least meet RBS and make the case for rural communities?

Michael Gove: Access to banking and other services is vital for the future of rural communities. I commend the Press and Journal newspaper for the campaign that it has been running, which has been enthusiastically backed by my hon. Friends the Members for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson). All those fine Scottish Conservative colleagues have been leading this campaign. The Scottish Government have a responsibility to do more with regard to safeguarding the interests of Scottish farmers, and it has fallen to Scottish Conservative colleagues to be in the lead in the campaign. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is a most eccentric denizen of the House. There is a lot of arm-waving and gestication of a very rarefied character. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he now holds an illustrious position in the House, because he chairs a Select Committee. He is trying to become a senior statesperson. A little less finger-pointing would enhance his statesmanlike credentials no end.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the vision for the new 50 million tree northern forest and share my delight that the first tree planting will be at the Woodland Trust’s Smithills site in Bolton West?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Indeed. This ribbon of woodland and forest along the M62 will be welcome, and the Government are kick-starting the project with a £5.7 million grant. We will continue to work with the Woodland Trust and other community forests in making this a reality. I am particularly pleased for my hon. Friend, and I look forward to heading to Bolton to see where the first tree is planted.

T3. [903556] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): There is strong cross-party and public support for increasing the penalties for animal cruelty to five-year prison sentences. Could that be done forthwith rather than waiting for the draft animal welfare Bill, which is still subject to consultation?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful for the hon. Lady’s support—of course, she has a distinguished record as a Home Office Minister. We will look at any proposals that come from any part of the House to try to make sure that we can expedite this legislation.

Mark Pawsley (Rugby) (Con): I understand the Secretary of State’s concerns about what happens to plastic waste once it has been used, but does he agree that its use by retailers in particular gives consumers the widester possible choice and prevents food waste? It is important that any measures that we introduce do not reduce consumer choice and do not cause more of our food to be wasted.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Although we need to reduce demand for plastic and increase recycling, plastic does have a role to play in the preservation of fresh produce and in helping us to tackle food waste, which is itself an environmental and economic mistake.

T6. [903559] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Across Dulwich and West Norwood this winter we have once again seen a huge number of Thames Water leaks, many of them at sites where there have previously been repeated leaks. Last year, Thames Water reported operating profits of £650 million. It has a corporate structure involving offshore companies. The chair of Ofwat has highlighted the “urgent need for…a step change in the way” Thames “operates and behaves.” Will the Secretary of State tell my constituents when they can expect to see a winter without the disruption caused by an organisation that is clearly not fit for purpose?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is angry on behalf of her constituents, and I share her concern. That is why the chairman of Ofwat, Jonson Cox, has been doing such a good job in holding Thames and other water companies to account. Change is coming, but of course I want it to come faster.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As the Secretary of State said, it is vital that we educate our young people about the dangers of plastics in the seas in particular. Will he join me in congratulating Alfie from New Waltham Academy in my constituency, who has done so much to promote this issue? When he visits the area in the not too distant future to meet the fishing and seafood community, as I know he intends to, will he perhaps visit the academy?

Michael Gove: I would be delighted.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think the huge amount of investment in improving transport infrastructure and helping local councils has certainly done that. When it comes to PM2.5, this issue affects everybody, and that is why it is a key part of what we will be addressing in our clean air strategy. I encourage people to do the right things under the strategy—do not burn wet wood, and think about switching to smokeless coal. These are the kinds of
things on which we can take immediate action now, as well as acting on the long-term issue of improving infrastructure.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): One reason why our countryside is so admired and so respected by urban dwellers is the way it is looked after and managed by our farmers. When will the Secretary of State be able to build on his Oxford speech this month, and say more about long-term support for agriculture?

Michael Gove: When we think of admiration and respect, it is the admiration and respect due to my right hon. Friend. He has been an outstanding Minister and a fantastic constituency Member for the Derbyshire Dales, which is one of the most beautiful parts of England. He is absolutely right that, building on the speech I gave to the Oxford farming conference, more needs to be said and done to outline the framework for farming in the future. I hope to do so at the National Farmers Union conference, when I can celebrate our farmers, who are the best in the world.

Mr Speaker: Have it framed and put it up in the living room.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Haggis production depends on a strong Scottish sheep farming sector. Hill farming and crofting are vital for the local economy of my constituency. The Secretary of State may say that this is a devolved matter, but come Brexit will he work as closely as possible with the Scottish Government in sharing best practice and knowledge to make sure that my constituents’ livelihood is safeguarded as far as is humanly possible?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We are already working incredibly closely, obviously, with all the devolved Administrations, and indeed we have been doing so to discuss these very matters ever since the referendum decision.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), will the Secretary of State ask those involved in building on and encouraging the work on the northern forest to look at the national forest in the midlands as an exemplar? Some 8.5 million trees have been planted there since its inception.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Under a Labour Government.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) makes an admirable point. I hope to visit her constituency and others to see the wonderful work that has been done. A comment was made from a sedentary position by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), and I am very happy to acknowledge that leadership has been shown by Labour politicians as well. [Interruption. ] Forgive me, it was the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). Labour speaks with one voice on this matter—though not on any others. Coalfield communities have been helped on their journey towards revival by the investment in woodland cover, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough has been a hugely effective champion of that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know it will be hard, but will the Secretary of State sign a pledge to give up on any gimmickry or tokenism in tackling things such as plastic pollution? He will need a lot of allies and a lot of expertise for the radical revolution that he needs. Will he be serious about this and get on with the job?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend. Friend on all the excellent work he has done on the environment, but will he reassure the farmers of the UK that it is not a case of either the environment or food production, but a partnership of them both?

Michael Gove: I could not have put it better myself. Our farmers are the original friends of the earth, and we will not have a healthy environment unless we also support those who are our primary food producers and the stewards of our beautiful landscapes.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): How can we be confident of the Government's intention to be robust on air quality if we leave the EU, when they refuse to introduce a decent scrappage scheme for vehicles and persist in promoting runway 3 at Heathrow?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Air quality is actually improving. We have made great progress and we want to do more, particularly on roadside NO₂ concentrations. The hon. Lady should welcome the initiatives we have taken. Just this week, the House has approved extra powers to make sure that we get rid of or reduce the capacity of diesel generators, which will do a lot to improve air quality right across the country.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Financial Regulation

1. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): To ask the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, what recent assessment the commission has made of the effectiveness of the regulation of (a) election expenses and (b) donations to political parties. [903523]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission reported on political finance regulation at the June 2017 general election in November 2017. It highlighted important areas for the Government and Parliament to improve election law and transparency in political finance. The commission’s recommendations include increasing the maximum penalty that it can
impose for a breach of the rules, extending the imprint requirement for campaign materials to include online campaigning, and changing the law to allow for transparency of political donations in Northern Ireland.

Alan Brown: After the 2015 general election, the Tory party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats were all fined for misreporting election expenses, and the Liberal Democrats continue to play fast and loose with how they allocate expenses between local and national campaigns. Does the hon. Lady agree with the Electoral Commission that the fines are no longer suitable, and that urgent action must be taken to ensure that the penalty matches the crime?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the commission’s recommendation to increase the maximum penalty that it can impose on political parties and other campaigners for a breach of the political finance rules. There is a risk that a maximum fine of £20,000 per offence could be seen as the cost of doing business, and the commission’s view is that monetary policy should be more proportionate to the income and expenditure of larger and well-funded campaigners.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Marriage Registration

2. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment the Church of England has made of the potential merits of proposals in the Registration of Marriage Bill to enable a mother’s details to be recorded on marriage certificates. [903524]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I must declare an interest because I am promoting the Bill that would enable a mother’s details to be recorded in the registration of marriages, and I will introduce it for the second time on 23 February. More importantly, the Bishop of St Albans will introduce an identical Bill in the House of Lords tomorrow. The House could not have a stronger demonstration of how much the Church of England would welcome this change.

Diana Johnson: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on promoting the Bill. One way that women have been written out of history is by not having what work they have done in the past recorded on official documents such as a marriage certificates. I very much support what she is doing, but can anything else be done to promote the Bill and get Government support?

Dame Caroline Spelman: We are doing our very best. On 31 December, I was encouraged to read in The Sunday Times that a Home Office spokesman had told that newspaper that the Bill had been “signed off”. I hope that might mean that the Government will give the Bill time when it comes here from the Lords, as I am sure it will. We all want this to happen. It would put an end to an anachronism, and we would all cheer that. Many mothers who have weddings in the offing would like this change to happen in time for their children’s marriages.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In a society where marriage break-ups and relationship breakdowns happen daily, we welcome the right hon. Lady’s assertion that it is now time to include the mother’s details on the marriage certificate. Will she outline a legal timescale for that, and say when it might be completed?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As things stand, an identical private Member’s Bill is being introduced in both Houses—that is a pincer movement to try to make this happen. This is only the fifth time that the House has attempted to get this important change to a law that dates back to 1853. If the Government were to give the Bill time in the House, that would speed up that change to the law. I hope that the statement from the Home Office on new year’s eve has some substance behind it, and that the Bill will soon be given time in the House.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Electronic Voting

3. Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, what estimate the Commission has made of the potential cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber. [903526]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Commission has given no formal consideration to a move to electronic voting in the House. Its responsibility in that matter is limited to the financial or staffing implications of any change to the present system, were a change to be agreed by the House.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The voting system here is a bit crazy, Mr Speaker: last week, we spent two hours on eight votes. Most other Parliaments in the world would laugh at that—and, indeed, they do. Given that MPs do value meeting each other in the Lobbies, can we consider a hybrid system so that we move to something electronic when there is more than one vote? That would save those two hours.

Tom Brake: I have some sympathy with the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but as I am sure he—now an expert in these matters—knows, this is a matter for the House. If he chose to, he could approach the Procedure Committee and ask it to look at this issue.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We do have a sort of electronic voting now because the Clerks are using iPads—but using the iPads takes longer than using the pieces of paper of the past because it takes more time to spot the individual names.
I still support our going through the Lobbies—it is a good opportunity to meet Ministers and other colleagues—but it would be good if every vote did not take 16 minutes. Would it not be a good idea to consider some swifter form of technology for the Division Lobbies? We could use a fingerprint or thumbprint to vote.

**Tom Brake**: The hon. Gentleman has made a sensible point, which I am happy to take back in considering whether the electronic voting that he has described could speed things up.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

**Religious Vocations**

4. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent assessment the Church of England has made of trends in the number of its religious vocations.

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner** (Dame Caroline Spelman) (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I know that my right hon. Friend has a great interest in this subject because he asked me about the training of ordinands in April last year. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that an additional 44 candidates have been selected for training as ordained ministers, making a total of 544 in training. That means that we are well on our way to our target of 750 a year by 2020.

**Sir Desmond Swayne**: As so many clerks retire, what will be the future age profile of my right hon. Friend’s holy orders?

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: Like a lot of institutions, we face the prospect of large numbers of older clergy retiring at the same time as a result of previous pushes to increase the number of people being ordained and entering ministry. I am delighted to say, however, that the number of younger ordinands in the under-32 age group rose by nearly two fifths and now accounts for almost a third of the total.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was disappointed to hear recently from the head of Uber that only 5% of Uber drivers are women. What is the gender balance among the ordinands the right hon. Lady mentioned in the statement she just made?

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: The hon. Gentleman has always been assiduous in asking about gender balance. I am delighted to be able to say that the intake of female ordinands has seen an increase of 19% compared with last year. Although women make up only a third of the Church of England has made of trends in the number of its religious vocations.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what discussions the Church of England has had with the Government as a result of the General Synod’s call to ban gay conversion therapy.

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner** (Dame Caroline Spelman): Following all meetings of the General Synod, it is standard practice for the clerk to the General Synod to inform the appropriate Department. That was done on 21 July following the vote at the Synod to ban conversion therapy. A response was received from the relevant Minister on 24 August.

**Mr Bradshaw**: It would be helpful if we knew a little more about what that response actually said. As the right hon. Lady will know, this so-called therapy does dreadful damage to young people emotionally and psychologically; it is ban long overdue. The sponsor of the excellent motion in the General Synod has asked for a meeting with the relevant Minister, but that has been refused. I hope that the right hon. Lady will intervene on her behalf.

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: I am obviously not responsible for the Government’s decision, but the General Synod voted clearly and unequivocally to ban gay conversion therapy. I can share some of the contents of the letter that the Minister wrote to me. The Government are strongly against the practice of so-called reparative or conversion therapy. They have no current plans to ban or restrict it through legislation, because existing voluntary registers already provide safeguards for the public, but I will certainly assist in the way that the right hon. Gentleman suggests by writing to the Minister.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): More widely, in some parishes anti-gay prejudice masquerades as theology. What further action can be taken to tackle that?

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: The leadership of the Church of England could not be clearer on this point. Archbishop Justin managed to secure a commitment to stamp out homophobia throughout the Anglican communion, when all the bishops were convened here in London. It has been established unequivocally, from the top of the Church all the way down, that homophobia has no place in the Anglican communion.

**Christians: Middle East**

6. **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what support the Church of England is giving to Christian communities in the middle east as a result of attacks on those communities during Christmas 2017.

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: We celebrated the introduction of Bishop Rachel as the first female bishop following the change in the law. We now have a female bishop for Newcastle sitting in the Lords, and very recently a female bishop for London was appointed. There is clear evidence of progress, and there is a method of positive discrimination whereby dioceses eligible to be represented in the Lords are encouraged to appoint a woman so that the Lords moves towards better representation of female bishops.

**Gay Conversion Therapy**

5. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what discussions the Church of England has had with the Government as a result of the General Synod’s call to ban gay conversion therapy.

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner** (Dame Caroline Spelman): Following all meetings of the General Synod, it is standard practice for the clerk to the General Synod to inform the appropriate Department. That was done on 21 July following the vote at the Synod to ban conversion therapy. A response was received from the relevant Minister on 24 August.

**Mr Bradshaw**: It would be helpful if we knew a little more about what that response actually said. As the right hon. Lady will know, this so-called therapy does dreadful damage to young people emotionally and psychologically; it is ban long overdue. The sponsor of the excellent motion in the General Synod has asked for a meeting with the relevant Minister, but that has been refused. I hope that the right hon. Lady will intervene on her behalf.

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: I am obviously not responsible for the Government’s decision, but the General Synod voted clearly and unequivocally to ban gay conversion therapy. I can share some of the contents of the letter that the Minister wrote to me. The Government are strongly against the practice of so-called reparative or conversion therapy. They have no current plans to ban or restrict it through legislation, because existing voluntary registers already provide safeguards for the public, but I will certainly assist in the way that the right hon. Gentleman suggests by writing to the Minister.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): More widely, in some parishes anti-gay prejudice masquerades as theology. What further action can be taken to tackle that?

**Dame Caroline Spelman**: The leadership of the Church of England could not be clearer on this point. Archbishop Justin managed to secure a commitment to stamp out homophobia throughout the Anglican communion, when all the bishops were convened here in London. It has been established unequivocally, from the top of the Church all the way down, that homophobia has no place in the Anglican communion.
8. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what support the Church of England is giving to Christian communities in the middle east as a result of attacks on those communities during Christmas 2017.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England is in regular contact with the diocese of Jerusalem and the diocese of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa. I am pleased to report that the news from the region was comparatively positive over Christmas, especially when compared with that of only a few months ago.

Dr Offord: Yesterday, I had a not only interesting but humbling experience when I visited the Holocaust Survivors Centre in my constituency. Many of the people there were actually survivors of the holocaust—the Shoah. Does my right hon. Friend accept that those people are not only concerned about attacks in other countries on the basis of religion, but feel that we need to do more to help the Egyptian Government to prevent such attacks, which are, effectively, a form of genocide?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The proximity of Holocaust Memorial Day reminds us of all that, sadly, such atrocities are ongoing in our world, and that people are persecuted for their faith. Egypt was relatively quiet over Christmas—quieter than in recent months—but it is the ancient Coptic Church in that country for which we, as fellow Christians, fear. It is a fact that Egypt has moved from 21st to 17th on the world watch list of countries about which we should be concerned, not least because of the rise of Daesh there.

Daniel Kawczynski: There is growing concern about the level and extent of the persecution of Christians throughout the middle east and north Africa. What representations is the Church of England making to the Government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about the disproportionately low number of Christians who are identified for resettlement to western countries?

Dame Caroline Spelman: We are in regular contact with both the Government and the UNHCR about the plight of persecuted Christians. We wanted to get to the bottom of why the percentage of Christians in refugee camps in a number of these countries is so low. In fact, the Christian diaspora is extensive, and Christians living in other countries where they can help to provide safe havens often enable their relatives to travel over. It is significant that, for example, 30% of Syrian refugees in America are Christian. Christians frequently choose to save themselves in such ways.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am in no doubt about the spiritual and pastoral support that the Church of England offers fellow Christians throughout the world, but will the right hon. Lady outline some of the financial or monetary contributions that are made to programmes for those most directly affected?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Because the Anglican communion has a network of churches throughout the world, it can often provide food and resources, clothing and shelter for persecuted communities who are otherwise very hard to reach. Only yesterday, I met the Bishop of Goma, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who bravely puts his own life on the line to provide essential humanitarian assistance, at his own expense, for the Christians who suffer in his country. That is one of the strengths that the Anglican Church has to offer.

Counter-terrorism

7. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what counter-terrorism measures are in place to protect Church of England premises; and if she will make a statement.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): Six cathedrals have received money from the programme launched in July 2016 as the places of worship security funding scheme, which became, in 2017, the vulnerable faith institutions scheme. To get funding, a place of worship has to show evidence that it is vulnerable, and cathedrals have been given up to £45,000 to assist with measures that they need to undertake.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the right hon. Lady for the interest she has shown in the counter-terrorism measures that York Minster is trying to put in place. However, the funding for its specific work and the planning regulations are inadequate. Will she work with me to try to ensure that worshippers at York Minster are safe?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Unfortunately, I do not think it is possible retrospectively to reimburse the Minster for the measures it has taken, which I believe are in any event temporary at the moment, but may I share the good practice of the House of Commons, the parliamentary estate, Westminster Abbey and Westminster City Council, which work together to try to make these public spaces safer after the terrible events of last year? I will do everything I can to assist the hon. Lady in getting that kind of good partnership working around York.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given that the Church of England is responsible for some iconic sites, the attention given to this work is welcome, but will my right hon. Friend reassure me that those wishing to meet the living God will not find a palisade fence separating them from His house?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is right: as Parliament does not wish to turn itself into a fortress because that would cut against what democracy stands for, no more does the Church want so to provide security measures that it becomes a less accessible place to meet with God. That balance has to be struck.
steps the Commission is taking to ensure the highest standards of employment practice from contractors working on the Palace of Westminster renewal and maintenance projects. [R]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The House service’s contract requirements and terms and conditions make provisions for contractors to provide adequate working conditions for employees. The provisions include health and safety, security, training, remuneration and payment of at least the London living wage to employees if working on the parliamentary estate. The working conditions provided by the contractors must be compliant with relevant legislation and ensure appropriate welfare and maintenance of stable and skilled workforces to ensure successful delivery of our contracts.

Christian Matheson: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer.

Companies such as McAlpine, which is up to its neck in blacklisting, have contracts on the parliamentary site. Since the best form of protection for workers is membership of a strong trade union, will the Commission consider giving named officials of the relevant trade unions security access so they can come in and check to make sure blacklisting is not taking place on these premises?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for advance notice of the supplementary question. I am afraid that the current position is that passes can be issued, for instance by Members, only for a specific purpose in supporting that Member. However, the hon. Gentleman has made a specific request and I undertake to secure a written response to it for him.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

Leaving the EU

10. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, what recent assessment the National Audit Office has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on its work programme. [903534]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission. The NAO work programme, determined by the Comptroller and Auditor General, is regularly revised to ensure it reflects current issues. Brexit is a major task for Departments, and some Departments are more affected than others. The NAO is keeping in close touch with Departments as they take forward the implementation task.

Mr Hollobone: After we leave the EU, we are likely to be still engaged in a number of EU-wide programmes. Will the Public Accounts Commission satisfy itself that the NAO has the requisite powers to continue to investigate Government involvement in those schemes?

Mr Bacon: The NAO has a remit to look at all UK public, taxpayers’ money and it has confirmed that it will scrutinise any financial settlement with the EU. The Comptroller and Auditor General has said his first report is due in the spring.
Business of the House

10.33 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House update the House on the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 29 January 2018 will include:

Monday 29 January—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords], followed by remaining stages of the Automated and Electrical Vehicles Bill.

Tuesday 30 January—Second Reading of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill, followed by motions relating to the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill.

Wednesday 31 January—Opposition day (un-allotted half day). Subject to be announced, followed by debate on motions relating to the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster.

Thursday 1 February—Debate on a motion on baby leave for Members of Parliament, followed by debate on a motion on hospital car parking charges. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 2 February—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 February will include:

Monday 29 January—Motions relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018, followed by remaining stages of the Smart Meters Bill.

We all remember those who suffered such terrible atrocities during the holocaust as we mark Holocaust Memorial Day this weekend, and I think we are all united in our desire to eradicate such evil acts from our world.

Next week, the House will have the opportunity to discuss the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. This must be a decision made by Parliament itself; it is not one for the Government. I urge all colleagues to take a basement tour, if they have not done so already, and to speak to the engineers ahead of the debate and see the challenges that lie ahead. Members may also wish to read the reports from the Joint Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Select Committee, and the financial memorandums to the motions, to acquaint themselves with the issues raised in them. They are all available online on the Parliament website, and of course my door is always open to any Member who wants to discuss this in advance of the debate.

Finally, I would like to wish everyone a very happy Burns night celebration tonight, particularly our Scottish colleagues on both sides of the House.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business. I also thank her for her letter about the new list of ministerial responsibilities, which states that this is scheduled for March and that the new list might be available soon. I do not know whether the Government are waiting for changes—perhaps the Foreign Secretary is now going to become the Health Secretary, although he was reminded by the Chancellor that he is the Foreign Secretary. Ministers must know their responsibilities by now—otherwise, the Government would be in a shambles—so may we have the update sooner rather than later?

May we also have the date on which Parliament will rise in July? We only have the date when we return on 4 June, and I have been summoned for jury service and would like to know the date when I will be available.

I thank the Leader of the House for tabling the motions on restoration and renewal and for the debate on the subject. Having two motions will rather complicate the three-hour debate, however. At last week’s business questions, she said:

“Because of the seriousness of the decision before the House, the two motions will not be amendable; it will be a case of either the first motion or, if that fails, the second motion.”—[Official Report, 18 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 1062.]

I hope that she is not trying to bind Parliament. I checked “Erskine May”, and it states that “if the amended notice does not exceed the scope of the original notice and the Speaker decides that it is proper for the motion to be moved in the altered form”, it can be tabled. I say hoorah for democracy and hoorah for you, Mr Speaker, because we know that an amendment has now been tabled. This is an important matter—I concur with the Leader of the House on this—and I have been down to the basement. It is important for Members to know that costs are being incurred every day that a decision is not being made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) made a point of order yesterday on the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, a matter that I have raised many times in business questions. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Prime Minister responds to the letter that the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, sent seven weeks ago offering financial help for the project? This Government should be working with the Welsh Government on a project that would be a world first. The First Minister is not Owain Glyndŵr; he is a very clever, democratically elected First Minister.

We know that the Government are committed to the environment, because they said so in their 151-page document “A Green Future”, but amazingly, that document made no mention of fracking. I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to a new study, “Sustainability of UK shale gas in comparison with other electricity options”, which examines the environmental, economic and social sustainability of fracking. May we have a statement on why exploratory drilling is going ahead in Lancashire when the study ranked shale gas seventh out of nine different energy sources?

May we have a statement on the UCAS data showing that the number of people applying to become teachers has fallen by a third in the past year, with 6,510 fewer applicants for teacher training in this academic year compared with 2015-16? Sadly, we need a statement from the Secretary of State for Education on why the number of teachers asking for financial support from the charity Education Support Partnership is up 40% on last year.

We want our teachers to teach our children personal, social and health and economic education. The Leader of the House will have heard about the events at the Presidents Club in yesterday’s urgent question from my
hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), in which the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) called for the expedition of PSHE. Will the Leader of the House please tell us when that will happen? We need that sooner, rather than later, in our schools. Will she also tell us whether the visit by a Minister to the Presidents Club was an official visit or a private one? Whether it is the Presidents Club or “All the President’s Men”, it is an abuse of power either way.

It is important to have Opposition days. In yesterday’s debate on Carillion, I and others asked a number of questions. The Minister—not the Secretary of State—came to the House to answer the questions, and he is following up on the taskforce that the TUC has asked for. The Opposition look forward to the delivery of the documents to the Public Accounts Committee. Will the Leader of the House say when they will be delivered?

Yesterday, we also had a debate on human rights, in this, the week of Holocaust Memorial Day, which is on Saturday. The Leader of the Opposition reminded us all to sign the book of commitment, which is still available to be signed between 2 pm and 4 pm outside the Members’ Cloakroom. That is a reminder that every one of the rights in the European convention on human rights, which was enacted in UK law under the Human Rights Act 1998, was systematically violated in the second world war. As the Opposition Day debate reminded us, human rights and dignity should be at the core of our society.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions. As she mentions, I have written to her on the subject of the ministerial list to say that it will be available as soon as possible.

On the rise of the House in July, now that I am apprised of the fact that the hon. Lady needs time for her jury service—I would not dream of delaying that unduly—I will absolutely seek to ensure that we give the matter consideration and inform the House as soon as we possibly can.

The hon. Lady asks about the motions concerning the restoration and renewal of the Palace. As I said last week—I think she agrees—we want the House to be able to take a decision. I wanted to see what sort of amendments were tabled. I think that I made it clear last week that we needed some sensible alternatives for the House to discuss, and some very sensible amendments have been tabled. I commit to undertaking to ensure that they are included in the options available to the House. Nevertheless, the important point is that the House can make an informed decision next week.

The hon. Lady asks about the Swansea Bay lagoon. As we have discussed several times in the Chamber, the project is extremely expensive compared with other forms of renewable energy. It requires a careful decision, and I know that it is still under consideration. On the subject of fracking, it is clear that natural gas provided by fracking, with some of the world’s strongest and most careful regulation, is a way forward for the United Kingdom as we move towards zero-carbon targets for our electricity generation. From where we are today, we cannot simply get rid of coal from the system—we hope to do that by 2025—and move straight to lower carbon forms of energy generation. Gas will continue to be an important part of our transition towards a low-carbon future, and natural gas from fracking is one option that is open to the United Kingdom.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of teacher applications. There are 15,500 more teachers in our classrooms than there were in 2010. The number of teachers returning to the classroom has increased by 8% since 2010, which is good news. Experienced teachers who have taken career breaks are coming back into the classroom, and, vitally, there are more teachers with first-class degrees—highly qualified teachers who can impart information to our young people.

I share the hon. Lady’s disgust at what happened at the Presidents Club. There is absolutely no place for that type of activity. A men-only club effectively abusing young women, as reported in this story, is absolutely unacceptable. As she will be aware from the urgent question rightly asked yesterday, the question when we will introduce sex and relationship education in schools is still subject to consultation with young people themselves. It is vital that we do not guess what they want to learn about but ask them themselves, which is why we need to take the time to consult.

On Carillion, I can assure the House that its request will absolutely be upheld and the documents made available, but as the hon. Lady will know, the Public Accounts Commission already has the means to ask to be provided with such documents.

Finally, I completely share the hon. Lady’s desire to reflect the importance of human rights in everything we do—in remembering not just the appalling actions during the holocaust but the appalling civil wars and problems in our own lifetimes. Human rights must be upheld.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. As per usual, a great many right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye in these exchanges. I simply remind the House that there is a statement by the Secretary of State for Defence to follow, in which I imagine there will be substantial interest and that that will be followed by two well-subscribed debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. There is, therefore, a premium on brevity from Back and Front Benches alike.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): May we have a statement on the excellent employment figures released this week?

**Andrea Leadsom:** That was a perfect example of brevity, was it not, Mr Speaker?

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this news, which should be a great pleasure for the entire House. There are 32.21 million people in work—415,000 more than a year ago—while the number of people in employment has increased by over 3.1 million since 2010, which is more than the entire population of Wales. Over 70% of this rise in employment has been in higher-skilled jobs, and unemployment has not been lower since 1971. It is great news for our economy.

**Several hon. Members rose—**
Mr Speaker: Order. I am reminded also that there is a Select Committee statement, which will not absorb a great deal of time but which is important. All that adds to the pressure on time.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On this Burns day, may I thank the great Chieftain o’ the Hoose for announcing the business for next week? I join her and the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) in acknowledging the huge significance and importance of Holocaust Memorial Day on Saturday.

Today we celebrate the birth of Robert Burns, Scotland’s greatest poet. Just maybe we should have listened to him when he warned “the best laid schemes o’ mice and men, aft go agley” before we started with this chaotic Brexit scheme a few months ago.

Now is not the time for “timorous beasties”. We need the Leader of the House to be braver on restoration and renewal. We cannot have a curtailment of debate and the closing down of options on these critical issues. With the huge costs involved, our constituents expect us to have sufficient time to debate them. We must make sure we have that. We must ensure that all options are fully considered. We must also hear today that there will be no attempt to curtail debate by the rejection of the amendments.

Any motion about renewal must also consider modernisation. I hope that the whole House will join my and the SNP’s campaign to reclaim our time and end the ridiculous farce of wasting days of the parliamentary year standing in packed Lobbies simply to vote.

The fallout from the Presidents Club dinner continues to develop and appal. Can we have a debate about these clubs to see what more can be done to challenge the laws that sustain them and the culture that still thinks them acceptable? We are in a new era of zero tolerance for this pathetic behaviour, and now is the time to make real and substantial progress in tackling it.

Lastly, as our devolution settlement is passed to the other place. In my view, as you know, Mr Speaker, SNP, and I am very grateful to them for that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. The Backbench Business Committee is open for business, and I would just ask Members to think ahead in terms of memorial and celebration days. I am anticipating applications from Members about International Women’s Day and St David’s Day—a Welsh debate—so if Members can think ahead to those important dates in the diary and bring forward their applications in a timely way, we will be able to plan well ahead.

I am glad to say that the haggis is not yet an endangered species. Even the clockwise ones, with longer legs on one side, still run round the hills very happily in all of the highlands. On Burns day, we should all be thinking about the sage words of Robert Burns, who said:

“Oh wad some Power the giftie gie us. To see oursels as ithers see us!”

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I assure the hon. Gentleman that we do take into account the needs of the Backbench Business Committee. I know it is holding some very important and popular debates, and we will continue to provide dates as early as we can.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the endangered nature of the haggis, although according to today’s press, it could be possible to clone haggis in the future. However, he is right to raise the importance of getting timely notification of available days, and we will make sure that that happens.
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Government have made great strides in recent months in bearing down on unnecessary plastic waste. At airports such as Gatwick, in my constituency, as people go through security, a lot of plastic bottles are discarded. Could we have a statement from my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary on ensuring that there are water refilling points in many places, such as airports, so that we can reduce plastic waste, which is so unnecessary?

Andrea Leadsom: All Members on both sides of the House will be delighted to see initiatives to ensure that water fountains and drinking water taps are made available at all key points across the United Kingdom. We have seen some progress towards that, and I think that that will be very welcome, not least because it will save consumers money, as well as reducing the enormous amount of plastic that finds its way into our marine areas.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Government figures released today show that levels of rough sleeping are now the highest on record, so can we expect a statement next week about this serious issue that affects all parts of our country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise the appalling issue of homelessness, which no one in this Parliament finds acceptable as a way forward. The Government have signed up to the important Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) to ensure that we do everything possible to eradicate homelessness by 2027 and to halve it by 2022, and several homelessness reduction taskforces are going ahead to consider what more can be done. The reasons for homelessness can be complicated. It is not necessarily just about housing as it can relate to mental health, addiction and other issues.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): May we have a statement on the boundary review recommendations for constituencies, so that they can come before the House for us to ratify? Some of us are very much in favour of the proposals in order to reduce the cost of running this Parliament.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a contentious point, but he may well want to seek a debate, perhaps through the Backbench Business Committee, so that colleagues can discuss the matter.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): With £3 billion set aside for Brexit contingency planning, £200 million lost to the UK economy each week as a result of slower growth, according to Mark Carney, and £300 million being spent on new civil servants, will the Leader of the House make time available for the Foreign Secretary to come to the House to explain from where he is going to get the £350 million a week for the NHS?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not accept any of the numbers that the right hon. Gentleman is bandying about. The fact is that he should be as delighted as we are on the Government Benches at the employment numbers that belie all the claims of those who sought to keep the UK in the EU, who said that our economy would be in disastrous straits, that unemployment would rise and that we would be in recession. None of those things has happened. The economy is growing and, importantly, more people than ever before have the security of a pay packet and the ability to feed themselves and their families.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): May we have a debate about the provision of top-class sporting facilities? In my constituency, football supporters are concerned that Coventry City are just nine games away from homelessness—its agreement to play at the Ricoh Arena is coming to an end—and speedway fans can no longer watch their sport at Brandon because the stadium has been allowed to get into a state of disrepair.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that, and I understand the frustration of Coventry City supporters. Football clubs are valuable community assets, and every care should be taken to protect their long-term financial future. As my hon. Friend will know, it is not the place of Government to intervene in the fortunes of any particular club. It is for the footballing authorities to administer their sport, and this case is a matter for the English Football League.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I am sure that you will be as appalled as I was to learn that half of all the tableware bought by the House last year was not made in England—never mind that it was not made in Stoke-on-Trent. May we have a debate in Government time on public procurement and purchasing post-Brexit so that we can ensure that we actually buy British?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for buying British wherever possible. When we leave the European Union, we will be able to look at our procurement rules. Wherever possible, where British goods are equal—in many cases, they are the best—we will be able to purchase them for ourselves.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): On the day that we rightly celebrate the life and works of Rabbie Burns, the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, one of Scotland’s iconic cultural centres, is threatened with closure by the SNP council in Stirling. May we have a statement from a Treasury Minister to confirm that the Scottish Government’s budget for the coming year is protected in real terms and that it is therefore a political choice, not a necessity, for the Scottish Government to impose spending cuts on local authorities, which threatens institutions such as the Stirling Smith?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is working with the friends of the museum to save this valuable community asset, and I understand that the world’s oldest football is one of its exhibits. My hon. Friend will no doubt be aware that the Budget allocated a further £2 billion to the settlement for Scotland and that the Scottish Government can take the decision to save this asset should they choose.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): With no proper consultation, North Lincolnshire Council is reducing the number of unpaid councillors on Kirton in Lindsey Town Council and Bottesford Town Council, meaning those councils will have fewer voluntary councillors.
than smaller neighbouring parish councils. Can we have a debate on the relationship between district councils and town councils?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue about local democracy. We would all like to see much greater decision making at local level, with good people coming forward to take up those posts. An Adjournment debate would be a good candidate to raise these specific issues with a Minister.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Mr Speaker, you may or may not be aware that today is rural vulnerability day. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this important new date in the parliamentary calendar that helps to shine a light on the challenges facing rural areas such as Taunton Deane? Will she find time for a debate on that issue? I would welcome her, and indeed Mr Speaker, to the event in the Palace today.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am happy to share in my hon. Friend’s pleasure at this new focus on rural vulnerability. Access to transport and other services can be difficult for many people living in rural areas, and of course the issue of loneliness can be more acute. It is right that we look specifically at these issues, and I am happy to support her in her campaign.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): We need an urgent debate on homelessness and rough sleeping because the issue has exploded over the past few years not just in major cities but even in towns such as Dudley, and it has been made much worse by benefit cuts and by reductions to social care, help and support services. That is why we need an urgent debate on this issue.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Homelessness is an appalling situation for anyone to find themselves in, and the Government are dedicating more than £1 billion up to 2020 to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. As well as supporting the Homelessness Reduction Act, we are looking at the new prisons Minister, who has acknowledged that there is a shortage of prisoners and 19 prisons where there is a shortage of prisoners and 19 prisons have had to be closed? Is that not the kind of problem the new prisons Minister will be aware of, the Government are now investing more than £9 billion in our affordable homes programme to ensure that we provide homes for people who are vulnerable.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Carole Shields of the Poverty Truth Commission in Glasgow has highlighted to me the difficulties in the transition between young people’s benefits and adult benefits in the social security system. Can we have a debate on that important issue? People should not have to wait 12 weeks to transition on to employment and support allowance, as her son did.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an important constituency issue. If she wants to write to me about it, I will happily take up that specific case with the relevant Minister on her behalf. This is the sort of issue she should raise at the next Question Time opportunity.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am still waiting for an answer to my question on what caused the Grenfell Tower fire, which I was told was imminent last autumn. Not for the first time, the question has outlasted the Minister of whom it was asked. Can we hear from Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about fire safety, especially that of domestic appliances? Last Sunday they announced a new Office for Product Safety and Standards, which appears to be just a new name for business as usual.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I say again that we continue to be appalled by what happened at Grenfell. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have been working since then to make sure that people living in high-rise buildings are safe by carrying out a series of checking and testing, which includes identifying ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding and larger-scale tests to establish how different combinations of cladding and insulation materials behave in a fire. The rules on fire safety are being reviewed, and he is right to raise the importance of this issue.

**Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (LD): As the roll-out of universal credit accelerates, Ministers will soon be confronted with the task of transitioning people on tax credits to universal credit. They must tell us soon how people will be informed of the changes and when the draft statutory instruments will be laid. May we have a debate on how the Government will ensure that no one loses out as a result of the transition?

**Andrea Leadsom:** In statements and in response to urgent questions, Ministers have come to the House to explain the changes to universal credit. We need to learn all lessons so that we improve the system. Universal credit is designed to ensure that work always pays, and there is evidence that it is working. People on universal credit spend more time seeking work and are more successful in finding work.

We have also ensured that people who make the transition to universal credit can receive a transitional payment for housing, that their housing benefit can be paid directly to the landlord when necessary, and that people can receive their payments on day one of their claim, should they need that, so we have listened and made changes to the system. The transition to universal credit is now significantly improved.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): When can we take advantage of the pragmatic and progressive views of the new prisons Minister, who has acknowledged that the crises of overcrowding and self-harm in our prisons are the result of 50 years of error by all parties? May we compare the crisis here with the situation in the Netherlands, where there is a shortage of prisoners and 19 prisons have had to be closed? Is that not the kind of problem we would like to have here?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that that is the kind of problem that we want to have. He is right to mention the commitment of my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry for Justice, to clean and safe prisons that are places of discipline and rehabilitation, not harm and violence. This Government gave greater powers last year to Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons through the urgent notification system, by which specific issues in prisons can be raised immediately. We have also invested £100 million in recruiting 2,500 new prison officers, and we should be at full complement by the end of 2018. There is more to do, but progress has been made.
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I still have not had a reply to my question about the anti-corruption tsar. Between 2015 and 2017, the then Member for Brentwood and Ongar, Eric Pickles, was the anti-corruption tsar. Who is the current tsar, or has one not yet been appointed?

Andrea Leadsom: I am happy to write to the hon. Lady with a response.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Unlike your good self, Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House has never had the advantage of visiting the Textile Centre of Excellence in Huddersfield. It is the centre of training for the whole textile industry. Will she consider an early debate on the crisis in skills and productivity in our country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to note that the productivity rise was greater in the last quarter than it has been since the financial crisis. There is a long way to go. Productivity has lagged since that financial crisis, and it is essential that the Government focus—we are doing so—on everything that we can do to invest in greater productivity. We have the national productivity plan, which is worth £31 billion, to ensure that we improve productivity right across the UK.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I am sure that everyone agrees that police dogs are an incredibly useful element of effective policing, especially in relation to firearms and drugs operations, yet following years of cuts to policing budgets across England and Wales, forces have reduced the number of police dogs by between 50% and 80% in the past six years. Will the Leader of the House outline her support for the “Don’t Ditch the Dogs” campaign, and may we have time in the Chamber in which parliamentarians can outline their support for the amazing work of police dogs and their handlers?

Andrea Leadsom: Police dogs do a fantastic job—there is no doubt about that—and I share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for them. She may well wish to seek a debate to enable colleagues to give their experiences and to discuss what more can be done to improve the resources available to the police, such as police dogs, that help us to tackle crime.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House knows that this week the Institute for Public Policy Research North published a full analysis of transport investment in the next four years. It shows that London will receive five times per head more than Yorkshire and Humber will receive. With Crossrail 2 already so far advanced, there is nothing that can be done by Transport for the North, in its advisory capacity, to change that underfunding within the next two years. May we have a statement from the Transport Secretary about exactly what he has got receive. With Crossrail 2 already so far advanced, there is nothing that can be done by Transport for the North, in its advisory capacity, to change that underfunding over the next few years. May we have a statement from the Transport Secretary about exactly what he has got against the north? Rather than denying the underfunding, he should address it.

Andrea Leadsom: The Government are absolutely committed to the northern powerhouse and to giving the great towns and cities of the north of England much more say over transport investment through Transport for the North. We are spending more than £13 billion to transform transport across the north, which is the biggest transport investment in the region for a generation.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House confirm whether there will be an opportunity for votes on the amendments to the R and R motions? I am thinking particularly of the one I have tabled with my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on finally introducing electronic voting to this House and any temporary Chamber. Surely, in the words of Burns:

“No’s the day, and now’s the hour”.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Gentleman’s enthusiasm for a certain decision to be taken by the House. As I think I have made clear, we are determined to ensure that there are some clear decisions to be taken. The selection of amendments is a matter for the Chair, not for me, but we are looking at this carefully to make sure that proper proposals are put forward on which the House can make a decision.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This month, Nottingham City Councillor David Mellen is reading to 2,018 Nottingham children to raise funds for Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library scheme in Nottingham. Given the Leader of the House’s enthusiasm for early intervention programmes, will she join me in congratulating Councillor Mellen?

Andrea Leadsom: I am of course very happy to congratulate the hon. Gentleman. His local councillor who is working on that important programme. It is vital that we do anything we can to prepare young people for adulthood, and for a successful and emotionally secure life. For my own part, I strongly favour even earlier intervention—in the perinatal period; I just have to make that clear.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted that the Leader of the House thinks that a “very sensible”—her words—amendment has been tabled to the restoration and renewal motion. I take that to mean the one that I have signed, along with the Chairs of 11 Select Committees, including several Conservatives. I hope that that means that she will be able to vote for it, because we will have a completely free vote and therefore Ministers will be free to do exactly what they want so that we make the right decision for the future of this country. Will she tell us at what time the votes will be next Wednesday?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting thoughts into my mind about how I might vote. I will look at what amendments are tabled and make my decision, as will all Members, so that we reach the best solution that suits the desires of most Members. We cannot say categorically what the timing next week will be—we can never do that—but this will be the second debate on Wednesday 31 January.

Nick Smith (Blenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement on the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks, which can be harmful to under-16s?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the fact that those drinks can be harmful to young people. I urge him to seek an Adjournment
debate, which would be appropriate for that sort of subject, or to question Ministers in the next Health questions.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): This week, Cardiff airport announced its 2017 results, which show nearly 50% growth since it was taken into public ownership by our Welsh Labour Government. May we have a debate in Government time on the reform of air passenger duty, which would enable our publicly owned airport to continue to thrive?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate Cardiff airport on its increasing passenger numbers—that is great news. The Treasury is always looking at ways to improve economic growth in the four nations of this great country of ours. I encourage the hon. Lady to ask about air passenger duty in the next Treasury questions.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Official figures released this week reveal that there are now nearly 22,000 fewer police officers in England and Wales than there were in 2010. My Dewsbury constituency is currently suffering a plague of car crime and antisocial behaviour that the police simply do not have the resources to manage. May we have an urgent debate on police numbers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that overall police funding has remained steady in real terms and that there are opportunities for police funding to increase next year, if police and crime commissioners use the precept levy that will enable them to do that. The way in which policing is managed needs to reflect new threats from cyber-crime and other types of criminal activity, yet frontline policing throughout the country as a whole has not changed—it has, in fact, slightly increased since 2010.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): May we have a statement on today’s Office for National Statistics figures showing a 21% increase in knife crime last year. Does the Leader of the House support my call for an immediate cross-party, cross-departmental inquiry into the root causes of youth violence, not just the symptoms?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady often raises issues around youth violence, and she is absolutely right to do so. Tackling knife crime is absolutely a priority of this Government. It has devastating consequences on victims’ families and, of course, our communities. Under Operation Sceptre, the Government continue to encourage police forces to undertake a series of co-ordinated national weeks of action to tackle knife crime. We hosted an all-force briefing event on Operation Sceptre on 23 January, and a record 38 police forces have signed up to take part in the next week of action, which is planned for February. The operation includes targeting habitual knife carriers, weapons sweeps, test purchases of knives from identified retailers and the use of surrender bins. The Government launched a consultation on 14 October 2017, which has now closed, and we are looking at what more can be done to get rid of this appalling crime.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Two years ago today—on 25 January 2016—University of Cambridge PhD researcher Giulio Regeni went missing in Cairo. His brutally battered body was recovered a week later; he had been tortured and murdered. The crime sparked international outrage and has called into question very basic academic freedoms. May we have a statement from a Minister on what the Government are doing to mark the event, and on what pressure is being exerted on the Egyptian Government to find the truth about what happened to Giulio?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that that appalling case horrified everybody who read about it in the press, and the hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise it. May I suggest that he takes it up at Foreign Office questions, when he can get a proper answer to his question?

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Mostyn House in Parkgate is a fine example of how an old building has been brought back to life. Even though some of my constituents have been living there for more than four years now, planning permission has not been granted. Despite the best efforts of the local authorities, the builder, PJ Livesey, will not do the work that is required. May we please have a debate on what more can be done to take irresponsible developers to task?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is clearly raising something that is very important in his constituency. I urge him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can get a reply from a Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Non-governmental organisations working with Iraqi refugees from religious minorities report that those refugees have not had the same access to humanitarian assistance and resettlement support in the middle east as the majority of religious groups and people of other nationalities. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey need to do more to ensure that Iraqi and religious minority refugees have equal access to humanitarian assistance and resettlement opportunities. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement, or indeed a debate, on this matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. The UK Government’s approach is to look at need rather than religious faith, but this is an important issue, and he might want to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can get a clear answer from a Minister.
Modernising Defence Programme

11.17 am

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):
I undertook to return to the House at the earliest possible opportunity to update hon. and right hon. Members on the programme to modernise defence, which the Ministry of Defence will be conducting in the months ahead.

Following agreement of the high-level findings of the national security capability review by the National Security Council, I have agreed with the Prime Minister and Chancellor that we should take forward its recommendation for a programme of further work to modernise defence to deliver better military capability and value for money in a sustainable and affordable way. This is essential if defence is to make its full contribution to national security.

The 2015 national security strategy and strategic defence and security review set out a clear ambition to ensure that the armed forces can tackle the threats that we face. It also proposed important new policy initiatives, including a stronger international approach, pursuit of innovation, modernised personnel policies and defence making a bigger contribution to our national prosperity, and we are making real strides to unlock greater efficiency and productivity.

Protecting the United Kingdom and our people remains our first priority and responsibility. As the threats we face become more complex and intertwined, we will need to work ever more closely with our NATO allies. We can also expect to remain actively involved with our partners in the Gulf in tackling shared threats to our security, and the Asia-Pacific region will become more important to us in the years ahead. The Ministry of Defence is making a major contribution to our prosperity as we procure the equipment our armed forces deserve and support defence exports, in which there have been recent successes, most notably the £6 billion Typhoon contract agreed with Qatar.

Significant events last year—the callous terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, and the major storms that ravaged British dependencies in the Caribbean—are reminders of our wider responsibilities. We need to contain threats that have their origin overseas and be prepared to react swiftly and effectively when crises arise. As we identified in 2015, this will require the joint force we are building to be versatile and agile. It will need to be capable of operating in all five domains: land, sea, air, space and cyber. It will need to be international by design, routinely exercising and operating with allies and partners. It will need to be credible and capable of operating against state and non-state threats—normally not alone but with NATO allies and other partners, but we must also be able to act on our own if and when required. It must be able to contribute to our national security at home, working with the police and other national security organisations.

While the major elements of our plans for Joint Force 2025 remain the right ones, in order to secure competitive advantage over our potential adversaries we need to ensure that we can move quickly to strengthen further our capabilities in priority areas and reduce the resources we devote elsewhere.

The Government commissioned the national security capability review to ensure that we have the policy and plans to implement our national security strategy, so that our investment in national security capabilities is as joined-up, effective and efficient as possible to address current national security challenges. A report will be published later in the spring.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in her recent Lord Mayor’s banquet speech, the threats, risks and challenges have become more complex and intertwined and have developed in areas and ways that we broadly expected, but at a much greater pace than was foreseen. The defence budget is £36 billion this year—the fifth largest defence budget in the world—and it will increase by £1 billion each year so that it will be almost £40 billion by 2021. The UK remains one of the few countries to exceed NATO’s 2% spending target, and this Government have committed to continue to increase the defence budget by at least 0.5% above inflation every year. However, we must do more to ensure that we use our resources effectively and deliver the efficiencies that the Department has committed to, so that they can be reinvested in the capabilities we require for our armed forces.

It is for these reasons that I have agreed with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to launch the modernising defence programme so that we can strengthen and modernise the armed forces to meet the threats that the NSCR identified. Modernising defence will allow us to deliver better military capability and value for money in a sustainable and affordable way, and it will allow us to ensure that defence capabilities complement other national security capabilities in the most effective way. I am determined to realise this goal through a modernised, more productive and more effective joint force that can deter threats more effectively and ensure that we can deliver what is required of defence today and succeed in any future conflicts. Turning this approach into reality will be my key goal for the modernising defence programme.

This programme will involve four strands of work. The first three will optimise how the MOD is organised and is operating, identify further efficiencies and ways to be more productive, including through an aggressive programme of business modernisation, and improve our performance on the commercial and industrial issues. The fourth strand will look at the capabilities that defend requires to contribute to our three national security objectives today and in the future, but also, most importantly, to understand the ever-changing threats that this country faces. I am determined to use the modernising defence programme to ensure that defence can make its full contribution to our national security on a sustainable basis.

I will speak to right hon. and hon. Members about this programme of work on a very regular basis, and I will keep the House updated as decisions are made. In the meantime, I would warmly welcome any contributions that right hon. and hon. Members would like to make. My Department and I will be consulting beyond the House as this programme of work gets under way in the weeks ahead.

Protecting our national security and the safety of the British people both at home and abroad remains the Government’s first priority. Let us make no mistake—the world is becoming a more dangerous place. We cannot afford to shy away from this reality, nor can we take our
security for granted. But even more than that, in a post-Brexit world Britain must continue to champion the global good. It must continue to reach out to seize global opportunities and deal with global threats. Our history teaches us that we cannot have prosperity without security. To protect that prosperity we must have armed forces primed and ready to tackle the challenges to come.

11.26 am

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I am sure that I speak for Members across the House in paying tribute to the dedication of our armed forces.

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it. However, I respectfully say, Mr Speaker, that the way in which this statement has been arranged by the Government has been shambolic from start to finish, and utterly discourteous to right hon. and hon. Members, some of whom may be elsewhere today because of explicit and repeated assurances by the Government that the statement would come on Monday. I am sure you have noted, Mr Speaker, that Members first heard news of this announcement when it was briefed to journalists on Tuesday afternoon, without so much as a written statement in this place. Then we had the complete farce of yesterday when the Government indicated that they would make a statement, then it was off, then it was on, and finally it was off again, with a full update promised on Monday. Clearly, the new facility to combat fake news is badly needed.

We do welcome the decision to separate out the modernising defence programme from the national security capability review, but the decision to hold a separate defence review must not simply be an excuse to kick the difficult decisions facing the defence budget into the long grass. This week we heard grave warnings from the Chief of the General Staff about the threats that this country faces. There has been growing concern that the Government’s savage cuts to our nation’s defences have left us ill equipped to respond to those threats.

The measure of this review will be in the detail. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to give us some specific answers today. Turning to the most important question, will the review be fiscally neutral? We know that much of the concern about the NSCR was that it was being carried out within the same funding envelope as the spending review. But if this review identifies that additional spending is necessary for the security of our nation, will the Government step up to the plate? Surely the Secretary of State must agree that it would be pointless to have a review that finds we need additional equipment or increased personnel only for the Government to ignore that recommendation. We cannot do security on the cheap, and it is high time that the Government indicated that they would make a statement, then it was off, then it was on, and finally it was off again, with a full update promised on Monday. Clearly, the new facility to combat fake news is badly needed.

We do welcome the decision to separate out the modernising defence programme from the national security capability review, but the decision to hold a separate defence review must not simply be an excuse to kick the difficult decisions facing the defence budget into the long grass. This week we heard grave warnings from the Chief of the General Staff about the threats that this country faces. There has been growing concern that the Government’s savage cuts to our nation’s defences have left us ill equipped to respond to those threats.

The measure of this review will be in the detail. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to give us some specific answers today. Turning to the most important question, will the review be fiscally neutral? We know that much of the concern about the NSCR was that it was being carried out within the same funding envelope as the spending review. But if this review identifies that additional spending is necessary for the security of our nation, will the Government step up to the plate? Surely the Secretary of State must agree that it would be pointless to have a review that finds we need additional equipment or increased personnel only for the Government to ignore that recommendation. We cannot do security on the cheap, and it is high time that the Government indicated that they would make a statement, then it was off, then it was on, and finally it was off again, with a full update promised on Monday. Clearly, the new facility to combat fake news is badly needed.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.

The hon. Lady asked whether the review aims to be fiscally neutral. No, it does not. It will look at how we can get the armed forces we need to deal with the threats that we face. The Government are absolutely committed to delivering the very best armed forces, and many Government Members and Opposition Members are equally committed to that. I very much hope that they will continue to support the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in the work we are doing to get the very best armed forces for future generations.
to working with her and with all Members of the House in trying to make sure that this review very much works for our armed forces.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place? I have sat in this place for 25 years—as you know only too well, Mr Speaker—and, sadly, I know that every Government bring forward another statement about modernising the armed forces, but invariably end up spending less money on the armed forces, while leaving them under the same pressures.

May I urge my right hon. Friend, in the conduct of his office, to please learn from previous mistakes? For example, when we went into the Bosnian area we had a “just-in-time” equipment policy based on supermarkets. That was very modern, but it ended up with tanks up on the side of the road with no equipment because we could not get it to them “just in time”. War is an expensive and wasteful business. Will he please ensure that we do not repeat the nonsense of people saying, “You can modernise,” when actually they mean, “You cut?”

Gavin Williamson: History teaches us many lessons, and we will try to learn as many of them as possible. My right hon. Friend has a lot of personal experience of the armed forces, and I welcome his contribution and thoughts on the review. We want the best armed forces possible. This is not an operation to take money off the armed forces; it is about ensuring that we get the armed forces and the support that we need, and recognising that they do the most amazing job for our country. That is what we hope to achieve as part of this review.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement, but the public must understand the farce that we went through yesterday to get to this point. This statement was on, it was off; it was maybe on, then it was definitely off. It was to happen next week, then we learned that it was happening today—better late than never, I suppose. We must also stop reading about these reviews in The Times, and he must endeavour to come to the House more often, rather than allowing leaks to newspapers. [Interruption.] I realise he is here now, but hon. Members know exactly what I am referring to.

Let me ask a couple of questions about the statement. Will the right hon. Gentleman expand on this week’s announcement about the new disinformation unit. Again, we had to read about that in the newspapers and he did not mention it today. If this review is not to be fiscally neutral, will he confirm that that is a departure from what Sir Mark Sedwill told the Defence Committee in a letter in which he said that it would be fiscally neutral? If it is not fiscally neutral, can members of the armed forces expect a pay rise when the review concludes? How will the review deal with Russian activity in and over the north Atlantic? Given what the right hon. Gentleman said about wishing to engage with Members, will he agree to meet me to discuss that issue? When he comes to report on this review in the summer, will he commit to handling it a lot better than he handled things yesterday?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman seems to think that the British public are really interested in the tabling of statements. I think they are interested in the fact that the Government are acting to ensure that our armed forces have the resources and everything they need. The review does not aim to be fiscally neutral—that is why we brought it out of the national security and capability review, which is a separate review mechanism. Sir Mark is doing an amazing job on the NSCR, which he outlined would be fiscally neutral, and this review has led on from that. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his wider issues and concerns about the north Atlantic.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that he will have the support of the whole House if he manages to secure additional funding for the pressures this year and next, and then puts the defence budget on a more sustainable footing that allows our armed forces to tackle the increased threats that they face, without demoralising rumours of “deep cuts”? The words used here are interesting and important, but what really matters in the end is money—more money.

Gavin Williamson: I thank my right hon. Friend for all that he has done for our armed forces. Without his work and campaigning, we would not today have a rising budget, with £4 billion of extra resources committed to our armed forces by the Government. I will take on board his comments. His article in The Daily Telegraph today sets absolutely the right tone and approach for how to take things forward. I hope I have the opportunity to sit down with him to discuss how we get the balance right and ensure that we achieve everything that he has set out and built on for our armed forces over the past four years. We must look at getting additional resources for our armed forces so that they have the capability to protect and truly defend Britain’s global interests, both near and far.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): My reaction to this much heralded, hokey-cokey statement is, is that it? Although the voice was Williamson’s, the hands were clearly Hammond’s. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the programme is still fiscally neutral? Why does it not say that increases in security expenditure will not be at the expense of defence? Why does it rehash the same old tired call for so-called and unspecified “efficiencies”? Why will he not just confirm that the winner is in fact the Treasury and its view that there are no votes in defence? In spite of his warm words, will not the real losers be our superb troops, our excellent defence industry, and the defence and security of our nation?

Gavin Williamson: I apologise if the right hon. Gentleman did not hear me. There is not the constraint of the programme being fiscally neutral; we are looking at what we can do and how we can deliver it to the best of our ability. I am very grateful to both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister for all they have done to work towards the position where we can put forward this programme and have the opportunity to look at the needs of our defence industry and establishment.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I have every sympathy with the Secretary of State: over the last two days when this was going to be announced, it was the old Army motto “knickers on, knickers off”, which many of us are familiar with.
A number of colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), have pointed to the crucial matter of money. Twenty years ago, the Labour Government carried out an enormous strategic defence review, which on the whole was well received, but it was never funded. Has the Secretary of State any confidence at all that his recommendations will actually be funded by the Treasury?

Gavin Williamson: Yes; I very much hope that the recommendations of the programme will be listened to closely by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. Its whole aim is to give the armed forces the opportunity clearly to set out our case for the resources that we need going forward.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The last 48 hours may have been somewhat chaotic, but I am more concerned about the last two months. There has been rumour after rumour and speculation undermining not only our global reputation, but the confidence of our serving personnel about their future.

There have been rumours about the Parachute Regiment merging with the Royal Marines and the end of amphibiousness—all this has been nonsense. Will the Secretary of State give us assurances that we will stop seeing such rumours on the front pages of the newspapers and be informed about what is happening? More importantly, what is happening with the review and where is the threat assessment coming from? What will the terms of reference be and when will we see them?

Gavin Williamson: There has been an awful lot of speculation over the past few months and virtually all of it has been proved to be completely untrue. I will continue to keep the House updated on progress, as I promised to in my statement. I will do everything I can to make sure that the armed forces, as well as the House, are listened to as we develop the programme going forward.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): There is real logic in separating out the security and defence reviews that the Secretary of State has referred to, but going forward, things such as cyber, intel, asymmetric warfare and drones will touch on both security and defence. How will he distinguish Sir Mark Sedwill’s review from the one that he has announced and will lead?

Gavin Williamson: We will be continuously working very closely with Sir Mark—given that a great deal of work has already been done on the NSCR, it would be crazy for us not to do that. What the review identified was that more work needed to be done on the Ministry of Defence budget. If the exercise were fiscally neutral, it would not have been possible to deliver in such a way. We will be working closely with the Cabinet Office to ensure that everything that we have done sits within the priorities of the National Security Council. As for cyber-attack, the Ministry of Defence itself leads on aspects of that. All the work across all those realms is done in conjunction with all the parts of our national security infrastructure—GCHQ, MI5 and MI6. It is essential that that continues going forward.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State’s desire to consult, I think that there would be merit in his coming along to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy so that we could dig into the detail of his announcement more thoroughly. Does he agree, however, that quantity has a quality all of its own, and that, given the threats that we know we face, any further reduction in armed forces personnel would be extremely unwise?

Gavin Williamson: We have made a commitment in relation to the size of our armed forces. I think there is a strong argument that we need forces with not just the very best equipment but mass, if we are to be able to deploy.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): On Monday, General Sir Nick Carter, the Chief of the General Staff, stated that the Russians could go to war far more quickly than we had previously thought. Will my right hon. Friend allow consideration, and some support, to leaving, say, a brigade in Germany, so that we would be closer to where the battles may well be?

Gavin Williamson: We are very much looking at that option. We need to ensure that forces that are even further east can be properly resupplied and supported.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I think the whole House will congratulate the Secretary of State on taking the review out of the straitjacket, but is there a risk that the submarine programme—in particular, funding for Astute boat 7, which has not yet been priced—could be diverted by the review?

Gavin Williamson: It is too early in the process for me to be able to comment on that, but I will look into the issue and come back to the hon. Gentleman. Obviously, the whole point of the programme is to look at things afresh. However, we have commented fairly regularly on the increasing threat that we face in the north Atlantic, which has been raised by Members. We must ensure that we have submarines that are able to operate in and defend the north Atlantic.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for delivering good news to the House, and congratulate him on leveraging the somewhat unexpected and sudden nature of his appointment to the advantage of Her Majesty’s armed forces and the Ministry of Defence. Leveraging control over the defence review back to the Department for the first time since 2010 represents a return of sanity, because the current defence review is proving undeliverable, which shows what happens if policy is divorced from the Department that has to deliver it.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about this programme being led by the Ministry of Defence. Our armed forces should be leading the programme, because they have the greatest understanding of what is needed, and what support they will require to be most effective going forward.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): We all welcome the impending completion of our splendid new aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, but there is some indication that we have insufficient Royal Navy surface warships—frigates and destroyers—to provide a protective screen for those magnificent ships in conflict. How will what the Secretary of State has announced sort that one out?
Gavin Williamson: My predecessor made it clear that we would invest in Type 26 and Type 31 frigates to ensure that that protective screen would surround those magnificent aircraft carriers, of which everyone in the United Kingdom is so proud.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and its upbeat tone. We have had a lot of discussion about threats from the north Atlantic and Russia; will he confirm that we will also look at the threats east of Suez, as, with Brexit, more of our trade will depend on that part of the world?

Gavin Williamson: One of the key elements of this programme is looking at how we can use defence to increase the prosperity of the nation. We talk about global Britain and about international diplomacy, and our armed forces are virtually always the best diplomats, because when others see British forces—whether the British Army, the Royal Air Force or the Royal Navy—they perceive them as a real symbol of Britain’s reach and what we can achieve in the world, and we will certainly be looking far beyond Suez.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Defence Secretary knows that nobody in the House today believes our defence forces are anything other than underfunded, but against that background and if he is to have the meaningful conversation with the nation indicated in his statement, will he give early consideration to publishing the terms of reference and the perception of the changing strategic threats that this nation of ours faces?

Gavin Williamson: The NSCR will be looking at producing a document explaining how it sees the changed threats and how we should respond to them, and that will be in the public domain. We need to have a more active debate—we all encourage that—because the threats we are facing are developing very quickly. Just five years ago, Russia was not seen as a real threat to our national security. We have to start talking about it. If we do not talk about it, people do not understand those threats. I will certainly be encouraging that debate going forward.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Given the nature of the increasing tensions with Russia, which my right hon. Friend has alluded to, will he give me an assurance that the size and frequency of British rotational deployments to Poland will increase under this review?

Gavin Williamson: Just before Christmas, I had the opportunity to visit our troops stationed in Poland. We are not currently looking at increasing the number of troops in Poland, but we are always talking very closely with our NATO partners; they are on a six-month rotation, which seems to suit matters currently, but we will keep that under review.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is not the wild and petulant infantilism of the statements by our world leaders a great threat to the security of the world, and does not history tell us that the greatest accelerant to war is an expectation of war, which we are fuelling at the moment? Would it not be far better for us to look to the great work we could do now in peacekeeping on the border in Bangladesh, rather than be thinking of war making?

Gavin Williamson: We are one of the most active nations in making sure we bring peace right across the globe. We have a great history and we should take great pride in everything we have achieved in the past, and I have no doubt we will achieve in the future. But we have to understand that people who are threatening Britain do not respect weakness; if we were to disarm, or get rid of our nuclear deterrent, or diminish or get rid of our conventional forces, that would make them no less likely to attack us. We have to have an effective deterrent, and that is not just a nuclear deterrent; it is a conventional deterrent as well.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Innovative defence technology firms, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprises sector, can play an important role in making sure our armed forces have access to the best possible equipment. As my right hon. Friend’s review proceeds, will he ensure that SMEs’ role in procurement is seriously considered?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has done a lot of work on the fourth industrial revolution, and we must ask how we can harness those new technologies to give our military the constant advantage going forward. The battlefield is changing incredibly rapidly, and if we can work with SMEs, we need to do more of that because some of the greatest and most innovative ideas come from those businesses. I appreciated the time my hon. Friend took to speak with me about some of the work being done in his constituency of Havant and look forward to working with him further to make some of those ideas a reality.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the review, which postpones possible defence cuts, but the longer the uncertainty goes on, the harder morale will be hit. Will the Secretary of State now reassure Plymouth serving personnel and their families that the Devonport base, HMS Albion, HMS Bulwark and the Royal Marines will not be cut in the further efficiencies that he has just announced?

Gavin Williamson: We have outlined in the programme the fact that we need to do this quickly. We are conscious of the concerns that many people in the armed forces have expressed, which is why we are committed to ensuring that we report back before the summer recess.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Secretary of State might not realise that, although Derby is as far from the sea as anyone can get, we have a very strong relationship with the submariner associations. The submariners are our unsung heroes: they are under the sea for months at a time. Will he ensure that they form an essential part of this review and that they are not overlooked? And do not forget that our submarines are powered by Rolls-Royce engines from Derby.

Gavin Williamson: And very fine engines they are! We have had a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent for almost 50 years. The work of our submariner force inevitably goes unnoticed—that is the aim—but what they do to
protect our commitment and dedication, the country would be a lot less safe.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This is the first chance I have had to welcome my former opposite number from the Whips Office to the Dispatch Box. May I ask him at what point Trident would become a burden on the defence budget, or indeed on the budget of the whole country? Surely, if it takes up a greater proportion of our defence spending, it will put pressure on conventional forces and put us in harm's way, rather than keeping us safe.

Gavin Williamson: I dearly miss my former honourable counterpart and the work that we did together as Chief Whips. The continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent is a vital part of our defence and we should never see it in isolation. People often talk about it without recognising that it is part of the whole spectrum of deterrence, involving the infantry, Royal Navy frigates and destroyers, Royal Air Force helicopters and fast jets and the British Army itself. The continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent is an integral part of all that, and if we got rid of it, we would make Britain less safe. We have to have it. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman welcomed it, because it brings an awful lot of wealth, prosperity and jobs to Scotland. On this side of the House, we are very proud of that.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Does he agree that it is vital to have the flexibility to support our allies when required? I particularly want to highlight the flexibility of the Royal Marines—40 Commando is based in my constituency—not just to provide security but to help the community, for example, in times of floods and hurricanes.

Gavin Williamson: I note my hon. Friend's comments about the flexibility of the Royal Marines. She is right, but this applies not only to the Royal Marines but to the Parachute Regiment and to every part of the British Army, the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. We saw how they stepped up at a moment's notice in the Caribbean to deliver relief to tens of thousands of people, and we see them stepping up to the plate every year when tragedy hits different parts of the United Kingdom. We are very proud of that, and it is an essential part of what they do and will continue to do.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My constituents have raised with me the importance of sovereign capability—that is, retaining the ability to produce in this country the equipment that we need for our armed forces. What importance does the new Secretary of State put on that?

Gavin Williamson: I put a great deal of importance on it. I want us, wherever we can, to purchase products that are manufactured here in Britain. We also have to look at manufacturing products that we can sell not just to the Ministry of Defence but right across the globe. The larger the product portfolio that we can sell to the Gulf, Europe and the United States, the better it will be for British industry.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): As part of his review, will the Secretary of State make certain that, thanks to the innovation of British enterprises, we have the most modern weapons for our ships, tanks and planes?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely. This is where we have the opportunity to embrace new technology to make our armed forces more effective in what they do. If we stand still, our enemies will overtake us. In this country, we have some of the most innovative companies, some of which have never before sold to defence, and we have to make use of that innovation.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I had hoped to ask the Secretary of State for reassurance for the service personnel and the many thousands of people across Lancashire who work in the defence industry, but I am aware that many colleagues were expecting this statement to be made on Monday and they are not in the Chamber today. Will the Secretary of State's door be open to colleagues who are not here today because of the hokey-cokey nature of this statement, and will he meet them?

Gavin Williamson: I will always meet them. Jobs in Lancashire are close to my heart, and I was very proud to sign a deal with the Qatars for the largest Typhoon order in more than a decade. We need to be doing more of that. How can we sell more Typhoons, more Hawks and more equipment around the globe? I look forward to working with Members on both sides of the House to make sure that the British defence industry continues to thrive and prosper.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. What does he believe will be the outcome of the review on the vital issues of recruitment and retention?

Gavin Williamson: I do not want to prejudge the programme just yet, but we need to give people the real confidence and belief that the armed forces are treasured and valued by everyone in this country. We need people to realise that if they join the Army, the Navy or the Air Force, they will have not just a great career but the best possible career that anyone could ever have. I hope that the programme will give them the confidence that a career in our armed forces is the best career that they can pursue.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is great to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I believe that the Secretary of State is seized of the danger of continually augmenting our threat assessments and losing capacity, only to find that old threats are renewed. As he looks to modernise this country's defence capability, may I urge him to look closely at Northern Ireland? Not only does my constituency have the UK's largest dry dock, which is suitable for Queen Elizabeth class carriers, but the city is home to the latest ECIT and CSIT cyber-security centres. Northern Ireland has never been found wanting when it comes to personnel or procurement opportunities, and I urge him to look to us.
Gavin Williamson: We owe a great debt to Northern Ireland. It contributes 7% of our armed forces—a percentage that is far greater than its population as a proportion of the UK’s—in the Regular Army and the reserves. I will have Northern Ireland at the forefront of my mind. I am not sure whether the Democratic Unionist party is suggesting that a third aircraft carrier should be built at Harland and Wolff. It is absolutely vital that we work together to make sure that a part of the United Kingdom that has continuously played such an important role in our national defence carries on doing so.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I welcome this statement. The cyber-threat that we face is novel and unprecedented, and I welcome its presence in the statement. It is not simply about state and non-state actors hacking our infrastructure and our businesses; it is about the spread of disinformation. Can my right hon. Friend say a little about what consideration the review will give to that new way of directly reaching our citizens?

Gavin Williamson: The National Security Adviser is leading on much of this, and I do not want to pinch other aspects of the national security capability review. I would struggle to get away with outlining some of the things that we want to do without breaching national security. I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me for evading his question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and promise of a review. Recruitment to the services has fallen to such an extent that more personnel now leave than are recruited. Those who know, in the Army, Navy and Royal Air Force, tell me that reopening Army recruitment offices on the high street would increase recruitment. Will he as a matter of urgency consider the reintroduction of high street recruitment centres to increase the numbers and then deliver the defence modernisation around the soldiers recruited?

Gavin Williamson: We are looking at that option. We have seen an upturn in the number of people applying to join the British Army—up 15% this year—but we are happy to look at all ideas to make sure the right number of people are applying to join our armed services, so that they can operate effectively.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Secretary of State a very happy Burns day. Tomorrow evening, I will be addressing a Burns supper in the wardroom of HMS Nelson. When I stand up, will I be able to confirm that the review will remain in the sole command of the Secretary of State and that, in conducting it, he and his staff will be fully aware of the critical importance of our senior service’s capabilities, especially its amphibious capabilities, about which there has been some concern of late?

Gavin Williamson: I can give clear confirmation that the review will remain in the hands of the MOD. We are driving this review and programme of modernisation. The Prime Minister and everyone else think it right that the MOD do this. It is the first time we have done it this way since 2010, and I hope that as a part of it we will get the right answers.
Points of Order

12.6 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, may I say what a delight it is to see you back in the Chair? Have either you or Mr Speaker been given notice by the Chancellor of the Exchequer that, in view of the important call by the former Secretary of State for Defence that we spend 2.5% of GDP on defence, he will be coming to the Chamber to announce an increase in the defence budget, so that the present Secretary of State can put it to good use?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that I have had no such indication, and Mr Speaker has not passed one on to me either. The good thing, however, is that his comments are on the record, and I am sure that someone will be letting him know the outcome shortly.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is very good to see you back in your place. It was July 2017 when the Prime Minister announced a public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. It is now nearly the end of January 2018 and we still do not have a chair, terms of reference or any indication of when it will be established. Have you been given any indication by the Government of a statement or announcement of what will happen next with this long-awaited public inquiry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been given no such indication, but I know that the hon. Lady will be taking up other avenues to pursue the matter. Her comments on this important matter are on the record, and I am sure the Government will be looking at it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Again, it is a pleasure to see you back in your place. We have just had the statement. Many Members—those who are here and those who are not here—feel deeply aggrieved at the way it has been handled. You will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, about the shenanigans yesterday: the statement was on and off several times. Worse, in a debate yesterday morning, the Minister for the Armed Forces assured Members that the statement would be happening next week, not this week. I was also given an assurance by the Leader of the House that it would happen next week. I welcome the fact that it has come early, but the Government’s jiggery-pokery has been deeply unedifying and discourteous to Members. Can you give us an assurance that the Ministry of Defence will not do this again, and can you advise Members on how to ensure that, when Ministers report on the review in July, as they hope to do, the same thing will not happen and they will not trick Members into thinking that a statement is not forthcoming when it actually is?

Mr Deputy Speaker: What I can say is that it is not for the Chair to decide when the statement will come; it is up to the Secretary of State when they decide to do it. I recognise that there has been a lot of frustration. I am sure that the usual channels can begin to have a conversation to try and ensure that all parties do not feel aggrieved. I am sure this is something that has been taken on board, but I can assure you that it is not for the Chair to decide when the statement will come. Recognising that the House is frustrated, and that this is an important matter, I am sure that this was not done deliberately.

Dr Julian Lewis: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to come back again, but I happen to know that there was a strong wish on the part of the Secretary of State for Defence and his team to make the statement yesterday. The only reason it was not made was so as not to cut into Opposition day time. I do think that should be borne in mind.

Mr Deputy Speaker: What I would say is that I do not want to pursue the debate. I know there were various discussions yesterday. In the end, the statement came today, I do not want to get into how it was arrived at. I think that is something that was done, quite rightly, with Mr Speaker. It is where we are now, and I am not going to pursue this in any other way, other than to say that the statement has been heard. Let us move on from that.
Ministers’ and Officials’ Conflicts of Interest

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Mr Bernard Jenkin will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Bernard Jenkin to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

12.11 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con):

It is the role of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to oversee the UK’s changing constitution and the efficacy of the civil service and the machinery of government. Within that, PACAC covers matters of ethics and propriety in Whitehall, overseeing the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the ministerial code, the special advisers code, the civil service code and the work of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which oversees the rules governing departing Ministers and Crown servants when they take up outside appointments.

PACAC has defined its overriding purpose as being “to conduct robust and effective scrutiny in order to help create conditions where the public can have justified confidence in public services/government.”

In that context, just before the election, in April 2017, PACAC published a new report on ACOBA, entitled “Managing Ministers’ and officials’ conflicts of interest: time for clearer values, principles and action”. That followed a report published in 2012 by our predecessor Committee, which recommended replacing the existing business appointment rules with a statutory system. The main recommendations of that report, and of our more recent 2017 report, have been flatly rejected by the Government. I am afraid that many people believe that to be hopelessly complacent. PACAC is therefore announcing in its supplementary report, published today, that we intend to hold a further inquiry into these matters.

The way we manage conflicts of interest arising where former Ministers and Crown servants leave the Government to take up jobs elsewhere really matters. There is a constant stream of embarrassing stories in the media about the so-called revolving door between employment in the public and private sectors, suggesting that people misuse the advantage of a job in Government to get lucrative jobs outside. Although many of these stories may be unfair, the situation is deeply corrosive of public trust in our system of democracy and Government because the present system of oversight fails to provide adequate assurance.

For example—I will name only one Department as an example, but this includes every Department—a constant flow of Ministry of Defence civil servants, and of senior officers from the armed forces, finish up working in the defence industry. A similar situation occurs in other Departments. No one should assume that this is automatically anything wrong with that, but there needs to be an adequate system of assurance that there is, indeed, nothing wrong, and that we are not fostering an over-permissive attitude. The expectation of many people—even of some Ministers—is that this is the new normal and that everybody does it.

We acknowledge, and I pay tribute to, the hard work of the ACObA board—the chair and the secretariat—but PACAC’s 2012 and 2017 reports can be described only as excoriating. In 2017, PACAC concluded: “ACoBA, in its current form is a toothless regulator which has failed to change the environment around business appointments.” That is because ACObA lacks power and resources, and its remit is much too limited. It is not a regulator—it is merely advisory, with no sanctions for non-compliance—and there are regular instances of the business appointment rules being ignored.

Furthermore, serious gaps exist in ACObA’s monitoring process, so while we know about some high-profile cases, we have little idea about the scale of non-compliance. That has got worse since the Government removed ACObA’s responsibility to monitor and report applications from Crown servants below SCS3 in 2010. Departments are meant to post half-yearly data on their websites to show when advice has been given to applicants at SCS2 and 3 levels, but this data has become patchy. We just do not know how many civil servants below SCS3 level who have performed important roles in respect of policy formation and commercial relationships end up in a position to draw on inside information or their Government contacts after they leave the civil service.

In the period between PACAC’s two reports, the challenge has escalated, with increased numbers of public servants and Ministers moving between the public and private sectors. There have also been a number of high-profile cases, leading to declining public trust in a system that was designed to promote public confidence. A personal observation is that the magazine Private Eye, from which we took evidence, frequently appears to do a better job of policing the business appointment rules than does the advisory committee itself.

It is essential that steps are taken to ensure that the ACObA system is swiftly improved. In PACAC’s more recent report, we set out a number of new recommendations in relation to how that could be done without resort to statute, although we recommend that a cost-benefit analysis of statutory regulation should be conducted. The Government have rejected statutory regulation on the basis that it would be too costly, but they refuse to do the cost-benefit analysis.

PACAC recommended that the Government provide ACObA with the powers and resources necessary to actively monitor and enforce compliance with the rules. There should also be a substantial increase in transparency regarding ACObA’s decisions, and that should be done by Department. Applications should be published on receipt and not just when they are approved. That might reduce a lot of ACObA’s unnecessary workload.

Most importantly, the business appointment rules should be fundamentally changed. A system to manage conflicts of interest needs to be more than just a code of rules and declarations. A principles-based system, if it
is effectively taught by leaders and learned by everyone so that it is intrinsic to public service, would create a new and different expectation that individuals will act with integrity, encouraging people to regulate their own behaviour and attitudes according to those principles.

Our report recommends a substantial change of emphasis in the ministerial code and the civil service code to highlight the values and principles that should guide attitude and behaviour. We need to instil an expectation of integrity in individuals’ decisions. That, combined with independent checks, could effectively foster a substantial improvement in attitudes and behaviours. Evasively, the Government responded that the essence of those principles and values is already embedded in the code, but they are not explicit enough. We need a change of heart, and we need a stronger system—otherwise public confidence will continue to be eroded.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for their powerful report and for the statement he has just made. The Opposition are committed to bringing this issue to the top of the political agenda and to seeking reform, as not a week seems to go by without the exposure of some conflict of interest in the heart of Government. Bearing in mind his statement and his report, does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that the report raises serious questions of governance and confirms that this is a Government of the few, by the few and for the few?

Mr Jenkin: I will leave aside the soundbite that came at the end of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but the substance of his remarks is correct. The system is inadequate and needs to be strengthened and reformed, and I am delighted that Her Majesty’s official Opposition are taking an interest in the matter.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is very good to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) for his work in bringing these affairs to the House’s attention today. If Members present have not already taken a look at the Government response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report, I encourage them to do so. We clearly state that the Government are committed to maintaining the highest standards of conduct for Ministers and civil servants, including special advisers, and we believe that the rules and procedures in place are proportionate and adequate. We look forward to working with the Committee to do more, however, and I put on the record my willingness to work with its Chair to do so.

Mr Jenkin: I welcome my hon. Friend back to the Front Bench in her new position at the Cabinet Office, to which she brings considerable experience, including of this issue. However, I have to express my disappointment at the Government’s response. Some minor amendments were accepted, but it regards the system as the highest example of regulation and openness when it simply does not deliver the public confidence that we want. I appreciate that this is a vexed issue and that we do not want to deter people from coming into the public service for fear of being treated unfairly on the way out, but the present arrangements are inadequate. The response even refused to put more explicitly into the ministerial code words such as “You must... take decisions in the public interest alone” and “You must... never allow yourself to be influenced in contracting, procurement, regulation or the provision of policy advice, by your career expectations or prospects if you leave the public service” and “You must not... take up any post outside the public service in businesses or [commercial] organisations operating in areas where you have been directly responsible”.

I do not understand why those things cannot be put explicitly in the ministerial code so that they are talked about and understood, which would begin to change the attitudes that unfortunately pervade many of the Ministers, special advisers and civil servants in Whitehall.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The Government’s conduct in responding to the report reinforces the public’s view that we here are acting in our own private interests, not in the public interest. Is it not significant that a Prime Minister who did not lift a finger during his period in office to answer pleas for reforms to jam the revolving door has now taken advantage of that period of office to take a job in China, with which he worked when in Government? Will the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee explain to us why George Osborne did not come to the Committee to explain why he had five meetings with BlackRock, why he altered the law in its favour and why, after losing office, he took a job with them on £650,000 a year for one day’s work a week? If that is not an egregious example of the abuse of the revolving door, it is hard to see what is. We have a shameful record, and perhaps the Chair will agree that the public will rightly regard us with contempt and as unfit to police our own affairs.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I join others in welcoming you back to your place, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) for his work in bringing these affairs to the House’s attention today. If Members present have not already taken a look at the Government response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report, I encourage them to do so. We clearly state that the Government are committed to maintaining the highest standards of conduct for Ministers and civil servants, including special advisers, and we believe that the rules and procedures in place are proportionate and adequate. We look forward to working with the Committee to do more, however, and I put on the record my willingness to work with its Chair to do so.
Mr Jenkin: Sadly, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As a member of my Committee, he has been instrumental in drawing the Committee’s attention to these issues. I would almost describe him as the conscience of the Committee on the issue, and long may he continue to encourage us in this work. As he knows, it is not the practice of the Committee to prosecute individual cases, and we should resist that because it would divert attention from the substance of the work that we need to undertake. I am actually quite pleased about how obviously carefully drafted the Government’s response is to our report because the points we are making in our report are having a telling effect. We have a long way to go, however, and that is why the hon. Gentleman has been one of those encouraging the Committee to continue pursuing the subject with a further inquiry. I thank him for his work for the Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Under the Standing Orders, the Member moving the motion should usually speak for around 15 minutes.

12.26 pm Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Supreme Court judgment in the case of Jogee and Ruddock of February 2016 that the law on joint enterprise and parasitic accessory liability had been wrongly interpreted for more than 30 years; further notes that since that judgment, the number of cases brought under joint enterprise has remained unchanged; further notes that there have yet to be any successful appeals of cases from before February 2016; and calls on the Government to review the use of joint enterprise and to bring forward legislative proposals to clarify the law on joint enterprise.

I welcome you back to your place in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing you and your family all the best; I know that it has been a very difficult few weeks for you.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the application for this important debate, and I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who supported that application, particularly the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), all of whom were co-sponsors of the application. I also thank the families and campaigners on joint enterprise, who are known as JENGbA—Joint Enterprise: Not Guilty by Association—and many of whom are in the Public Gallery today. They have never given up in their fight for justice for their loved ones.

Why are we having this debate now? It is nearly two years to the day since the Supreme Court made a landmark ruling that the law had taken a “wrong turn”. That followed years of campaigning and high-profile and seminal documentaries and films, such as “Common” by Jimmy McGovern. Since then, however, nothing of substance has actually changed. In the run-up to the ruling, the campaigners highlighted how, particularly in murder cases, secondary parties were too often receiving mandatory life sentences for having a lesser part or no significant part when compared with the principal party. They also showed that the evidential threshold was much lower than would normally apply to murder, particularly the notion that secondary parties “might” have foreseen the actions of others, rather than having knowingly foreseen them.

At the time of the ruling, campaigners, parliamentarians and others viewed it as a victory and had confidence that injustices would be put right and that the use of joint enterprise would be more limited going forward. However, two years on, the Supreme Court ruling feels increasingly like a pyrrhic victory, with no case from the 30 years in which the “wrong” law was applied being awarded an appeal, and many new cases with all the hallmarks of the old cases being successfully prosecuted.
Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a debate on this difficult issue, which is not a small matter. Does she agree that 4,500 people are currently in prison having been caught by the wrongful application of joint enterprise law? Men, women and children are serving long sentences for crimes that they did not commit.

Lucy Powell: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. We know it is at least that sort of figure—we do not have accurate figures.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend on securing this debate. This crucial issue is a priority for the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. The particular case of Alex Henry is of great importance. I chair the Westminster Commission on Autism, and several people in this ghastly predicament are on the autism spectrum and have been taken totally out of care.

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that particular case, and I know the family are here today. The case has many of the hallmarks that we will come on to discuss.

We are now seeing a new generation of joint enterprise lifers in prison. The Supreme Court says it is “the responsibility of the court to put the law right”. But many of us have come to the conclusion that the criminal justice system will not right itself, and is not righting itself, in relation to joint enterprise, and that we need to act. That is why Members on both sides of the House have joined together to send a strong signal both to the Government and to prosecutors and others that the way in which we continue to apply the law and the incredibly high bar that has been set for previous unsafe convictions to be reheard need to be redressed.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important subject to the Floor of the House. I have had reason to represent one of my constituents, Jace Ryan Smith, who was convicted and sentenced to 31 years under joint enterprise. He was doubly punished recently because he was not allowed to go to his grandmother’s funeral, not because of anything he had done wrong but because Greater Manchester police thought he may become a victim of another gang. Is not the real problem with joint enterprise that people are punished and given long prison sentences of more than 30 years for actions they did not carry out themselves?

Lucy Powell: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will take one more intervention before making some progress.

Chuka Umunna: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I reiterate that it is very good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have two questions. First, following on from the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), the statistics show that 37% of those serving long sentences for joint enterprise are black. That is 11 times the proportion of black people in the population. The figures for people of mixed race are similarly disproportionate, which underlines why it is essential that we have the review that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) calls for in the motion, which I fully support.

Secondly, given the uncertainty, surely we are seeing the courts acting, in effect, as legislators. That is wrong. Where there is uncertainty in the law, it is for this House to tidy it up, particularly where the law is visiting injustice upon people in the way we are seeing.

Lucy Powell: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend’s sentiments, and I will address some of that in my speech.

With hundreds of lifers in prison after being convicted under what the Supreme Court views as a wrong application of the law, this is potentially one of the biggest and most widespread miscarriages of justice ever to face our justice system. As such, I fear that the cosy club of the criminal justice establishment is closing in on itself to prevent this from ever being fully exposed.

What is joint enterprise? Joint enterprise has been applied in cases for more than 300 years, although it is a common law that has never been passed by Parliament. The doctrine allows for more than one person to be charged for the same offence, despite the fact that they may have played a different role, or no role, in the crime. Joint enterprise applies to all crimes, but in recent years it has been particularly used as a way to prosecute murder, especially, but not exclusively, in cases involving groups of young men.

This is obviously a very emotive issue, particularly for families of murder victims, and no one is suggesting that those who commit murder, or who knowingly and intentionally assist in committing murder, should not face the full force of the law. However, nor should the evidential bar for serious offences like murder be lower, by virtue of presence or association with the principal offender, as we have all too often seen.

Indeed, there are many cases, many of which I am sure will come to light today, in which people are serving life sentences when it is clear that they did not commit murder but were found guilty under the “old” or “wrong” law of parasitic accessory liability. Furthermore, many others who were convicted as secondary parties are carrying the same sentences as the principal based on a prosecution narrative of gang and association, even though intent and foresight are unproven and the secondary party was not physically present or had withdrawn from the scene.

When one looks at the profile of those convicted of murder, there is a further flaw in how the doctrine is applied. The majority are of black and ethnic minority backgrounds, and the vast majority are young, with many teenagers serving life for a secondary or parasitic role. I will say more, as will others, but we have to ask questions about the disproportionate use of such doctrines in cases involving certain communities.

The political context is also relevant to this debate.
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that where 14, 16 and 19-year-olds have gone to prison for significant periods of time, when it is absolutely clear to the community that they have not committed murder, as happened in her community of Moss Side, it undermines the black community’s sense of justice, fewer people co-operate with the police, fewer people have faith in the justice system and it undermines all she is attempting to do?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I hope to give everybody 10 minutes. If Members intervene, the danger is that I will have to drop the time limit immediately.

Lucy Powell: I fully agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), but I will try to make some progress.

There was a political context when the joint enterprise law began to be overused and extended in its use during the 1990s and the noughties, but there is a different political context today. As my right hon. Friend has just said, we now more clearly understand the consequences of disproportionate and unfair applications of the law against certain groups. I am pleased the Government recognised that when they launched the Lammy review and in the Prime Minister’s recent comments on “burning injustices”—I hope she can live up to that rhetoric.

Practice and the law have been far too slow to catch up with the changing mood in the country. I will briefly discuss what the Supreme Court ruling does and does not say, and what still needs to be addressed. First, the ruling is clear that the law governing secondary liability has taken a “wrong turn” and has resulted in the “erroneous” application of the law. However, it also sets out that, in order for appeals to be heard “out of time,” a substantial injustice test, not the usual unsafe conviction test, will be applied. Yet the substantial injustice test was not clearly set out in the ruling and has never been set out by Parliament. The substantial injustice test has subsequently been tested through case law and is now an almost impossible high bar for people to clear. That is why, nearly two years on, there has yet to be a single successful appeal awarded by the Court of Appeal.

Finally, in our opinion the Supreme Court failed to address another question put before it: does joint enterprise over-criminalise secondary parties?

What needs to change in the law—first, what needs to change going forward, and secondly, how can we put right some of the injustices of the past? It is clear that joint enterprise continues to be overused and is disproportionately used against groups of young men, particularly those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. I saw that at first hand in a recent case in which 11 young black men from Moss Side faced charges of murder. Seven of them were convicted of murder and four were convicted of manslaughter. The youngest was only 14 and many of them were not previously known to the police. As research by Manchester Metropolitan University has shown in its study “Dangerous Liaisons”, more than half of all those serving life sentences are children or young adults, and more than half are from a black and ethnic minority background.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will have to make some progress. I am sure someone else will give way later.

The extensive research also found that the establishment had a gang narrative that often relied on neighbourhood narratives, racialised assumptions, unevienced constructs and loose associations. Things such as social media tags and videos have been critical to securing many of the joint enterprise convictions. We know that there are serious flaws in this approach. That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham has raised it in his review and why the Home Affairs Committee is looking into it. Indeed, joint enterprise was, following the Supreme Court ruling, albeit under new Crown Prosecution Service guidance, but that remains problematic.

We want the Government to look at three areas for future cases. The first is proportionality and whether joint enterprise is being used correctly or disproportionately against certain groups. We ask the Government to do what the Supreme Court failed to do, which is to establish whether joint enterprise over-criminalises secondary parties. Secondly, and related to that, we need the data. Collating the data about who is being charged and convicted, and where, is urgent now and long overdue. Thirdly, the long-awaited outcome of the review of the CPS guidance needs to be brought forward, and quickly. It must include clearer guidance for prosecution discretion so that lesser offences can be brought against secondary parties in many cases.

The final point is about retrospective cases and putting right the injustices of the past. We are not asking for automatic reopening of every single case. It is right that there must be a test, but the test is now so impossibly high that no cases have successfully been heard by the Court of Appeal, and the Criminal Cases Review Commission has yet to recommend that a single case should come back, despite having received 99 fresh applications and reviewing 90 more. Indeed, appeal judges seem utterly dismissive of these cases. Unlike in a usual appeal case, where the threshold is the possibility of an unsafe conviction, applicants in the case of the “wrong” law of joint enterprise are also required to demonstrate that, as well as being unsafe, had the correct law applied there “would” have been a substantial difference to the outcome. In most other cases, this would be simply that it “may” have done so. So we believe that the substantial injustice test needs establishing by Parliament in law, and it should make it clear that the threshold is “may”, not “would”.

Moreover, we think that the Court of Appeal should also be allowed to consider the ongoing effect of the conviction on the applicant and, critically, take account of the applicant’s age, mental health and other vulnerabilities at the time. The old, or wrong, foresight test now applied correctly to adolescents or those suffering with learning or mental difficulties would surely provide a substantial change to convictions. Today we would not expect an immature teenager or someone with learning difficulties to understand the old, weak foresight test.

I want the Government urgently to consider a mechanism for clarifying the threshold in these cases. Just to be clear, this is not about opening the floodgates, but if the law has been wrong for 30 years, during which time hundreds if not thousands of mandatory life sentences were handed out under the old wrong law, then it stands
to reason that at least some—not a tiny, tiny few—of the cases are a clear injustice that the courts are currently failing to put right.

I think we can all agree today in the House that the law took a wrong turn. That now needs putting right. The establishment is evidently not putting itself right, so the Government and Parliament need to act. We urgently need a review of the use and scope of the prosecutions brought under joint enterprise, particularly its disproportionate use against young BAME men. We also need urgent clarification of the qualification for appeal so that we can put right decades of substantial injustices and unsafe convictions leading to many serving life sentences for murders they did not commit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Mr Andrew Mitchell, with a 10-minute limit.

12.46 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con):
Mr Deputy Speaker, along with the whole House I welcome you back to the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this debate and thank Mr Speaker and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I draw the attention of the House to my outside interests as set out in the register.

We are holding this debate today because we know that thousands of people have been prosecuted under joint enterprise over the last decade alone, and we have a profound fear that some of these convictions are unsound. I am deeply conscious that behind each of these crimes lies a victim, usually murdered, with grieving loved ones whose lives have been changed for ever and ruined. My heart goes out to all those and their families who have suffered in that way. But we also know that there is a wealth of evidence that suggests that joint enterprise has both convicted people in error and wholly disproportionately affected those who identify as black, Asian and minority ethnic.

Young people from ethnic communities have been, essentially, hoovered up for peripheral and in some cases even non-existent involvement in serious criminal acts. The Supreme Court’s decision in the case of Jogee has established that the previous interpretation of the law was wrong and confirmed the abolition of what I advised lawyers call parasitic accessory liability, to which the hon. Lady referred. But to date only a very limited number of joint enterprise convictions have been quashed.

To find a defendant guilty of a criminal offence, a jury must be satisfied that a defendant both committed the crime and had the requisite state of mind to carry out the crime. Yet the law on joint enterprise, and secondary liability more generally, was developed by the courts to ensure that all participants in a criminal enterprise could be held accountable. Indeed, it has been a key tool when prosecuting suspected gang members. But there has been a failure by our criminal justice system to distinguish between gangs and groups. The House will understand that not all members of groups have a criminal purpose. Not all members of gangs or groups join in when there is an incident. Humans are by nature social animals. People naturally hang around in groups or sports teams or protest marches. That does not mean, if an incident occurs, that everyone in the group intended whatever happened to happen.

We now have evidence of how discriminatory the law of joint enterprise has been, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on the work he did in revealing the unequal treatment of, and outcomes for, black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. Over recent years, I have worked with Matilda MacAttram, of Black Mental Health, who has done so much good work exposing the inadequacies of the criminal justice and legal system in this respect. I also pay tribute to the Prime Minister who, as Home Secretary, ensured that the voice of Black Mental Health was heard in Government.

It is no accident that the bulk of the prison population convicted under a joint enterprise doctrine is young BAME men. It is an uneasy and difficult truth that an association might exist unconsciously or otherwise in the minds of the police, prosecutors and juries between being a young ethnic minority male and being in a gang, and therefore being involved in forms of urban violence. Such findings are echoed by studies of the ethnic profile of prisoners convicted on the basis of joint enterprise. One study by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies found that, for young people convicted under joint enterprise, nearly 60% were BAME.

There is now a real suspicion that justice has miscarried in many joint enterprise cases. Juries were not directed on the correct law, even in the most serious of cases. The high standards of legal accuracy we are entitled to expect of our justice system have simply not been met. In such cases, we rightly expect the appeal system to function and to function effectively.

Even as recently as 2017, prosecutors were still trying to find an easy way to convict, as was shown by the case of Lewis. Thankfully, the judge found there was no case to answer. The prosecution appealed that ruling and rightly lost. There is now a logjam in our criminal justice system, with the Court of Appeal appearing wrongly to block appeals by joint enterprise prisoners. The burden of the substantial injustice test, to which I have referred, has been passed on to the prisoner, which requires the person convicted to satisfy the Court of Appeal that “he would not have been convicted had the jury been directed on the basis of the corrected law as set out in Jogee.”

Instead, the question should be, “Is there a realistic possibility that he would not have been convicted?”, which I understand has legal precedence and which was the test previously applied in the case of McInnes v. Her Majesty’s Advocate.

Along with the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), to whom I pay tribute, I visited Alex Henry in prison in Cambridgeshire. Shortly after his conviction for joint enterprise murder, he was diagnosed with autism. I have taken a close interest in his case over the past two years and think it one of immense concern. As we have learned in recent weeks, the police and Crown Prosecution Service are often difficult to deal with in respect of disclosure. Parliament needs to reconsider the proper approach and the relevant sanctions. The evidence available to a prosecutor is now more comprehensive, with CCTV and phones, which in theory makes it easier to distinguish
between those who join in and those who do not. Recent cases of alleged sexual offending have demonstrated the consequences when disclosure is not properly dealt with.

The right to a fair trial is a basic human right. I worry that, in respect of these cases, our courts are too keen to block appeals by those who might have been convicted by error of the courts. Such behaviour serves only to undermine our faith in the justice system. There is a tendency in Britain to believe that we have the best criminal justice system in the world. I put it to the House that our attitude to the British crime and justice system is riddled with a complacency that is wholly unjustified. That view would be borne out by any fair-minded person who focused on joint enterprise.

The whole House should be grateful to the right hon. Member for Tottenham for his recent report, delivered at the Government’s request, on the legal system’s treatment of black, Asian and ethnic minorities in Britain. Quite apart from the right hon. Gentleman, there are many in the legal profession who argue that it is simply unacceptable that today, in 2018, virtually all senior members of the judiciary are white men from privileged backgrounds. That simply does not reflect the society that is Britain today and which the judiciary serve.

We should not forget that all too often in Britain, injustice is remedied not by the organs of the state but by the investigative prowess of a free media or, indeed, by Members of the House. Who can forget the manifest injustice done to the Birmingham Six was remedied not by the police or the state, but by the indefatigable work of two Members of the House: Sir John Farr, the then Conservative Member for Harborough, and Chris Mullin, the then Labour Member for Sunderland South and subsequently a distinguished Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee and a development Minister? Today, the poor families of the victims of that outrage have still not achieved closure, as the ongoing coroner’s inquiry in Birmingham demonstrates.

I hope that, following this debate, the media will take a close interest in the cases in which joint enterprise might have led to innocent people being convicted. JENGBa, the organisation formed in 2010 to which the hon. Member for Manchester Central rightly referred, now supports more than 800 prisoners, many of whom are serving mandatory life sentences of 22 years, and the youngest of whom was just 12 when charged. I hope that the Justice Committee, with its considerable authority—its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), is in his place—will take on board the indefatigable work of two Members of the House: Sir John Farr, the then Conservative Member for Harborough, and Chris Mullin, the then Labour Member for Sunderland South and subsequently a distinguished Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee and a development Minister? Today, the poor families of the victims of that outrage have still not achieved closure, as the ongoing coroner’s inquiry in Birmingham demonstrates.

I hope that, following this debate, the media will take a close interest in the cases in which joint enterprise might have led to innocent people being convicted. JENGBa, the organisation formed in 2010 to which the hon. Member for Manchester Central rightly referred, now supports more than 800 prisoners, many of whom are serving mandatory life sentences of 22 years, and the youngest of whom was just 12 when charged. I hope that the Justice Committee, with its considerable authority—its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), is in his place—will not allow these matters to rest until they have been fully examined by Parliament, so that we can be assured that justice has been delivered.

12.53 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I, too, welcome you back to this place, Mr Deputy Speaker, following the tragic circumstances that befell your family.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for the thorough way she set out the issues. I also thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for raising the issues he did and for mentioning my predecessor, Chris Mullin, who has an astounding and excellent track record on this issue.

This is a very important debate, but it is difficult for politicians to deal with. Let me say first that my sympathies are always with the victims of crime. People who are convicted of murder must be subject to the full weight of the law, as must people who are safely convicted of joint enterprise, but the Supreme Court’s change to the law in 2016 is not being implemented correctly. The Supreme Court said that the law had taken “a wrong turn” in 1984, which is clearly correct. However, as has been outlined, cases from before Jogee can go back to the Court of Appeal only if the person convicted can prove that the conviction was a substantial injustice.

An injustice is carrying on for many who are still in prison today and cannot be granted an appeal because their cases are “out of time” and would therefore have to pass the substantial injustice test. I wish to focus my remarks on that.

Those who were convicted more than 28 days before the change announced by the Supreme Court have to prove a substantial injustice, which means proving that the change in the law would have categorically made a difference. As has been outlined, that is an enormous bar to have to clear. Those people who were convicted in the 28 days before the change have to show only that their conviction is unsafe—a much lesser test of proof—in that the change in the law might reasonably have made a difference. All that means that, in a hypothetical situation, two people convicted of the same crime with identical evidence would be treated differently in the eyes of the law. That is simply wrong and needs to change.

It is no surprise that of the 500 men, women and children—a lot of them were children when they were convicted—who are supported by JENGBa, not one has successfully appealed their conviction since the Supreme Court’s decision on Jogee. I put on record my support for JENGBa, which has worked extremely hard not only by raising the issues with joint enterprise, but by supporting the families involved.

In most cases, this country can be proud of the British justice system, but when mistakes, misinterpretations or miscarriages of justice occur, they must be put right quickly. The British justice system is judged on that as much as on how the law is implemented. It is clear that the justice system is failing those people who are still in prison—often after many years—who were convicted more than 28 days before the Supreme Court ruling.

The direction of the law needs to be aligned and all cases should be judged against the lesser test of proof, which is that the conviction is unsafe. That would mean people convicted fairly, equally and reasonably against the new test that the Supreme Court set in putting right the “wrong turn” rightly staying in prison to serve their full sentence. However, those who would not have been found guilty under the new rules would get their freedom, and whatever follows.

That is why this debate is so important. Such an outcome would be right and proper and would restore British justice to being seen once again as fair, equal and reasonable. As long as people are judged against such a ridiculously high bar, British justice will be failing the people in prison who were judged under a wrong law.
12.58 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I join every other Member in welcoming you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate. I wish to speak for several reasons. First, as Chair of the Justice Committee, I think it is important that we keep this matter under review. The Committee has given some consideration to this matter in the past, and no doubt we will again.

Secondly, throughout my adult life, I have been a practising barrister. I concern myself very much with the justice system because it is something of which I am part and in which I believe. A belief in that system was one reason why I came to this House. It is massively important that it does what it is supposed to do—that it does justice and that we get it right. Where we fail to get it right, we should not be afraid to say so.

Thirdly, I have a constituent—I think their partner is in the Public Gallery today—who is serving a life sentence, with, I think, a 23-year tariff, as a result of the application of the joint enterprise principle to a case of murder. He made no bones about the fact that he had been party to an offence of dishonesty, but was convicted of murder, by the application of the joint enterprise principle, as a result of the act of violence perpetrated by another individual. Therefore, that case comes exactly into those with which we are concerned.

For all those reasons, this is a very important debate. I am sorry that there are comparatively few people in the Chamber today. One thing that has struck me since I have been here is how, by comparison with the past, this House takes comparatively little interest in reform of our criminal justice law. Through the ’60s and ’70s, Members of this House—either through private Members’ Bills or the pressure that they put on Government to make changes to Government legislation—effected major changes for the better in many aspects of our criminal law: reforms of the law in relation to homicide and the abolition of the death penalty; and changes to the law in relation to the criminalisation of abortion and homosexuality. A vast number of other really important matters of criminal justice reform emanated from debate in this House. Sadly, too often, that gets squeezed out in the current climate. Perhaps we should debate it rather more.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am reluctant to intervene on such a good speech, but the hon. Gentleman knows of my interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. Does he not think that the Criminal Cases Review Commission is lacking in that it does not intervene enough, or early enough or persistently enough in these cases?

Robert Neill: There are a number of areas where changes are needed. I have great respect for the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, but I am conscious that it is under pressure both in terms of resource and of its terms of reference. It would not be unreasonable to look at that. Miscarriages of justice do occur. I know that full well because I vividly remember prosecuting one once—not in a murder case, but in a rape case. At the time, the evidence and the legal test appeared compelling, but, thanks to the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, evidence came to light, and I had no hesitation in not seeking to resist the appeal when it came to the Court of Appeal a second time. Its work, therefore, is really important. It is also important that it has the means to carry out its vital job, as its role is a significant one. However, there are other gaps that we must look at as well.

Everybody accepts now that there was a serious departure from good reasoning in the case of Chan Wing-Siu in Privy Council back in 1985. When one reads the case, the odd thing is that the judgment, which was described as “taking a wrong turn” in the Supreme Court, was, actually, almost not based on the principal facts or arguments that had brought the appeal to start with. The noble Lord, the member of the Privy Council, giving the judgment in that case rather went off on a tangent and developed what was then regarded as the concept of secondary parasitic accessory liability.

The matter could have been resolved perfectly well on the facts of its own case. It is set out very well in what is a very detailed judgment of a strongly constituted Supreme Court in the Jogee case. I certainly do not fault the judgment of the Supreme Court in Jogee at all. It is exceedingly well-reasoned, and it is significant that not only the then President of the Supreme Court, Lord Neuberger, but the current President, the then deputy president, Baroness Hale, were there. The then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, took the unusual step of sitting in the Supreme Court because of his experience in criminal justice matters. Intellectually, the Supreme Court in Jogee got the answer right and said that the approach, which had encompassed so many people into secondary liability in homicide offences, was wrong. However, some practical errors remain in its application.

Mr Mitchell: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is a lawyer, so can he explain to me, as a layman, why, following this extremely well-written judgment on Jogee, which I have also read, the criminal justice system did not react with enormous alarm and immediately set in train reviewing the very large number of cases affected by that judgment?

Robert Neill: That brings me to my next point. There is a concern that, in practice, the filter effect that has been put to the bringing of appeals out of time and the way that it has been interpreted in cases such as Anwar and others has been particularly restrictive. That is the difficulty. It is very clear that the Court of Appeal in the Anwar case and subsequent cases has taken a very narrow interpretation of the substantial injustice point. That does not necessarily have to be the case on the basis of Jogee, but it was always made very clear in the Supreme Court’s judgment that one should not assume that the Jogee case would mean that every conviction for murder on the basis of joint enterprise should be overturned, or that in many cases, even where convictions for murder were overturned, there would not also be a conviction for manslaughter, where appropriate, but the level of foresight and involvement was less. That is the important point that we have to consider.
None the less, it is really important that we get to a situation in which people are convicted, certainly, of offences where they have done wrong, but they should be convicted of and sentenced for offences that properly reflect the level of culpability of their behaviour. When we do not get that right, confidence in the system is understandably undermined. That is my concern, which is shared by the Members who have already spoken about the difficulty of bringing cases out of time to the Court of Appeal. Clearly, it is something that needs to be looked at. If the rule of precedent makes it difficult for a court to do that, perhaps Parliament and Government should indeed consider it.

I just observe in passing that there is, in any event, the proviso to the Criminal Appeal Act 1968, which would mean that if, once the case has been heard, no material injustice occurred, the conviction can be upheld. At the moment, we have a double test: a test to bring the appeal out of time; and then the proviso. The difference is that, in the test to bring the appeal out of time, the onus is on the appellant to meet that test, whereas, under the Criminal Appeal Act, the test in relation to the proviso puts the onus on the prosecution. That is something that needs to be considered.

When the Justice Committee looked at this matter with some care in evidence sessions in the last Parliament, the view was that it had to be seen in the context of a very unsatisfactory state of the whole law of homicide. The distinction between murder and manslaughter remains extremely unclear in this country. Unfortunately, the Government have not so far taken up the opportunity of examining that. The logical route would be to ask the Law Commission to carry out such an examination.

In evidence to the Justice Committee in the last Parliament, Professor David Ormerod, a former chair of the Law Commission, a senior commissioner for criminal law and a distinguished academic Queen’s Counsel in criminal law matters, identified exactly that point. He said that a review of the law of homicide still represents the “best solution” that could encompass the decision in Jogee.”

It would enable us, thereafter, to encompass the consequences that stemmed from it. Referring to the Supreme Court’s decision, he said that “they are constrained, as ever in the common law, by the facts of the case and the nature of the argument.”

That is our common law system. He went on: “It was not possible for them to offer a comprehensive review of the whole of the law relating to secondary liability, which the Law Commission could do”.

One of my asks of the Government, as well as revisiting the test for bringing the appeals out of time, is to take up the Law Commission’s willingness to examine that area. There is vast expertise in the Law Commission, which is sometimes under-used. It can look at the matter dispassionately and set the difficulty that we have with secondary liability in these cases into the broader difficulties that we have with the law of manslaughter. We heard compelling evidence from criminal practitioners, representatives of the Criminal Bar Association, about the real difficulty and complexity of giving direction to juries in manslaughter cases. Judges have given most careful directions, after discussions with counsel on both sides, but none the less they frequently find juries returning and sending a note seeking further clarification. The greater the lack of clarity, the greater the risk of injustice. I hope that issue can be resolved. I suggest to my hon. and learned Friend the Minister, whom I welcome to her post, that that would be a sensible and measured approach to find an intellectually sound way forward on this intractable issue.

The other matter that I would like the Minister to consider is the review of the Crown Prosecution Service guidelines, which the Justice Committee has taken evidence on. The fact that the review is taking place is welcome. The hon. Member for Manchester Central and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield referred to the disproportionate impact that the use of prosecutions using joint enterprise has on certain communities.

The fact is that a doctrine developed some 300 years ago still has effects on the social life of 21st century Britain, and those effects are very different from what Lord Hale described in his “History of the Pleas of the Crown” in about 1670. We need to have a means of applying that prosecutorial tool in a way that reflects modern society.

I hope that the public interest element of the Attorney General’s guidelines can be strengthened to consider the appropriateness of using this tool in the way we have discussed, given the impact on certain communities within the United Kingdom. I hope that those are constructive suggestions that we can take forward from this debate.

1.11 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). I take it from his words and from the emotion behind them that the door to the Justice Committee is now open and that at some future stage it will consider this matter, because I think that is one of the loci from which we can seek to bring an end to this horrendous, disproportionate nightmare, which is a stain on British jurisprudence. In this appalling situation, 40 seconds can lead to 12 years in prison, and somebody who just happens to be within a group of people can find themselves facing the best part of their young life locked away for something they could not stop, even if they wanted to.

It is often said that the House is at its worst when we all agree unanimously, but I think that this is the exception to that rule. Tribute has already been paid to JENGbA, Charlotte Henry, Gloria Morrison and all the other campaigners. I would like to think that even without JENGbA’s informed and passionate prodding, people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) would have brought the matter forward, because this is a stain on the British legal system. The Prime Minister has referred to burning injustice. Well, this injustice is burning so strongly and brightly that the smoke is almost choking us, and we cannot see the sense and sanity of the law for the obfuscation that has come from this ridiculous piece of law.
This law was originally introduced to deal with duelling. I appreciate that duelling used to be a pastime of Members of this House, but how can a provision on assisting or encouraging—or even for a parasitic accessory liability—a couple of people duelling in Hyde Park a couple hundred years ago somehow lead to my constituent Alex Henry, a man with a four-year-old child whom he has hardly seen, facing 12 years in prison for what happened in 40 seconds when he was with a group of young men? How on earth can we move from that piece of medieval law to the present situation in which people are suffering?

I suggest that the reason something happened in this area of jurisprudence in the 1990s comes down to one word. It has already been mentioned by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, who I must forgive for destroying my stereotype of stern, unbending Conservatism, because he has shown himself to be humane, decent and informed on this, for which I pay him full tribute. The word he used was “gang”. In the 1990s, there was an assumption that groups of young people—and young black people—were a threat and that they were somehow out to destroy society: they were corrosive, their music was unbearable, their accents incomprehensible, their clothes unforgivable and their activities incomprehensible to most people. I like to think that those in the senior echelons of the law are well versed in street culture, but on this occasion I think they saw gangs as a threat. They somehow transposed groups to gangs. This piece of draconian, lead-like law was brought in to crush a threat that did not actually exist. Yes, of course there is street crime and violence, but it is not confined to one group of people. Young people such as Kenneth Alexander and dear Alex Henry, who were simply out with friends, now face the life that is ahead of them because of how the law works.

There are few tasks more melancholy that visiting a constituent in prison, and one of the frustrations is the inability to do much more than sympathise and show that they are not forgotten. I think that JENGbA’s work is so crucial because it shows that these people have not been forgotten. Would it be inconvenient for the judicial system to review thousands of cases? Damn right it will be inconvenient, but I will take a bit of inconvenience to righting the wrongs. We have no plans to review or amend the law at the moment.”

Stephen Pound: When it comes to righting wrongs, I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Robert Neill: rose—

Stephen Pound: Absolutely. The Supreme Court ruled that the law had been interpreted incorrectly, but that is only half of it. Interpreting the law incorrectly is one thing, but righting the wrong is what has to happen now.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate case, and I agree with him that righting this wrong in the way the law has been applied is important. Does he agree that there is a distinction between the concept of joint enterprise and how it has been applied? For example, if he and I jointly agreed to commit a burglary, the application of joint enterprise in those circumstances would be perfectly reasonable. The problem is the extension to groups of young people when one of them commits acts of violence when it is suggested that foresight can be equated with intent. That is taking the doctrine beyond a sensible application.

Stephen Pound: The hon. Gentleman has indicated a way forward. He knows the case of Craig and Bentley, which I remember very well indeed. Let us not forget that one of them was hanged in a joint enterprise. Is it not a salutary thought that if the present law on joint enterprise had been applied when we had the death penalty, 20 young men would have been hanged. Can you imagine? If everybody in a group of people where somebody dies was said to be guilty, as with Craig and Bentley, would they then all have been hanged? The mere thought of that is so horrific—so disgusting—that it surely brings into sharp relief the insanity of this legislation and the idea that this great blanket of culpability is cast over a whole group of people. This law is nonsensical. It is cruel; it is brutal; it is outdated; and it has to go.

Amazingly, this is the first time that we have debated this subject on the Floor of the House. I hope that today will be the beginning of a process that leads to people like Alex Henry seeing daylight, and his child and his family, again. When I last saw Alex—I have visited him a couple of times—he was keeping his head down and keeping his nose clean. He was working in the kitchen. He actually had kind words for the staff at HMP Whitemoor, but the hope was going out of his eyes. You could actually see him looking at that long, long stretch ahead of him.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) mentioned, Alex is a man on the autism spectrum. In his appeal, evidence was submitted on his behalf by none less than Professor Baron-Cohen. One cannot get a higher authority than that. Was that opinion accepted? Clearly not, because my constituent is still in prison. He is a young, autistic man who, for 40 seconds of his life, did not do something happening. He did not do anything wrong; he did not stop it happening. Can it really be right in this day and age that the law we are all sworn to uphold—that we are a part of as part of the establishment of this country—is having that impact on people, disproportionately on young black men, and disproportionately on the innocent?

I profoundly hope that this debate is one of those occasions when something really good comes from this place—where we put down a marker to say, yes, we thank JENGBa for all its work, but even without JENGBa, in our own heart of hearts, in our own knowledge and analysis of the situation, we realise that this stinks. It is wrong—dangerously, destructively, corrosively wrong. We have to do something about it. Let today be the day that we consign the present interpretation of joint enterprise to the dustbin, move forward and bring the law back into repute—take it away from ill-repute. I hope that Kenneth Alexander and Alex Henry can then take their rightful places in society where we want them to be. May they be here in the House of Commons, in the Gallery or wherever, rather than behind bars at the nation’s expense. We cannot go on like this.

1.22 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), especially given the points that he raised about the local context—the 40 seconds leading to 12 years—the historical context and this ancient practice deriving from duelling. I appreciate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) bringing this important debate to the House.

Our justice system needs to recognise the context in which much crime happens. There is a social context. It is more than just an individual engaging with and committing crime. Friends and family have a huge influence on people’s lives, on what they do and on the moral framework in which they act. If an individual gets in with the wrong crowd, perhaps a gang or a mob, and those people encourage, force, direct or egg on people to commit crimes, the justice system has to take account of their actions. There has to be that justice. That is what friends and families of the victims, so often murdered, would want and expect.

Therefore, I would like to support the hon. Lady’s comments about improving the sense of proportionality and about the gathering and presentation of accurate data. It is so important that we have good data to base these decisions on in future. I also agree with her on bringing forward the CPS review.

I am not a lawyer, so I do not want to detain the House for too long. I recognise that following the Supreme Court ruling of February 2016 the CPS has consulted widely on new legal guidance for prosecutors in cases of secondary liability. I hope that the Minister agrees that hon. Members and their constituents would be best served by waiting for that guidance to be issued.

1.24 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this debate and on the way in which she has gone about representing her constituents, many of whom I met a few weeks ago, who are caught up in this terrible nightmare. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has championed and taken up many of these issues consistently in this House over the past few years.

The doctrine of joint enterprise is a common law doctrine very much derived from judicial decisions, not legislation passed by Parliament. As has been said, it is now time for Parliament to reflect hard on where we have arrived at and on the fact that this debate is essentially about juveniles—people as young as 14 who are looking at spending significant stretches of their lives behind bars. This debate is about what we have come to describe as “gangs”. We do not use the word “gangs” when we are talking about the Bullingdon club; we do when we are talking about black youth in constituencies such as mine or white youth in constituencies such as Salford in north-west England.

That is why it is so important that we look hard at a doctrine that stretches back to 1846, when two cart drivers engaged in a race that killed a pedestrian. Throughout the 20th century, further court judgments clarified the joint enterprise doctrine in the case of murder. Even if there is no plan to murder and one party kills while carrying out a plan to do something else—for example, robbery—the other participants can still be found guilty. The use of that doctrine has been criticised by academics, by legal practitioners and by the Justice Committee. I want to associate myself with all those remarks and, in particular, with the fantastic work of JENGBa over the past few years.

Following the review that I did for the Government, it is important that we recognise that in black, and particularly Muslim, communities, there is tremendous concern about our judiciary. In those communities, the judiciary do not appear to be independent and justice is not perceived to be blind. That is why I was so disappointed that, when I proposed a target in my review, it was roundly rejected by our senior judiciary and by the Government, although a target is not prescriptive but merely a goal.

I am concerned that the independence that our judiciary say they have, and rightly have in our democracy, means that they are hugely detached from the communities that we are talking about. They do not have to defend their actions in Tottenham town hall or Manchester city hall. They are never present in those communities. They do not have the kinds of surgeries that we do. It is really important that they reflect hard on the common law tradition. In other jurisdictions such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, there has been progress on proximity and diversity in relation to the judiciary, but in this country we appear to be stuck. On this occasion, it is absolutely clear that the common law makes no common
sense. That is why I referenced joint enterprise in relation to black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in my review.

The offence of joint enterprise has long been justified, by Ministers of both Conservative and Labour hue, on the basis that it sends a wider social message. I will not quote the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), a former Justice Secretary—hon. Members will recognise that I do not need to; they will know what his views would be—but let me quote Lord Falconer. He said of joint enterprise in 2010:

“The message that the law is sending out is that we are very willing to see people convicted if they are a part of gang violence—and that violence ends in somebody’s death. Is it unfair? Well, what you’ve got to decide is not ‘does the system lead to people being wrongly convicted?’ I think the real question is ‘do you want a law...as draconian as our law is, which says juries can convict even if you are quite a peripheral member of the gang which killed?’”

I want to say that the former Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer got it wrong, and the perception in the sort of communities we are talking about is that this is very wrong. Joint enterprise raises significant issues of miscarriages of justice, which must command the attention of this House and of our wider justice system.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I want to put on the record my thanks to my right hon. Friend for the work he has done with his review. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who represents a neighbouring constituency.

This issue has also touched the lives of my constituents. Yesterday, I spoke to Louise Otway, whose son was sentenced to 30 years under joint enterprise. I am concerned by two issues, as a former serving police officer in the Greater Manchester police and as a practising solicitor. My first concern is that, although the Supreme Court has said that the law has taken the wrong turn, nothing has been done to put that right, which is not acceptable. Secondly, as is becoming clear from listening to my hon. Friends, BME and working-class defendants are over-represented, with the use of gang narratives playing into the stereotyping and targeting of these groups. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential we have greater transparency, through the official statistics, about the make-up of joint enterprise defendants?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend’s point is exactly right. The issue is: what would happen if the principal’s intent was graver than the accessory? In all the cases that have been mentioned, that is absolutely the case. What would happen if the outcome of whatever act the principal carries out is far graver than the accessory was aware of? Getting into questions about the foresight and intent of a young adult is next to impossible, given all that we know in modern times about child psychology, so it is absolutely right that young people should not be convicted in those cases.

Robert Neill: The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case and perhaps I can offer him some support. As evidence to the Justice Committee has made clear, practitioners feel it would be of greater assistance to juries deciding on these issues if there were a statutory framework within which they could work. We have done that with the Theft Act 1968, which replaced out-of-date common law arrangements. Ironically, in the Jogee case, the trial judge of first instance was this country’s first black woman High Court judge, but she was obliged to follow the rules of precedent. Had there been a revision of them by statute, the situation might have been different.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right. He makes the case that it is now for the House really to get thinking about these matters.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, an accessory party can be liable under joint enterprise, even if they withdraw from a group before any crime is committed. Many hon. Members will think of the example of a group of students in a playground or a park, where someone talks about teaching someone a lesson—in fact, we might recall such an occasion from our own lives when we were younger—and one of those individuals thinks that teaching a lesson involves significant violence, assault or even something ending in murder, and just because the group had discussed teaching someone a lesson, someone else may end up in prison for murder.

We have been in the House when or know of times when Members have picked up the Mace—I am thinking of the former leader of the SNP and Lord Heseltine. If you picked up the Mace and an older Member thought it was coming towards them and died from a heart attack, you would be in serious trouble. However, if you had discussed it with your colleagues beforehand, they too would be in serious trouble. A whole political party—on that occasion, the SNP—might have been heading towards that. That shows how ridiculous this situation has become, and it is why we need an urgent review.

We are having this debate after politicians have said, “We have to crack down on gangs and that is why we are doing this.” But has it worked? Knife crime is rising: in England and Wales, there were 36,998 knife crime offences in the 12 months to the end of June. Hospital admissions as a result of knife crime and the use of sharp objects are rising. We have a real problem in London, which the Mayor of London is trying to deal with. Has this therefore had the effect that people suggested it would? It has not. It has not had that effect because it is not minors driving knife crime—it is serious organised criminals: gangsters and kingpins. They are driving the trafficking of cocaine and drugs, which is leading to the turf wars that are making some of the communities we represent more violent. The 14, 15 and 16-year-olds or those in their early-20s locked up for the offence of joint enterprise do not know anything about getting a tonne of cocaine from Bolivia or Colombia. We must go after the gangsters, but we are hearing very little about that.

The Ministry of Justice’s own research on joint enterprise convictions understands the psychology of young people. It understands the need of teenagers and juveniles to belong to a group. It understands that they have a predisposition towards risk, seeking excitement and reckless behaviour. It understands their inability to inhibit their impulses and the fact that they have less self-control. All of us in the House who are raising or have raised teenagers will recognise all those characteristics. Are we really going to throw young men—black and white—into prison because they are young?

I have two boys at home. They navigate the streets of north London on their way to school and one in particular goes through some high knife-crime areas. I am raising
boys who would never ever take a knife out of the house and use it on anybody else—I am absolutely sure about that—but can I say, if something is going on in a park, that one of them might not drift towards the action? Hand on heart, as a father, I cannot say that. I do not ever want to have to visit one of my own children in prison. None of us should want that waste. None of us should want those criminal records. It is time that this House acted.

1.38 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to speak in this important debate, and it is always a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I congratulate those who secured this debate, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating it some time.

When my constituent Ms Gillian Hyatt first came to see me in 2012 about her sons in prison, I thought it a straightforward case of a mum doing her best for her children despite the fact that they had offended. I commend her for pressing me to look beyond a concerned mother and to examine the JENGbA campaign. I attended JENGbA’s briefing in Parliament only a few months ago, as did most of my colleagues here today. I was shocked by consistent reports of case after case of mostly young men—including, as we have heard, a disproportionate number from the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities—who had been not only convicted but handed the severest of sentences. I commend JENGbA for its campaign, and for its briefing for today’s debate.

Like other Members, I have not heard anyone say that all those locked up are innocent. Called “inside campaigners”, some may well be, but the message I hear most strongly is that although some may be innocent, many are guilty of lesser offences. Some of those offences are much less serious, and therefore the tariffs handed down by the judges seem questionable at least. The numbers are huge, but efforts to assess how many people are involved have proved difficult. The Ministry of Justice has not produced statistics for those found guilty through joint enterprise, and one has to ask why.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that between 2005 and 2013, between 1,800 and 4,500 people were prosecuted for murder with joint enterprise used as part of the charge. However, I am getting ahead of myself, because the fundamental flaw in using joint enterprise to prosecute for murder was exposed, as we have heard in speech after speech, by the Supreme Court in 2016. The Court held that in 1984 the law had taken “a wrong turn”—I think every speaker has mentioned that, and it must be one of the weakest euphemisms ever heard—in the case of Regina v Chan Wing-Siu, and it overturned the verdict of Regina v Jogee.

Jogee was retried and found not guilty of murder but guilty of manslaughter, and his mandatory life sentence was replaced by an appropriate sentence for manslaughter. The Supreme Court also ruled that cases prior to Jogee could only go back to the Court of Appeal if people could prove that their conviction was a “substantial injustice.” Despite the hundreds of cases at least—I report that the Ministry of Justice cannot, or will not, say exactly how many there are—the Court of Appeal has denied every joint enterprise appeal. Incidentally, the youngest person to receive a life sentence was just 12 years old when charged.

The common law doctrine of joint enterprise covers two types of offence. The first is “assisting and encouraging”, also known as “aiding and abetting”, and I have nothing to say about that. The other is “parasitic accessory liability”—which I find quite troubling. Even the title sounds as if the accused must be guilty of something, or has some form of vicious disease. PAL is controversial, as the secondary offender would not need to intend the crime, but merely have been able to foresee it.

Traditionally, for someone to be convicted of murder, it had to be proved that the killer intended to kill, or at least to seriously injure someone. PAL was therefore quite a shift, and led to hundreds, if not thousands, of convictions over 30 years since 1985. The Supreme Court decision in 2016 on Regina v Jogee must, at least statistically, call some of those convictions into question. That decision, however, applies to out-of-time appeals only if it can be proved that a “substantial injustice” has occurred—that was tested in Regina v Johnson in 2016—and proved categorically that a change in the law “would” have made a difference. The Criminal Appeal Act 1968 allows the court to quash a conviction where the misapplication of law “might”, rather than “would”, have made a difference. Since the Jogee decision, none of the 800 men, women and children currently supported by JENGbA have successfully appealed against their conviction—not one.

My constituents Asher and Lewis Johnson were both sentenced to 16 and a half years for a murder committed by another man. I will not go into great detail, but suffice it to say that they maintain they had no knowledge of the guilty party’s intention. Asher was a youth worker who had never been in trouble before. It might be that there is more to the case, but for them to be found guilty by association seems worthy of fresh examination, especially given the Supreme Court ruling that the law had taken a “wrong turn.” It certainly had for the Johnson brothers. They want a fresh hearing with the evidence presented in light of the Jogee ruling, but that has been denied. I cannot know all the facts, and like all colleagues here I do all I can to support the police in their difficult job, but something here just does not feel right.

In conclusion, JENGbA is calling for the abolition of parasitic accessory liability charging—as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central explained in her excellent speech, CPS guidance on that is still very confusing. It also calls for the abolition of child life sentences, and for the Ministry of Justice to collect data on all joint enterprise secondary party convictions. It argues that this is a “common law, used against common people, that makes no common sense.”

I believe it has a very strong case.

1.45 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), my hon. Friend the Member...
for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on seeing this debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating it time today.

I represent some of the family of Alex Henry, whose case was explained in some detail by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). Alex Henry was involved in a violent street fight in Ealing in 2013, and has spent four years in prison, serving 19 years under joint enterprise. His mother, Sally Halsall, is my constituent, has spent four years in prison, serving 19 years under joint enterprise. His mother, Sally Halsall, is my constituent, and last October I met her and Alex’s sister, Charlotte, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield. I really came to understand the importance and significance of joint enterprise, and the need to review the law.

In August 2013 Alex Henry went shopping with three friends. A confrontation took place that lasted just over 40 seconds. It is not clear why the confrontation took place, but it may have been triggered by a stare. One young man used a knife from within a bag, and he stabbed two brothers, one of whom tragically lost his life. On the sixth day of the trial, the man with the knife pleaded guilty to murder and grievous bodily harm with intent, and was sentenced to 22 years. Alex Henry received a sentence of 19 years—only four years less—despite never touching the knife or even being aware of its existence.

Since Alex’s conviction in March 2014, his family have campaigned tirelessly with JENGbA to reform the law of joint enterprise. The injustice, as the family saw it, was that traditionally, for someone to be found guilty of murder the Crown needed to prove that the defendant inflicted fatal harm while intending to kill, or at least to commit very serious harm. Conversely, under joint enterprise the Crown needs only to prove that the defendant foresaw the possibility that the crime “might” happen, rather than that they intended it and knew that it “would” happen. This means that it is easier to prove the guilt of the accessory than the principal offender. Therefore, in Alex’s case the Crown needed to prove that Alex foresaw the possibility that the stabbing “might” happen, rather than that he intended and knew that it “would” happen.

There was no evidence that Alex knew about the possession of the knife and therefore that someone might be stabbed. However, the Crown persuaded the jury by arguing that “friends tell each other everything”, and therefore that Alex must have known the other man was in possession of a knife that day, and foreseen the possibility of its use if any altercations were to arise during the shopping trip. “Friends tell each other everything and therefore the crime could have been foreseen”—what a shocking indictment of the way the law works if that can lock up a young man for so long.

As we have heard, in February 2016 the joint enterprise law was successfully reformed. Now, rather than foresight, the Crown needs only to prove that the defendant intentionally encouraged or assisted the principal offender while knowing that the crime “would” take place. The law of joint enterprise has convicted thousands of men, women and children, 800 of whom are supported by JENGbA. However, the courts have ruled that the change in the law will have no automatic retrospective effect for out-of-time appeals, which include every case resulting in conviction 28 days or more before the change in the law. Instead, those out-of-time appeals will be allowed only if a defendant can prove a substantial injustice, which means proving that the change in law would, without doubt, have made a difference.

However, that is an impossible test, as was found in the case of Regina v. Anwar in 2016. The evidential bar has not been raised by Jogee; in particular, presence at the scene of the offence can amount to encouragement of the crime. Moreover, proof of the defendant’s intent to encourage, coupled with his knowledge that the crime would happen, can be inferred from the friendship of the co-defendants, just as foresight was inferred before Jogee.

If nothing more need be shown evidentially since the change in the law, how can a defendant prove that the change in the law would have made a difference? In comparison, those who have suffered a misapplication of the law changed in Jogee need to show only within 28 days of conviction that the conviction is unsafe, in that the misdirection might have made a difference. So far, no out-of-time case has succeeded on appeal—including Alex’s appeal, which was rejected.

In his excellent report on black and minority ethnic people in the justice system, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, who is no longer in his place, rightly shone a light on unacceptable inequality, particularly for young people from those communities. But two other factors are particularly relevant to joint enterprise. First, there is maturity. Many convicted under joint enterprise are not in full maturity; the justice system is beginning, slowly, to understand that young men under 25 are not mature and need to be considered slightly differently—their maturity must be a factor in their cases.

The other factor is the autism spectrum. Alex Henry’s diagnosis of autism was important in his case. Despite Alex’s having had many problems from an early age, no one had suggested to him or his family that he might be on the autistic spectrum until a viewer of the documentary made about the case wrote to the family. Alex’s family then arranged for Alex to be assessed by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, the leading academic on autism and Asperger’s syndrome in this country.

The professor’s report states that it is incredibly unlikely that Alex could have foreseen what would or might happen in those 40 seconds since, due to his autism, he cannot predict the actions, behaviours or intentions of others. The Court of Appeal rejected that ground because Alex’s mother has a PhD in psychology and so she could have coached Alex in “how to act autistic”. That is shocking. The court also said that it could not understand why Alex was diagnosed so late in life, aged 23, despite seven previous mental health assessments, which did not result in a diagnosis.

Mr Mitchell: I want to strongly support what the hon. Lady is saying about the judgment of the court in that case in respect of autism. I have read the case and, as a layman, I find the response of the court completely inexplicable.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the right hon. Gentleman so much. Anybody who has had any contact with people who have been diagnosed with autism at a later stage knows that the condition is often not diagnosed early. Many people go through many difficulties in their lives...
before being diagnosed, if at all. Alex was one of those in that unlucky situation. Because autism is an invisible disorder, many assessments found traits of autism as highlighted in Professor Baron-Cohen’s report. That could be a factor in appeals.

The refusal of Alex’s appeal has left the family devastated, as the House can imagine, but they are determined to see him proved innocent. In their view—and mine, from what I know of the case—he is not a murderer. How many people in prison for joint enterprise have undiagnosed autism? We need to look at that.

Since Alex’s appeal was rejected last year, his sister Charlotte has applied to challenge the “substantial injustice” at the Supreme Court. The family are also taking Alex’s case to the European Court of Human Rights. They believe that joint enterprise breached article 7 of the European convention on human rights and the principle of legality that holds that there shall be no punishment without law. Since those convicted under joint enterprise were not actually convicted under a true law, their presumption of innocence under article 6(2) remains, and it is breached by the need to prove that the change in the law would have made a difference.

In October 2016, the Select Committee on Justice, on which I have the pleasure and honour of served, wrote to the chair of the Law Commission to suggest that it review the law of joint enterprise, given the lack of legal clarity in the wake of the Jogee judgement—particularly on how juries should be directed on the question of intention. Unfortunately, the final version of the 13th programme of reform omits any work on joint enterprise. I know, however, that the Justice Committee’s Chair will continue to push those points.

Robert Neill: The hon. Lady is right that the Committee will want to pursue that point. However, there is nothing to stop the Government themselves asking the Law Commission to carry out a review, as has happened a number of times in the past.

Ruth Cadbury: Like the hon. Gentleman, I look forward to the Minister’s response.

As we have heard, the Justice Committee also wrote to the Director of Public Prosecutions suggesting clarification on the intention of the defendant. I support the clear demands put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central: proportionality, the need for proper data, a review of the CPS guidance and a review of older cases. All those are essential, and we look forward to the Minister’s response on all those issues.

For the sake of Alex, the thousands of others imprisoned under joint enterprise and their loved ones, I support the calls of colleagues across the House that the injustice be rectified. Let us right the wrong. If we really want to address knife crime, let us learn from the places that have actually brought it down.

1.57 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I have had the privilege of working with JENGbA, and particularly with Gloria Morrison, for seven or eight years, and I am pleased that the organisation is now located in my constituency. However, I am sorry that we have not made more progress—by “we”, I mean the House and the Government. As we have heard, JENGbA has a phenomenal record of representing 800 families in these difficult cases. I have a number of constituents serving long sentences who were convicted before the Jogee judgment and are therefore potentially subject to review; I am sure many other Members do too, given the numbers.

Before coming to those points, let me say that these matters are not easy. I am sure that we all also have constituents who have been the victims of violent crime. As my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, we are concerned that people should be punished suitably for crimes that they have committed. There are famous cases, including those of Garry Newlove and Stephen Lawrence, in which joint enterprise played a part in the convictions. When very serious offences are committed, particularly murder, and there are victims and grieving families, it is perhaps only human nature to want to bring people to justice. The difficulty has arisen because, particularly where there are large gangs or groups, it is more difficult to identify who the actual perpetrators are. The danger of a miscarriage of justice is therefore all the greater.

Several Members have referred to the history of what has variously been called common purpose, secondary liability or joint enterprise. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said that the offence was originally developed by the common law to deal with the social evil of duelling, almost as a matter of public policy rather than law. The leading case of Swindall and Osborne in 1846 was about two cart drivers encouraging each other in a race, one of whom killed a pedestrian. It is easy to see in such cases how one can attach guilt to the person who is not the primary perpetrator. My hon. Friend also mentioned the celebrated Craig and Bentley case, in which many factors were involved. On Sunday, it will be 65 years since the execution of Derek Bentley. It is 25 years since he was pardoned, and 20 years since his sentence was quashed. Bentley, who was 19, was hanged, but the actual perpetrator, Chris Craig, was not, because he was under 18.

However such cases were resolved, it is fairly easy to see the principle of joint enterprise at work, but, as has been pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and others, we are now dealing with a number of new factors. There is the huge preponderance of people from black and minority ethnic communities who are convicted, there is the number of young people convicted, and there is, simply, the number of people who are engaged. It is, I think, wrong to say that not much attention has been paid to the issue; it is a question of what the outcomes have been. The Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and his predecessors have produced a number of telling reports.

The Crown Prosecution Service guidelines have been reviewed, although they may still be imperfect, and, of course, there has been the Jogee judgment. That judgment is perhaps unsurprising. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), before Jogee the level of the mental test for secondary participants was lower than the one applying
to primary offenders. That had to change, and it has changed. There is, therefore, a possibility of review, but—I think the courts are cognisant of this—there is also the issue of floodgates. Will there suddenly be a huge number of cases to review because of a correction of the law—not a change in the law, but a declaration of what the law should have been all along? Many Members have said, “So be it”, but it is up to the Government to decide how the position is to be dealt with, and I am afraid that the Government have been wanting in that regard.

After Jogee, in November 2016, the then Secretary of State wrote to the Justice Committee:

“We have concluded that no further review of the law is necessary at this time.”

As far as I know, that is still the Government’s position, although we may hear otherwise from the Minister today. Let me say to the Minister that that is wrong. We need such a review. That will not be easy, because this is a complex and difficult offence and because there are arguments on both sides, but the law gets itself into a mess in exactly these areas. When I was a shadow justice Minister between 2010 and 2015, I urged my party, if it were subsequently to come to power, to look at some of these difficult issues. I am thinking of not just joint enterprise, but inchoate offences and, indeed, homicide. A number of common law offences that have developed over a period may not be fit for purpose in the modern world. I hope that we shall hear some positive answers from the Minister today. Reviewing the law in this respect cannot be left to the courts or the prosecuting authorities. Sooner or later, either this or a future Government will have to do it.

My final point—another JENGbA point—concerns evidence and statistics. I cannot believe that we are not collecting proper statistics. It is clear from the statistics that are available that a high proportion of people are convicted of homicide on the basis of joint enterprise. According to some estimates, the proportion who are sentenced is approaching 50%. Two years ago, I asked a parliamentary question on the subject. My question was:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, how many people have been convicted under joint enterprise in each year since 2010.”

The answer was as follows:

“Such information is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.”

That, too, is quite wrong. If we are to deal sensibly with this difficult and sensitive matter, we must have the facts.

It would be wonderful to hear from the Minister today that there will be a review, and that the Government will refer the matter to the Law Commission, as was indicated by the Chair of the Justice Committee. It would certainly be welcome to hear that there will be a proper collection of statistics, so that we have a sound basis on which to introduce reform.

2.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and her colleagues. They deserve great credit for raising this important matter, and for posing a number of challenging questions.

The consequences of the Jogee decision include, of course, uncertainty and distress for victims and relatives who now wonder whether those who have been held responsible for violent crimes against them will have their cases reopened and their sentences quashed. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the hon. Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) rightly reflected on that. On the other hand, we are all agreed that the so-called wrong turn in the law means that there have undoubtedly been many miscarriages of justice, and people have been convicted and sentenced for crimes far graver than those for which they should have been held responsible. As we know, thanks to the excellent work of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), serious questions have been raised about its disproportionate effects on young men from black and minority ethnic communities.

Members who are far more qualified than me—including the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee—have explained why the decision of the Privy Council in the 1985 case of Chan-Wing Siu was wrong and was required to be “corrected” by the Supreme Court. For me, that correction raises three discrete questions.

It is clear that the law after 1985 has been wrongly applied, and that that has resulted in real injustices. The first question to ask is whether the law on joint enterprise and parasitic accessory liability is now operating as we want it to. How should the criminal law respond when a person engages in a joint enterprise with a principal who goes on to commit a more serious offence outside the scope of that enterprise? I think that, on paper, the Jogee decision is better than what was in place previously, but Members on both sides of the House have raised concerns about whether it is operating effectively in practice, or as Parliament would wish. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) gave appalling examples of judicial reasoning that gave real cause for concern.

The situations in which joint enterprise might arise, and the different views of culpability, are many and varied. A number of Members have focused on the effect on young people and gangs in particular, and we have heard powerful arguments for reform, especially from the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham, but joint enterprise arises in many other circumstances. We therefore need to seek a solution that can respond adequately to all the different facts and circumstances. Sentencing is a related issue. Does the application of mandatory sentences in some cases mean that punishments cannot reflect the different levels of culpability of principal and accessory in certain circumstances, and might that, too, require reform?

There are also serious questions to be asked about appeal rights, about which the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke eloquently. If the decision in the 1985 case had been in statute and reflected the will of Parliament, and if it had then simply been amended or replaced in 2016, there would have been no possibility of a right to appeal for those convicted between those times. As the right hon. Member for Tottenham said, however, common law is very different. The Supreme Court is saying that the law was applied wrongly by the courts, and that people have been convicted
of crimes that they did not commit. It cannot possibly be right that no challenges to those convictions have been successful. There is a strong case for saying that the bar for appeals against such decisions has been set too high.

These are difficult decisions. It has been useful for Members to be able to air their views, but I cannot help agreeing with the Chair of the Justice Committee that a thorough and comprehensive review is required. That work is urgently needed if we are not to return to this issue in the very near future.

2.8 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important debate. I also pay tribute to JENGBA on its highlighting of concerns about this law for many years, which contributed to the 2016 Supreme Court ruling that the law had taken a wrong turn.

We have heard many excellent and passionate speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central spoke eloquently and comprehensively about the issues. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield talked about the family of a victim and their suffering, and also about miscarriages of justice, making the important point that we must distinguish between groups and gangs. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) rightly said that the victims' families must not be ignored, but that miscarriages of justice must also be dealt with. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the Chair of the Select Committee, talked about the need for hon. Members to press the Government on legal reforms, and the importance of charges and sentences being correct and proportionate to the acts carried out. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) contributed with his characteristically passionate oratorical skill, and talked about his constituent Alex Henry, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). I must also compliment my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), on the points he made, specifically on the guidance for the prosecutors involved in making decisions on what charges should follow. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham made a powerful speech about how this law has been applied in practice in certain situations.

The law regarding joint liability is complex. In 2012, the Justice Committee—when I was a member—carried out an inquiry into the operation of the legal doctrine of joint enterprise. In 2014, it revisited the issue to see what had occurred. Both reports deal with the status and application of the law before the Jogee case reached the Supreme Court, where judgment was handed down in February 2016. Although the reports predate this important judgment, much of their background information and analysis remain useful. The Committee explained that joint enterprise is a form of secondary liability whereby a person who agrees to commit a crime with another becomes liable for all criminal acts committed by the other person—the principal offender—in their joint criminal venture. The Committee suggested that the Director of Public Prosecutions should issue guidance on the use of the doctrine when charging. In particular, it wanted guidance on the relationship between association and complicity. I will return to the issue of the clarity of the law shortly, as it remains a concern of many Members even after the Jogee ruling.

Victims of crime are at the centre of Labour’s approach to justice. Victims, their families and the wider public must have faith in our justice system, and to achieve that our justice system must deliver certainty. Labour is also clear that, where there are substantial injustices arising from the application of the law of joint enterprise before the case of Jogee, these should be addressed.

Jogee is reasonably described as a landmark court judgment. It established that the law on joint enterprise had been misinterpreted in the criminal courts for three decades. The ruling turned on the judgment that an individual foreseeing a possible crime does not equate to “automatic authorisation” of it, as the law had been interpreted in previous cases. A higher threshold of proof is now required as a result.

It is welcome that the Supreme Court clarified the application of the law of joint enterprise. The judgment also set out criteria by which potential miscarriages of justice can be addressed where a substantial injustice has occurred.

Subsequent judgments following the Supreme Court ruling relating to joint enterprise appeals have developed the argument around the nature of the substantial injustice. Judgments in joint enterprise cases since Jogee have explained why the law must provide certainty.

It is clearly in the public interest that convictions are not automatically reopened when judges in later cases develop the law. To reopen all cases would undermine the certainty of convictions and deny closure to victims’ families. In the Court of Appeal case of Johnson, it was stated:

“The need to establish substantial injustice results from the wider public interest in legal certainty and the finality of decisions made in accordance with the then clearly established law... It also takes into account the interests of the victim (or the victim's family), particularly in cases where death has resulted and closure is particularly important.”

Labour is clear that victims of crime and their families must have confidence in our justice system. However, it is also vital that victims of miscarriages of justice have opportunities to have their cases heard. Without those opportunities, we would risk injustices being permitted to continue.

Those who believe that miscarriages of justice have been committed are of the opinion that how “substantial injustice” is defined has not yet been fully developed. It is right that more clarity is brought to this vital question, and we hope that today’s debate has contributed to that. In addition, we welcome the news that the Crown Prosecution Service is reviewing its guidelines and we hope that this opportunity will be taken to help provide more certainty and clarity for both victims and the wider public.

Many members of the public will be surprised to know that no official statistics are available on joint enterprise convictions. That can make it difficult to assess how big an impact the wrong turning in the law between the cases of Chan and Jogee has had in practice.
Almost two years ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) asked the Secretary of State for Justice how many people had been convicted under joint enterprise in each year since 2010, and a similar request was made by the Justice Committee in the 2010-15 Parliament. The Government response was that the information was not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionately cost. That is a plainly unsatisfactory response to a very reasonable request for information that would shed light on the scale of joint enterprise convictions. May I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government take action to rectify this urgently? There is a need to keep proper statistics on offences of joint enterprise; that would greatly assist everyone.

Although there are no official statistics, the evidence that there is from academic research suggests that the doctrine of joint enterprise may have been applied in a discriminatory way. Where such profiling does exist, it shows that the doctrine is not only unjust but undermines the social contract and community support for our criminal justice system.

In its 2014 report on joint enterprise, the Justice Committee explained:

“It is clear that a large proportion of those convicted of joint enterprise offences are young Black and mixed race men. In the Cambridge research sample, 37.2% of those serving very long sentences for joint enterprise offences are Black/Black British, eleven times the proportion of Black/Black British people in the general population and almost three times as many as in the overall prison population. There is also a much higher proportion of mixed race prisoners convicted of joint enterprise offences than there are in the general prison population (15.5% compared to 3.9%).”

The Justice Committee also heard evidence about why there was disproportional:

“Dr Ben Crewe from the Cambridge Institute of Criminology said that there were probably two main reasons for the disproportionate impact of joint enterprise on young Black men, the first being that BME men may be over-represented in the kinds of communities where young men typically hang around in groups that are labelled by outsiders as ‘gangs’ and the second that ‘an association may exist unconsciously in the minds of the police, prosecutors and juries between being a young ethnic minority male and being in a gang, and therefore being involved in forms of urban violence.’”

Many Members today have alluded to that point. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham for his work in the Lammy review. It states: “Despite the High Court ruling, experts in the field remain concerned about some of the legal practice on Joint Enterprise. Many are not convinced that the line between ‘prohibitive’ and ‘prejudicial’ information is drawn appropriately in the evidence put before juries when cases reach trial. People must be tried on the basis of evidence about their actions, not their associations—and the evidence put before juries must reflect this.”

This again demonstrates the clear need to publish accurate statistics on offences of joint enterprise. We ask the CPS to take this opportunity to rework its guidance on joint enterprise and to consider its approach, so that this and associated laws are not implemented in a discriminatory way and so that, when prosecutors are deciding the appropriateness of the charge and who needs to be prosecuted, this guidance is applied properly and fairly. I hope that the Minister takes this opportunity to do that today.

Mr Mitchell: It was unforgivably remiss of me earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, not to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) to her first outing on the Government Front Bench. The whole House will wish her well in what will undoubtedly be the start of a long and distinguished ministerial career.

2.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. I would like to start the debate by commending the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for securing this debate on an issue that is close to her constituency and to her heart. I also want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for supporting the motion today.

I fully recognise the importance of the law in this area. When anyone is charged and convicted of a crime, it will have serious consequences for them, their families and their victims. This is especially the case when the charge may be for such a serious crime as murder. I also recognise the sensitivity of this issue, given that the youngest of those that JENGbA supports was 12 when he was charged with the offence, as many Members have mentioned. That will obviously have a significant impact on his life.

Many Members have identified what the Supreme Court decided, but it is important to set out the principles involved because some Members put forward hypothetical circumstances that could result in a conviction for accessory liability, and I am not sure that all those circumstances were right. It is important to be clear what we are talking about from the outset.

First, I will summarise a few of the points in the Supreme Court judgment in the case of Jogee, which was handed down in February 2016. It concerned a very specific area of the law on joint enterprise called parasitic accessory liability, rather than the whole law of joint enterprise. Such liability arises when two people, person 1 and person 2, participate together in one offence, such as a burglary, and during those events, person 1 commits a second offence—for example, he or she murders a security guard. Under the law as it stood before Jogee, if the second person foresaw that the first person might act with the intention to kill or cause really serious harm and participated in the burglary none the less, that second person would be guilty of murder alongside the first.

In the Jogee judgment, the Supreme Court said that that was wrong, as the motion recognises. A person cannot be guilty merely for foreseeing that an accomplice might commit a second offence during the course of the original plan. Rather, the Supreme Court held that such a person can be guilty only if he or she intentionally encourages or assists a person to commit such an offence and intends them to have the mens rea required for that offence. The effect of Jogee is that members of a gang who are not the principal perpetrators of the crime will not necessarily be guilty of the crime in question unless it can be shown that they have intentionally encouraged or helped the principal perpetrators to commit that crime. As many Members have said, the Supreme Court also held that offenders convicted under the old test would be granted permission to appeal only if they had suffered “substantial injustice”. That is the position as it stands, as a matter of law.
[Lucy Frazer]

I should like to respond to some of the points that have been made today. In the short time allotted, I am afraid that I will not be able to respond to them all. I shall concentrate on those that are identified in the motion. There has been a suggestion that the number of cases brought under joint enterprise has been unchanged since the Supreme Court judgment. As the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and others have pointed out, however, the difficulty with that argument is that there are no official statistics to enable us to confirm or deny that. A number of Members have criticised the Ministry of Justice for not collecting that data, and we are looking into that. It might be possible to address that under our reforms relating to the common platform. I can confirm that the Ministry of Justice is looking into the matter.

The point was also made that there has not yet been a successful appeal. I understand that that could be extremely frustrating for the parties concerned, but it does not mean that there is no route to an appeal. There is a system to challenge any previous decisions. It is possible for an appeal to be made by an individual, who could also apply to the Criminal Cases Review Commission to have their case reviewed by the Court of Appeal. Indeed, a number of cases have been brought. [Interruption.] They have been brought, but they have been unsuccessful. There has also been criticism of the threshold that the Court of Appeal applies in relation to substantial injustice, but this is not a new test brought in by the Supreme Court in relation to Jogee. It is a long-applied test that the Court Appeal uses in relation to out-of-time appeals.

The key point that has been advanced in relation to the motion today is that there is a need for legislation. I should like to identify a few reasons why it might not be appropriate to bring forward legislation at this stage. First, the law on joint enterprise is not set out in statute; it has evolved through case law. Some criticism was made of that by the right hon. Member for Tottenham, it has evolved through case law. Some criticism was made of that by the right hon. Member for Tottenham, the common law has equal weight with law made by statute. No judge in the Jogee case—no judge in the Jogee case—has raised it in the Select Committee as well. As a new Minister, I am happy to consider that in due course.

Some other, broader points were made. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned disclosure, which I know the Attorney General is looking at. Many other points were made, and I will happily address them when time allows.

To return to the motion, I recognise the importance of the law on joint enterprise and the impact that it can have on people, such as the constituents of the hon. Member for Manchester Central and the others mentioned today. For the reasons set out, however, the Government do not believe that the time is currently right for any changes to the law on joint enterprise. It is for the courts to interpret the law, as laid down by the Supreme Court. I hope that the revised guidance on secondary liability will provide a clear direction for prosecutors in this area of law, and I am happy to keep the matter under review. With that in mind, I invite the House to reject the motion.

2.30 pm

Lucy Powell: Notwithstanding the Minister’s response, I think that everyone watching this debate can take away from Parliament the fact that there is a clear and unified view that the law has got it wrong and that the law needs to be put right. Judging by today’s debate, I suggest that there would be a parliamentary majority in favour of doing just that. In the meantime, I ask all who are watching—the prosecutors, the Appeal Court judges, the police and others—to start putting things right. We will consider, as a cross-party group, how to put further pressure on the Government and work with them to improve the situation.

I think that there is a clear consensus about proportionality, gangs versus groups, the CPS guidance—the initial interim guidance was problematic—and a wider homicide review. Critically, there is a broad consensus on the retrospective cases and the substantial injustice.
test, which would prevent unsafe convictions. It is critical that age, maturity, mental wellbeing and potential disabilities can be taken into account.

This has been an historic debate, and many people who are watching will feel its historic importance. We are not going to stop here. I hear what the Minister says, and I disagree with some of it. We will continue to press the Government to take further action.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House notes the Supreme Court judgment in the case of Jogee and Ruddock of February 2016 that the law on joint enterprise and parasitic accessory liability had been wrongly interpreted for more than 30 years; further notes that since that judgment, the number of cases brought under joint enterprise has remained unchanged; further notes that there have yet to be any successful appeals of cases from before February 2016; and calls on the Government to review the use of joint enterprise and to bring forward legislative proposals to clarify the law on joint enterprise.

Proscription of Hezbollah

2.32 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation driven by an antisemitic ideology that seeks the destruction of Israel; notes that Hezbollah declares itself to be one organisation without distinguishable political or military wings; is concerned that the military wing of that organisation is proscribed, but its political wing is not; and calls on the Government to include Hezbollah in its entirety on the list of proscribed organisations.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that my right hon. Friend is bringing this issue to the House. I do not know whether she is aware of this, but in December the Government held a debate on the extension of proscribed organisations. During that debate, the Minister for Security and Economic Crime told me that only the military organisation of Hezbollah was proscribed, but that Hezbollah supporters who engaged in terrorist activities in this country would be prosecuted.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that terrorist activities should not be the only grounds for prosecution, and that there should be prosecutions for incitement to hatred, incitement to anti-Semitism and other crimes that are being committed on the streets of London? As the Mayor of London has said, Hezbollah should be banned in its entirety.

Joan Ryan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and I thank him for that intervention, which I take as 100% support for the motion.

I am the chair of Labour Friends of Israel, an organisation that has campaigned for many years on the issue that we are addressing. Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation, driven by anti-Semitic ideology, which seeks the destruction of Israel. It has wreaked death and destruction throughout the middle east, aiding and abetting the Assad regime’s butchery in Syria and helping to drive Iran’s expansionism throughout the region. It makes no distinction between its political and military wings, and nor should the British Government.

In 2010, the Obama Administration labelled Hezbollah “the most technically capable terrorist group in the world”. Over the past three decades, it has been implicated in a string of deadly attacks against Israeli, Jewish and western targets in the middle east and far beyond. Its operatives have been arrested for plotting or carrying out attacks across the globe, in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. The litany of death and violence widely attributed to Hezbollah includes the 1983 murder in Beirut of 241 American and 58 French peacekeepers; the 1986 wave of bombings against Jewish communal targets in Paris, in which 13 people died; the 1992 attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, in which 29 people died; the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish mutual association, which led to the deaths of 85 people; the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in which 19 US servicemen lost their lives and nearly 500 people were injured; and the 2012 attack on a bus of Israeli tourists in the Bulgarian resort of Burgas, in which six people were murdered and for which two people finally went on trial last week.
Such terrorist acts are promoted, glorified and encouraged by the Hezbollah leadership. Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, has praised suicide bombings—or “martyrdom operations”—as legitimate, honourable, legal, humanitarian and ethical actions, saying that those who love death will triumph over those who fear it.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that the 1,000 or so people who marched in London under the Hezbollah flag subscribe to the very agenda that she has described? There is no difference between the military and political wings of Hezbollah, as it continually acknowledges. The only recognition of a difference is in UK policy; it does not exist in reality. It is time for that policy to change.

Joan Ryan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and thank him for that intervention. He is completely right to say that there is no distinction and we need to be clear about that. Hezbollah's actions are driven by a deep-seated, intractable and vicious hatred of Jews. The House does not need to take my word for it; Hezbollah's leaders have proudly boasted of their anti-Semitism:

“If they all gather in Israel,” declared Nasrallah,

“it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”

Nor is Nasrallah a lone voice. Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy leader, has said that

“the history of Jews has proven that, regardless of the Zionist proposal, they are people who are evil in their ideas”.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that, as well as being anti-Semitic, Hezbollah has assassinated and murdered Christians? As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) has said, any distinction between a military part and a political part of Hezbollah is entirely without meaning.

Joan Ryan: I have no difficulty agreeing with my hon. Friend on that point. Hezbollah has killed probably more Muslims than anybody else, as well as Christians, Jews and others.

Hezbollah's leaders and media peddle classic anti-Semitic tropes and lies. They refer to Jews in the basest of terms, labelling them “apes and pigs”, and suggesting that

“you will find no one more miserly or greedy than they are”.

Hezbollah's leaders and media make spurious claims about Jewish conspiracies and world domination, and they deny the Holocaust, suggesting that

“the Jews invented the legend of the Nazi atrocities”.

Hezbollah's hatred of Jews is a noxious mix, which, in the words of one writer, fuses

“Arab nationalist-based anti-Zionism, anti-Jewish rhetoric from the Koran, and, most disturbingly, the antique anti-Semitic beliefs and conspiracy theories of European fascism”.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I just want to highlight the backers of Hezbollah, the Iranians, who provide training and weapons, including rockets. While the Iranians' malevolent influence continues throughout the middle east, they are jeopardising the prospects for peace between the Palestinians and Israelis and posing a strategic threat to the very state of Israel.

Joan Ryan: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point with which I absolutely agree. I will come to it a little later.

Hezbollah is a menace throughout the middle east, but Israel is its principal target. That is no secret. In its founding manifesto in 1985, in which it also pledged its loyalty to Ayatollah Khomeini and urged the establishment of an Islamic regime, Hezbollah says of Israel:

“Our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated... We recognise no treaty with it, no cease-fire, and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated.”

This is no mere rhetorical sabre-rattling; Hezbollah vehemently opposed the Oslo peace process and has fought any normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab countries. On numerous occasions—most notably in 1993, 1996 and 2006—it has sought to provoke conflict with Israel, and the consequences have been disastrous and devastating for the peoples of both Israel and Lebanon.

In 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped and murdered Israeli soldiers on the country’s northern border and proceeded to launch Katyusha rockets to indiscriminately pound the Jewish state. The resulting conflict led to large numbers of civilian casualties and the evacuation of several hundred thousand people. In defiance of UN resolution 1701, which brought the conflict to an end, Hezbollah has spent the last decade restocking its arsenal and rebuilding its forces in Lebanon. It has trebled the size of its fighting force from 17,000 to 45,000 men. It has launched an arms procurement programme, amassing short, medium and long-range missiles and rockets, drones, precision-guided projectiles, anti-tank weaponry and ballistic missiles. It now has an estimated 120,000 to 140,000 rockets and missiles—an arsenal larger than that of many states.

That Hezbollah has been allowed to replenish and then expand its armoury in this manner represents a terrible failure on the part of the international community, a breaking of the assurances provided to Israel and a betrayal of the people of Lebanon and Israel. The implications are truly horrifying. Andrew Exum, an expert on the region and President Obama’s former deputy assistant secretary of Defence for middle east policy, wrote recently:

“I shudder to think what the next conflict will look like.”

Hezbollah has no qualms about such a war. It does not care about the loss of thousands of civilian lives—of Israelis, Lebanese, Jews, Muslims and Christians—that its aggression will lead to.

Quite deliberately, Hezbollah has embedded its forces and weaponry in towns and villages, turning the people of southern Lebanon into human shields. Quite deliberately, it will, as it has done in the past, target civilian population centres in Israel, even vowing, in the words of Nasrallah, that there will be “no red lines” in any future conflict—he underlined the pledge with threats to attack the Dimona nuclear reactor and the ammonia storage facility in Haifa.
Quite deliberately, it will seek to draw in other regional actors. Its capacity may be many times greater than those of other terrorist groups, but its aim—to instil terror by inflicting mass civilian casualties—is the same as that of those who wage attacks on targets big and small throughout the world, and of those who attacked London Bridge, the Manchester arena and this House only last year.

Hezbollah has not simply exported terror globally and wreaked havoc in Israel and Lebanon; its bloody fingerprints are all over the Syrian civil war, the most brutal conflict of this century. In 2016, it was estimated that more than a quarter of Hezbollah’s forces were engaged in fighting on behalf of the murderous Assad regime. It has not only contributed to the killing fields of Aleppo and Homs; it has helped to eliminate the non-extremist opposition to Assad, thus contributing to the ranks of Sunni jihadists and stirring sectarian hatred.

Hezbollah has indeed become Iran’s indispensable partner—the Blackwater of Iran, as some have labelled it—helping to promote and further Tehran’s expansionist agenda throughout the middle east, in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Such a vast enterprise cannot be run on the cheap, so in addition to the vast sums of weaponry and cash lavished on it by Iran, the party of God is now engaged in money laundering, arms sales and drugs smuggling. It works through informal networks and centrally run enterprises. The latter, one leading middle east analyst told the US Congress last summer, were operating like “international organised criminal entities”.

**John Spellar (Warley) (Lab):** Do not the various elements that my right hon. Friend is describing show the indivisible nature of Hezbollah? It does not have separate wings but is one criminal terrorist entity.

**Joan Ryan:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a distinction that Hezbollah not only does not recognise but denies.

As the House will be aware, the British Government have long held the view that Hezbollah’s military wing is involved in conducting and supporting terrorism. In 2001, the Hezbollah External Security Organisation was added to the list of proscribed organisations. In 2008, this proscription was extended by a reference to the “military wing of Hezbollah, including the Jihad Council and all units reporting to it (including the Hezbollah External Security Organisation)”.

Hezbollah’s political wing, however, is not proscribed, even though this distinction is not one that Hezbollah itself has ever recognised.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case and we are grateful to her for bringing this to the House. Does she not agree that it should make both the Government Front-Bench team and our Opposition Front-Bench team deeply uneasy that they are effectively in an alliance in refusing to recognise the bogus distinction between the so-called military wing and the rest?

**Joan Ryan:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I am hoping that both Front-Bench teams will take note of my speech and come forward with policy decisions that support proscribing Hezbollah in its entirety.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): Is the right hon. Lady aware of the ComRes poll showing that 81% of the public want Hezbollah proscribed in its entirety, and does she agree—I see that there are some very honourable Members on the Opposition Benches—that the Labour Front-Bench team has got this wrong and should agree with the motion, not oppose it?

**Joan Ryan:** Obviously—unless the Labour Front-Bench team is agreeing with my position—we have a difference of opinion, but I am calling on the Government to change their position. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but his point would have far more weight and power if he addressed it to his own Front-Bench team, as they are in a position to lead on this but are not doing so.

**Nick Boles** (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): It is so great to see you back in your seat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I high-tailed it from my office in Norman Shaw South when I saw the right hon. Lady on the television screen and was absolutely inspired by the passion with which she is speaking. She is a friend of Israel, and I am a friend of Iran, but does she agree that you do not have to be a friend of Israel to believe that Hezbollah, in its entirety, is a terrorist organisation? You can be a friend of Syria, a friend of Lebanon or a friend of the entire middle east, but you should want Hezbollah, in its entirety, to be banned.

**Joan Ryan:** Well said—I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation and it should be banned in its entirety—whichever you are a friend of—if you are not a friend of the terrorists. I would add one other thing: it is not just for Jews to fight anti-Semitism, and this is an anti-Semitic organisation; it is for all of us to stand up on that issue.

The distinction is not one that Hezbollah has ever recognised; in fact, it has consistently and explicitly refuted it. In 1985, its founding document stated clearly:

“As to our military power, nobody can imagine its dimensions because we do not have a military agency separate from the other parts of our body. Each of us is a combat soldier when the call of jihad demands it.”

It could not be clearer.

In 2009, Naim Qassem, Hezbollah’s deputy general secretary, made it clear that “the same leadership that directs the parliamentary and government work also leads jihad actions in the struggle against Israel”.

It could not be clearer. He repeated this message three years later, declaring:

“We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other... Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority.”

Those are Hezbollah’s own words.

Also in 2013, Nasrallah himself ruled out any notion that the military and political wings were somehow different:

“However, jokingly I will say—though I disagree on such separation or division—that I suggest that our ministers in the upcoming Lebanese government be from the military wing of Hezbollah.”

He also mocked our Government’s division between the two, saying “the story of military wing and political wing is the work of the British”.

**Joan Ryan:** My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case and we are grateful to her for bringing this to the House. Does she not agree that it should make both the Government Front-Bench team and our Opposition Front-Bench team deeply uneasy that they are effectively in an alliance in refusing to recognise the bogus distinction between the so-called military wing and the rest?
That is what he said. It is a distinction that, with good reason, many other countries throughout the world do not recognise. Those that do not include the Netherlands, Canada, the US, the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The right hon. Lady’s passion and clarity on this issue are absolutely right. I agree that it is incumbent on the Government in principle—I hope those in the Opposition Front-Bench team would follow—to change the policy. Is it not absolutely possible to work with the Government of Lebanon—a Government with whom we are extremely friendly and whom we are assisting to defend herself against the predations of ISIS, initially, and now of other factions in Syria? Is it not absolutely possible to assist our legitimate and welcome allies in Lebanon against those things, yet still call out this terrorist group for what it is, for the violence it is committing in Syria and for the destruction it is carrying out in northern Israel and all around the region?

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman is right. Those Governments that do proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety do talk to the Lebanese Government. If Hezbollah wishes to change its views on Israel—to not obliterate it—and to signal that it will give up its arms, I am sure that, whether it is proscribed or not, that would be the right road to take if it wished to take part in any peace negotiations, which it clearly does not.

Many Members of this House do not recognise the false distinction between the military and the political wing, as is evident today. Last summer, marchers at the al-Quds day parade in London displayed Hezbollah flags, causing great offence to many, especially in the Jewish community. Once again, they were exploiting the utterly bogus separation that the Government choose to make.

I pay tribute to Jewish communal organisations, such as the Community Security Trust, the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council, which have tirelessly campaigned on the issue of Hezbollah proscription. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), as well as the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) and the Mayor of London, for their efforts to persuade the Government to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety.

I note not only the Government’s unwillingness to do so but their inability to explain or justify why they will not act. I understand that, in conflict situations, it is sometimes necessary to keep open channels of communication to facilitate dialogue and to encourage those who are engaged in violence to abandon the bomb and the bullet for the ballot box. However, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that this is Hezbollah’s intention. In both its rhetoric and its actions, this leopard shows no sign of changing its spots.

Nor do I accept the notion, which Ministers have previously advanced—that banning Hezbollah’s political wing might somehow—the Chair of the Select Committee touched on this—impede our ties with Lebanon, where Hezbollah exercises not just military but political power. Proscribing Hezbollah in its entirety does not appear to have hampered relations between Lebanon and any of the countries we have already referred to. I am deeply concerned that this Government are simply not taking the threat posed by Hezbollah seriously. Only last week, I was informed by the Home Office that it does not collect data on the numbers of Hezbollah members or supporters in the UK, a practice that is followed by other European countries, such as Germany.

The Terrorism Act 2000 allows the Home Secretary to proscribe an organisation which:

“(a) commits or participates in acts of terrorism,
(b) prepares for terrorism,
(c) promotes or encourages terrorism,”

including the unlawful glorification of terrorism, or

“(d) is otherwise concerned in terrorism.”

As I have demonstrated, Hezbollah, the leaders of which assert that it is unified and indivisible, more than fulfils those criteria. Even if a distinction between the political and military wings could be drawn, the words of the former in promoting, encouraging and glorifying terrorism surely meet the Government’s criteria for proscription.

After last June’s terrorist attack at London Bridge, the Prime Minister said “there is, to be frank, far too much tolerance of extremism in our country.” I agree. Hezbollah is an organisation that is driven by a hatred of Jews, that promotes and encourages terrorism and that calls for the destruction of the middle east’s only democracy—a key British ally in the region. However, as long as the Government do not proscribe Hezbollah’s so-called political wing, the tolerance will continue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest an informal time limit of around 10 minutes to 12 minutes.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), because she made an exceptionally powerful speech on an issue that matters to so many of us. I refer the House to an entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests regarding a visit to Israel that I undertook in February. I thank the many constituents who have contacted me about this important debate today to make their views clear: they want to see Hezbollah banned in its entirety. Mr Deputy Speaker, it is wonderful to see you back in the Chair, even for a debate on a matter as sad and as serious as this.

As the right hon. Lady stated in her speech and as many others stated in their interventions, the distinction currently made in our law between Hezbollah’s political and military wings is artificial. Hezbollah is a single operation, and that has been stated by its leadership on numerous occasions. For example, its deputy leader, Naim Qassem, has said that Hezbollah has “one leadership and one administration”.

Hezbollah’s political leaders have a long history of personal involvement in the group’s terrorist and criminal activities. For example, its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, is believed to have taken part in hostage taking, plane hijacking and violent attacks on rivals.
Hezbollah presents a clear danger to the security of our country. The decision to proscribe parts of the organisation was prompted by the 2012 attack on a bus of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria. As we have heard this afternoon, the list of its crimes and atrocities is long and includes the notorious truck bomb in Buenos Aires in 1994 that killed 85 people and injured many others. It was the deadliest terrorist outrage in Argentina’s history. Just a few years ago, when a Hezbollah operative in Cyprus was found guilty of planning to attack Israelis, he said he was “collecting information about the Jews” and that that was what his organisation was doing everywhere in the world. We should be under no illusion: Hezbollah poses a serious threat to the citizens of this country and to our neighbours across Europe, and we should proscribe it in all its forms.

In taking that step, the Government would have considerable support both from this House and from the public. Yesterday, the Jewish News published details of a wide-ranging ComRes representative poll that it commissioned. Of some 2,000 people questioned, 44% would support the political wing being designated a terrorist group, compared with just 10% who were opposed. With 46% answering “don’t know”, that means that 81% of those expressing a view backed the designation of the whole of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation.

We should be in no doubt about whether the question we are debating today matters in a real, practical way. By limiting proscription to the so-called military wing, we are undermining the ability of the police to protect us from the danger posed by this group. The fact that some parts of Hezbollah are not proscribed limits the ability of law enforcement agencies to seize funds using asset freezing and forfeiture powers. Classifying the whole organisation as a terrorist group would significantly constrain its ability to raise funds and would stop it using UK banks to transfer money around the world.

I emphasise that terrorism is not the only type of unlawful activity in which Hezbollah is involved. Just a few weeks ago, the French authorities referred a 15-member Hezbollah cell to a criminal court on money laundering charges. In October 2015, the US and French authorities arrested two individuals from Hezbollah, one in Atlanta and one in Paris, who were caught laundering drugs proceeds and seeking to purchase weapons and cocaine. According to court documents, they used “Hezbollah-connected associates” to provide security for narcotics shipments. One of those associates was located in the UK and apparently laundered £30,000 for a US Drug Enforcement Administration undercover agent who was posing as a narcotics trafficker.

The partial proscription of Hezbollah has not deterred the group from engaging in criminal conduct on British soil. Moreover, the Community Security Trust reports that Hezbollah has been heavily involved in the drugs trade in South America. In February 2016, the DEA uncovered a massive Hezbollah money laundering and drug trafficking scheme. In the view of the DEA, Hezbollah enjoys established business relationships with the South American drug cartels and is responsible for trafficking large quantities of cocaine into Europe and the US.

Proscribing an organisation is a serious step. It is right that the law sets out clear criteria that must be satisfied before a Minister can take such a decision. There can be no doubt that the parts of Hezbollah that are overtly terrorist and military fall squarely within the definition in section 3(5) of the Terrorism Act 2000, the relevant legislation. In my view, there is a very strong case to say that the criteria of subsection (5) are also satisfied in relation to the political wing of Hezbollah. The political leaders of the organisation have promoted and encouraged the group’s terrorist activities, as the right hon. Member for Enfield North so powerfully explained. Hezbollah defines itself as one single organisation, which is how it should be treated by our legal system.

Quite frankly, the annual al-Quds Day march is a scandal. It is not acceptable that people can fly the Hezbollah flag on the streets of London and get away with it simply by adding a post-it note claiming the support shown is for the political wing, not the military aspect of the organisation. This has to stop. As the campaign emails that arrived in our inboxes point out, this is an embarrassment. They are laughing at us.

In considering whether to proscribe an organisation, Home Office guidance states that the Home Secretary should take into account factors including “the need to support other members of the international community in the global fight against terrorism”.

It is time we followed the lead set by countries such as the USA, Canada and the Netherlands, which have implemented full proscription.

Hezbollah has been carrying out murderous attacks in countries across the world for more than 30 years. The organisation is heavily implicated in crime and money laundering, as well as being a deeply malevolent presence in the Syrian war. It is a violent, anti-Semitic organisation, and its main ambition is the complete destruction of the state of Israel. We should ban it, all of it, now.

3.30 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): It is absolutely fantastic to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on her speech, and I agree with every word. The speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was superb, absolutely brilliant, and she should be commended for it.

I thank all the people of Dudley who have written to tell me that they think Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation, that they think it should be banned in its entirety and that waving its flag is an incitement to terrorism and violence. As we have heard, the organisation has carried out terrorist attacks and racist murders in the middle east, in Europe and across the world. Its stated aim is the destruction of Israel, but it does not limit its attacks to people in Israel; it targets Jewish people anywhere and everywhere.

It is not true to claim that there is a political wing and a military wing. As has been said, Hezbollah itself does not make this distinction, and the supposed distinction undermines the fight against terrorism. That is why the United States, France, the Gulf Co-operation Council, Canada, the Netherlands and Israel have all proscribed Hezbollah in full, and why I cannot understand why our Government have not been prepared to do the same. I very much hope that that stance will change as a result of the debate this afternoon.
Zac Goldsmith: We have heard in the past that proscribing Hezbollah might somehow destabilise Lebanon and the wider region, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that by engaging in this pretence and indulging a terrorist organisation we are destabilising the many moderates in Lebanon who are determined to marginalise the terrorists, marginalise the extremists and marginalise Hezbollah?

Ian Austin: The hon. Gentleman is right about that. It is a point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North made when she opened the debate and that was made eloquently by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

It is unacceptable to see Hezbollah’s flag waved on the streets of Britain, and it is disgusting to hear the virulently racist abuse and racist chants that accompany it. So I agree with many of the comments that have been made today, but I want to focus on three particular issues.

First I want to talk about Hezbollah’s role in the middle east and its impact on the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. We have debated that many times in this House, but we should be under absolutely no illusion about the difficult issues that will need to be confronted in the negotiations—borders, land swaps, the status of Jerusalem, settlements and so on. Let us be really honest about this; none of those issues remotely interest Hezbollah. It is not interested in the compromises that all sides will need to make to bring about a two-state solution. Its sole interest is the destruction of Israel. Hezbollah has made that absolutely clear. It declared in 1992 that the war is on “until Israel ceases to exist and the last Jew in the world has been eliminated. Israel is completely evil and must be erased from the face of the Earth.”

That is why, when Israel unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah’s response was not peace but the murder and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers and an avalanche of rocket attacks just six years later. It is why, today, Hezbollah, thanks to its Iranian paymasters, threatens Israel by pointing 120,000 to 140,000 rockets at the country.

In October, Hassan Nasrallah, in just one of the Hezbollah leader’s many threats, urged Jews to flee Israel before it is devastated by war. Last February, he warned that there would be “no red lines” in any future conflict between the terror group and Israel. In April, he boasted of his organisation’s preparedness for war, and in June he spoke of the “hundreds of thousands” of Shi’a fighters from across the middle east who would rush to Hezbollah’s side when it next takes the fight to the Jewish state.

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend is making an excellent case, as he always does. Does he agree that it is also important to keep reminding people of the role that Hezbollah has played in training the Houthi rebels, who are causing such terrible carnage, destruction and death in Yemen?

Ian Austin: In Lebanon and Israel, in Syria and Yemen, Hezbollah is causing carnage. That is its stated aim.

Jack Lopresti: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as others have said, one of the best ways of defeating Hezbollah is to encourage and assist a stable, functioning Lebanese state?

Ian Austin: That is correct, and the point was made eloquently by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee earlier. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) goes to the middle east a lot; he knows a lot of people there. He is an expert on the region and what he says is worth listening to. I hope that Ministers will be listening to the advice that they have just been given.

Analysts warn that the next conflict between Israel and Hezbollah “will likely be the most destructive Arab-Israel war yet.” Israel’s military believes that, in a future conflict, Hezbollah will be able to launch 1,500 rockets and missiles a day. Israel has increased its defensive capabilities, but Hezbollah is likely to target military facilities, important infrastructure and civilian population centres.

In the past, Nasrallah has threatened that Hezbollah will attack an ammonia storage facility in Haifa and a nuclear reactor at Dimona. The week before last, I was in Haifa, which is just over 20 miles from the border with Lebanon and is the site of Israel’s oil refinery, making it one of Hezbollah’s main targets. Imagine the carnage, devastation and civilians deaths that could result in a future conflict when Hezbollah start to rain down missiles on Haifa from just a few miles away, as it has done in the past.

Sadly, Israel’s experience in southern Lebanon was repeated in Gaza. Israel signed an agreement with the Palestinian Authority on movement and access to Gaza, which gave the Palestinians control over their borders for the first time in history, allowed imports and exports, and approved the construction of a seaport and discussions on an airport. Israel pulled out of Gaza but, just as in Lebanon, an Islamist movement, a terrorist organisation, a powerful armed militia—this time Hamas, also equipped by Iran and just as committed to Israel’s destruction as Hezbollah—launched a coup, banned elections, drove out Fatah, threw fellow Palestinians from the rooftops, summarily executed people outside mosques after Friday prayers and declared themselves the new rulers of Gaza, saying that they would use the strip as a base to destroy Israel. The unilateral withdrawal of 8,500 Israelis from Gaza was met not by peace but, after Hamas’s brutal takeover, by rockets and attack tunnels. When we look at the experience in Lebanon and in Gaza, we can understand why, whether or not people in this Chamber like it, the Israelis are very reticent about pulling out of the west bank.

As we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), the Iranian proxy Hezbollah poses a significant threat to security and stability in the middle east—explicitly the whole middle east, not just Israel. My second point is that Hezbollah has played a particularly pernicious and powerful role in the internal affairs of Lebanon. Its armed forces have been described as more effective than Lebanon’s army and its military power is occasionally used to pressurise the Lebanese Government, allowing Iran to exercise influence in the country. Once seen as a state within a state, Hezbollah’s growing influence in Lebanon threatens to draw Israel’s northern neighbour, and its army, into any future conflict.

My third point is that, as we have heard, Hezbollah’s so-called resistance against Israel is influenced by its deeply anti-Semitic ideology. The group’s leader Hassan Nasrallah has said that if Jews “all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”
He has also suggested:

"God imprinted blasphemy on the Jews' hearts."

Hezbollah's deputy leader, Naim Qassem, has said that "the history of Jews has proven that, regardless of the Zionist proposal, they are a people who are evil in their ideas."

The late Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, one of Hezbollah's most influential figures, peddled anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jews. He declared:

"The Jews want to be a world superpower...the Jews will work on the basis that Jewish interests are above all world interests."

I have criticised the Government for not proscribing Hezbollah, but I also wish to address some remarks to my party. In 2009, at a meeting of the so-called Stop the War Coalition, which must be the worst or most inappropriately named organisation in British politics, the leader of the Labour party said that he had invited "friends" from Hamas and Hezbollah to an event in Parliament. Later, when asked why he had called them friends, he said:

"I use it in a collective way, saying our friends are prepared to talk."

He also said:

"There is not going to be a peace process unless there is talks involving Israel, Hezbollah and Hamas."

First, who would describe a racist, fascistic and terrorist organisation like Hezbollah as friends? Social democrats—indeed, all democrats—should always be crystal clear about how they describe totalitarian movements and Governments, whether that is Hezbollah or, for instance, the Iranian dictatorship that backs Hezbollah.

Secondly, the statements by the leaders of Hezbollah make it very clear that they have absolutely no interest in the negotiations and compromises that could lead to peace. The idea that Hezbollah is a partner for peace is utterly misguided. Its contribution to the Oslo peace process was to threaten to murder Jewish tourists and businessmen visiting Arab countries that normalised their relations with Israel. Even if we were to set all that to one side, I do not think that the leadership of our party has shown the same interest in speaking to the Israelis. Invitations to meet the leaders of Labour's own sister party, who have repeatedly invited our leader to visit Israel and talk to them about their plans to bring the conflict to an end, have not been accepted.

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is enormously difficult and complex. There are no easy answers. If there were, they would have been found by now. However, some elements are clearer than others, and the case of Hezbollah is one of them. This is an anti-Semitic, racist terrorist group—acting at the behest of Iran—which wishes to drive Jews from the middle east and murder Jews around the world. Hezbollah is part of the problem; it will never be part of the solution. That is why this House and our Government should agree today to proscribe it in its entirety.

3.16 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I say, too, how very pleased I am, Mr Deputy Speaker, to see you in the Chair today? I congratulate the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) on her opening speech and on securing this important debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating it. I should declare an interest as chair of the Council for Arab-British Understanding.

There is no doubt that Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation. Indeed, it is one of the largest, most powerful, most vicious and most dangerous terrorist organisations in the world. Although it is, ostensibly, a political party, and one of the key political players in Lebanon, it also overtly and rigidly adheres to the Shi'ite revolutionary agenda of Iran. Its emergence in 1982 in the wake of the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon was directly attributable to the intervention of Iran. The influence of Iran was made clear in Hezbollah's manifesto, dated 1985, which stated:

"We are the sons of the umma—the party of God, the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran."

Hezbollah, in truth, is an Iranian proxy, closely associated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and, like Iran, it considers the United States and Israel its principal enemies. Early in its existence, Hezbollah pledged allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini, and since Khomeini's death in 1989 it has continued allegiance to his successor, Ali Khamenei.

Central to the ideology of Hezbollah is the concept of resistance, chiefly to the United States and Israel, and resistance is Hezbollah code for terrorist activity. Indeed, the history of Hezbollah has been one of one terrorist act after another. In April 1983, very shortly after its formation, it carried out a suicide attack on the United States embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people. Six months later, there was another suicide bombing—of the US Marines barracks in Beirut—which killed 241 US nationals have been repeatedly targeted by Hezbollah, and, indeed, Hezbollah was responsible for killing more Americans than any other terrorist organisation until the 9/11 attacks on New York city.

Israel and Israeli interests have also been the repeated targets of Hezbollah terrorism. After Israel withdrew from south Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah carried out numerous cross-border incursions, culminating in an attack in July 2006 that killed eight Israeli soldiers. In the conflict that followed, Hezbollah fired thousands of Iranian-supplied rockets into Israeli territory, killing 39 civilians and 120 soldiers.

Hezbollah has also planned and executed many other terrorist attacks outside the region, including on the European continent. Two Hezbollah operatives are being tried in their absence for the 2012 bombing of a bus carrying Israeli citizens at Burgas airport in Bulgaria. Such actions are seen as part of the "resistance" to Israel that is one of Hezbollah's avowed objectives. Many of the attacks have been on non-Israeli Jewish people and Jewish interests—the right hon. Member for Enfield North catalogued those attacks extensively.

Quite understandably and properly, Hezbollah's activities have led to it being designated a terrorist organisation in many parts of the world. In 1996, Israel listed Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, followed by the United States in 1997. It has also been proscribed by Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, France and Bahrain. In March 2016, the Gulf Co-operation Council designated it a terrorist organisation, stressing its status as a proxy for Iran in regional conflicts, including with the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. The secretary general of the GCC, Abdul Latif bin Rashid Al Zayani, commented:

"The GCC states consider Hezbollah militias' practices in the Council's states and their terrorist and subversive acts being carried out in Syria, Yemen and Iraq contradict moral and humanitarian values and principles and international law and pose a threat to Arab national security."
Very recently, in November last year, most of the Arab League’s 22 members condemned Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, stating that it was supporting terrorist groups across the middle east by supplying them with weapons, including ballistic missiles.

The United Kingdom’s position on Hezbollah has been somewhat more nuanced. In 2001, the UK proscribed Hezbollah’s External Security Organisation under the Terrorism Act 2000. That proscription was extended to the military wing, including the Jihad Council, in 2008 as a consequence of Hezbollah’s targeting of British soldiers in Iraq. The UK was also instrumental in persuading the European Union to designate the military wing a terrorist entity in 2013.

However, the British Government have consistently been reluctant to extend the proscription to the entirety of Hezbollah. In an explanatory memorandum to the European Scrutiny Committee in August 2013, the then Minister for Europe, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), stated that although the UK does not engage with Hezbollah’s political wing, some EU member states do engage with it as a political party in Lebanon and therefore had concerns over the effect of EU designation on that engagement. He explained that by distinguishing between Hezbollah’s political and military wings, the designation would not prevent those member states that have contacts with Hezbollah’s political representatives from maintaining such contact.

The Minister stated in the same memorandum that the military wing of Hezbollah was separate from the political wing, which included Ministers, Members of Parliament and other representatives, and was overseen by a political council. I suggest that such a distinction is completely illusory. The fact is that Hezbollah itself denies that there is any distinction to be drawn between its military and political wings.

Nick Boles: My right hon. Friend is making a persuasive speech. Does he agree that it would be as absurd to suggest that one could distinguish between the British Government and the British armed forces, and that somehow one could declare the British armed forces to be an enemy without declaring the British Government and the British armed forces, and that such a distinction is completely illusory. The fact is that Hezbollah itself denies that there is any distinction to be drawn between its military and political wings.

Mr Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend, who is entirely right. More to the point, Hezbollah itself agrees with him, because in 2000 its deputy secretary general, Naim Qassem, declared: “Hezbollah’s Secretary-General is the head of the Shura Council and also the head of the Jihad Council, and this means that we have one leadership with one administration.”

In 2012, Qassem said: “We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other. Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, is in the service of the resistance and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority.”

So Hezbollah is, in reality, a single entity, and it is ludicrous to suggest that it is not.

As a single entity, Hezbollah is a threat to the entire world. British interests, not least, are affected by it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) gave a catalogue of the extent to which Hezbollah carries out activities that are directly threatening British interests, and is also carrying out crimes on the streets of Britain. At an unwargually less dangerous but nevertheless highly offensive level, Hezbollah protesters routinely display Hezbollah flags on the streets of London at events such as al-Quds day, disingenuously labelling then flags of the political wing of Hezbollah, rather than its military wing.

It is very clear that the partial ban is not having the desired effect, or much effect at all. The Government have contended that banning the organisation in its totality might destabilise the political order in Lebanon. I would suggest, however, that the greatest destabilising influence in Lebanon is Hezbollah itself. Even as we debate today, four Hezbollah members are being tried before the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in connection with the murder of the late Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri. Hezbollah forces have supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. The organisation continues to conduct terrorist attacks against Israeli interests.

While I understand the Government’s concerns and anxieties, I suggest that partial proscription has not had the effect either of curbing Hezbollah’s terrorist activities or of clearing Hezbollah from the United Kingdom. Hezbollah is on our streets, defiantly waving its flags and thumping its nose at the British Government. I consequently urge the Government to reconsider their stance and to conclude that Hezbollah—a dangerous, aggressive terrorist organisation that is a threat to regional stability and to the security of this country—should be proscribed in its entirety.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great privilege to follow so many excellent contributions from all parts of the House. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for securing this extremely important debate and for her very powerful opening speech.

Hezbollah is a radical Shi’a Islamist terrorist organisation founded in Iran soon after the 1979 revolution. It is an anti-Semitic organisation that carries out acts of international terrorism. It should be proscribed in its entirety. Instead, the UK accepts the spurious distinction between Hezbollah’s political and military wings, banning the military wing but permitting the so-called political wing to operate. As hon. Members have pointed out, Hezbollah itself does not accept this distinction. In 2012, its deputy secretary General, Naim Qassem, said very explicitly: “We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other.”

The evidence that Hezbollah engages in terrorism and engenders hate is overwhelming. Hezbollah was behind the bombing of the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994, killing 85 people. It has murdered people—Jews, Christians, Muslims and others—in places such as Nigeria, Thailand, Bulgaria and Cyprus. It is complicit with the murderous Assad regime in Syria. Operating with Assad and Iran, it is part of the “axis of resistance” that seeks to confront Sunni power, western influence and Israel. It is a malign influence.
Hezbollah specifically promotes anti-Semitism. Al-Manar, Hezbollah TV, was the first media outlet to make the false claim that 4,000 Jews or Israelis did not go to work in the World Trade Centre on 9/11, allegedly on the basis of advice from Mossad. This lie has now become a widespread anti-Semitic libel. Hezbollah’s message incites violence. Esther Webman, who has studied Hezbollah’s anti-Semitic motifs, has concluded that Hezbollah’s brand of anti-Semitism is typical of contemporary violent Islamist groups. She describes it as “combining traditional Islamic perceptions with Western anti-Semitic terminology and motifs to express its opposition to Zionism. Zionism, in turn, is equated not only with the State of Israel but also with imperialism and with Western arrogance.”

This issue has very serious implications for us in the UK. At the annual al-Quds march in London last June, Hezbollah’s green and yellow flag—the same flag displayed in military operations—was put on show. The purpose of the march and of al-Quds day itself is to agitate for violent resistance and the destruction of the state of Israel. At the centre of the flag, the largest Arabic word in green reads “Hezbollah”, out of which emerges a globe with an upraised arm grasping an assault rifle. The letter A of Allah is linked to the upraised arm grasping the assault rifle, signifying the ideological legitimisation of Hezbollah’s armed resistance as being divinely sanctioned. That message is clear, menacing and extremely powerful. The menacing chants at the march on the streets of London this year included the heinous cry:

“Zionists/ISIS are the same.
Only difference is the name.”

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Lady is making a very powerful speech. It is also worth pointing out that the march was led by the director of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, who, during his speech, blamed the Grenfell Tower tragedy on the Zionists. As we all know, the word “Zionists” is a euphemism for Jews. The whole enterprise was just entirely bonkers, as well as being anti-Semitic.

Mrs Ellman: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. I will refer to the Grenfell Tower disaster in a moment.

All this is inciting violence, hatred and division on the streets of the UK. This is happening as anti-Semitic offences in this country reach record levels, as shown in the recent Community Security Trust report. There are many other disturbing recent examples of incitement to hatred, and I will now mention the important point raised by the hon. Gentleman. Tahra Ahmed, a volunteer running a network helping the survivors of the Grenfell fire tragedy has claimed that the 71 people who perished were “burnt...in a Jewish sacrifice”.

That is horrendous—horrendous incitement to hatred.

On the march at that al-Quds event, some marchers held flags with small stickers attached to them stating:

“I support the political wing of Hezbollah”.

This was designed to give the marchers protection against any legal challenge—pretending that the political wing of Hezbollah is somehow a separate entity. This is a farce. The flags indicate military might, and their display incites hatred on our streets and division in our communities.

I recently went to see the Metropolitan police to express my great concern about expressions of hatred on our streets, specifically in relation to the al-Quds march, but also in relation to other recent events. I asked the police why they were not taking any action against this incitement to hatred. It was clear from the discussions that ensued that a key factor in the police’s failure to act was that Hezbollah’s political wing is not illegal, and neither is displaying the flag.

Dr Offord: I, too, have met the Metropolitan police, including Pat Gallan, who informed me that the Met had a Queen’s counsel opinion stating that they are not able to take any action, for the reason the hon. Lady outlined. Pat Gallan did not feel that it was appropriate for me to read the opinion, but a legal opinion is simply that—just an opinion.

Mrs Ellman: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point that should be pursued. My discussions with the Metropolitan police made it clear that its decisions on how to deal with individual incidents are to do with the legal situation at the time, the need for freedom of expression and the police’s interpretation of how those two aspects interact. Opinions are important, but so is incitement on our streets.

It is time for change. The fallacy that Hezbollah has two separate sections should be exposed. Under UK law, only the so-called military wing of Hezbollah is listed as a proscribed terrorist organisation. Evidence from abroad and on our streets in the UK is clear that Hezbollah is a single, terrorist, anti-Semitic entity. It is guilty of mass murder abroad, it promotes terrorism and discord across the middle east, and now it is importing anti-Semitism and anti-Western hatred on to the streets of London, sowing discord and division in our communities.

I call for Hezbollah to be banned in its entirety. I hope that those on the Opposition Front Bench are listening hard to the contributions from Labour Members, but the Government are responsible for what happens and I ask the Minister to take action.

3.36 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I apologise for ducking out of the debate earlier. I wanted to sign the book commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day, and I recommend that other Members take the opportunity to do so before it closes in about half an hour.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) on securing this debate. Hezbollah claims to be the party of God, but it is simply a genocidal, anti-Semitic terror group based in Lebanon that seeks the destruction of Israel and the extermination of all Jews worldwide. The organisation is well known, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) reminded us of the terror attack that took place in 1994, with the bombing of a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people. The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) reminded us of the comments by the leader of the Labour party who infamously described Hezbollah as his “friends”. Well, they are no friends of mine.

Hezbollah is a creation of Iran. It is one of Iran’s most important and powerful international terrorist proxies, and it gives it extensive access to the Arab world. Iran has provided hundreds of millions of pounds for Hezbollah’s weapons and technology, and salaries
for tens of thousands of fighters. In June 2006, Hezbollah secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, confirmed that he was “open about the fact that Hezbollah’s budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran”.

Before leaving office in December 2016, former UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, reportedly had concerns about Nasrallah’s remarks and stated that Iran’s supply of weapons to Hezbollah violates a long-standing arms embargo against the country.

With Iran’s support, Hezbollah fighters have been deeply engaged in supporting the regime of Iranian ally, President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and gaining battle experience, probably in preparation for their next attempt at conflict with Israel. Hassan Nasrallah has repeatedly threatened Israel with war, warning that Hezbollah is ready to strike anywhere in Israel with “no limits”. Iran has established rocket factories in Lebanon under Hezbollah’s full control, which together with military provisions and other weaponry are located throughout civilian villages in southern Lebanon. As the hon. Member for Dudley North reminded us, the terror group now has up to 150,000 rockets capable of striking the whole of Israel.

Last week, I presented a petition to the House on behalf of 896 people in my constituency who are calling on the Government to proscribe the political, as well as the military, arm of the Hezbollah organisation under the Terrorism Act 2000. The Government currently distinguish between Hezbollah’s so-called political wing, and its military wing, even though the group itself does not.

I have attended the al-Quds march on many occasions, and most recently I went last year with former MP Michael McCann, who spoke at the event. We witnessed the yellow flags of Hezbollah, which feature a large green assault rifle, being waved with impunity on our streets. Despite the countless representations made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), the Metropolitan police and Ministers have failed to take any action.

The Islamic Human Rights Commission, which organises the march, has provided guidance on its website for participants, advising that although flags of illegal organisations could not be waved at the event, demonstrators could bring a Hezbollah flag to show support for its political wing. I take some credit for that being on the website because two years ago I called on the Met to ban the march. I received abuse, but also correspondence from the so-called Islamic Human Rights Commission, which told me that it had never had any illegal flags—it was, of course, referring to those of Daesh, not Hezbollah. Subsequently, it has advised people that they should put a post-it note on their flags to say that they are supporting Hezbollah’s political wing, not its military wing.

The Home Secretary has recently explained the position on offences in respect of displaying flags: “For an offence to be committed, the context and manner in which the flag is displayed must demonstrate that it is specifically in support of the proscribed military wing of the group.”

Taking that into account, flags flown at the march featured the disclaimers that I have mentioned, even though we have been reminded that the organisation itself does not recognise any difference between the two wings.

**Dr Matthew Offord**

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Hezbollah is appalling and I would very much like to see it banned. Only one argument might say that it should not be: the security services might be—we will never know this—advising the Minister that it is better to keep it where we can see it rather than send it underground. That might be the only argument against a ban.

**Dr Offord:** I am not in favour of banning things, I have to say. But the hurt, resentment, agitation and general disruption that this annual march causes—not only to the Metropolitan police, but to the people of London—should in itself lead to its being banned. This year, I called again on the Metropolitan police not to allow the march to go ahead. Infuriatingly, days after the Grenfell Tower fire, with the police massively stretched by the tragedy, the organisers insisted on going ahead with the march even though the Met did not have the resources to police it. That was reprehensible on the part of the IHRC.

This year, the march was led by a director of the IHRC, Nazim Ali, who in a speech, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) mentioned, blamed the Grenfell fire tragedy on “the Zionist supporters of the Tory Party”.

He also accused the Israel Defence Forces of being a “terrorist organisation that murdered Palestinians, Jews and British soldiers.”

Participants in the rally called for the destruction of Israel and waved slogans, including one stating “We are all Hezbollah”. Shockingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the Leader of the Opposition has spoken at the annual event in the past. I take this opportunity to call on him not to do so again in future.

As we have heard, senior Hezbollah officials have repeatedly said that Hezbollah is a single entity, proudly stating that “resistance” is their “priority”, and even publicly mocking the UK and other European countries for distinguishing between the two wings.

**Joan Ryan:** The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, which I agree with. I should just say that in response to the al-Quds march and the resulting complaints and offence, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has asked for Hezbollah to be proscribed.

**Dr Offord:** The right hon. Lady has made a really good point, and I want to respond; I am grateful that she took my intervention earlier. She is absolutely right—there is an issue with not only Labour Front Benchers but Government Front Benchers. I certainly hope that they hear what I am saying today. This is not about one party or another. I do not seek to make this a party political issue, but when I see the shadow Home Secretary rolling her eyes at some of the comments made by Labour Back Benchers, that makes me think that her heart is not really in this issue and that she is not as concerned as many Government Members—or, indeed, many Opposition Members.

According to Home Office guidance, “Under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Home Secretary may proscribe an organisation if she believes it is concerned in terrorism, and it is proportionate to do. For the purposes of the Act, this means that the organisation: commits or participates in acts of terrorism; prepares for terrorism; promotes or encourages terrorism (including the unlawful glorification of terrorism); or is otherwise concerned in terrorism.”
It is worth reiterating that senior Hezbollah officials have openly and repeatedly stated that no substantive separation exists between so-called “political” and “military” wings. Given that fact, I believe that Hezbollah meets the criteria for full proscription under the Terrorism Act.

It is not just the Jewish community in this country who are distressed by Hezbollah’s overt presence in the UK; it also distresses those of us who deplore terrorism and hate all kinds of bigotry and those of us who want this country to be a welcoming and safe place for our many diverse communities.

A number of Members are unable to be here today because they have returned to their constituencies. No doubt they will be attending this weekend’s Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations. However, we must not underestimate the strength of feeling among the British public in favour of rooting out anti-Semitism and hatred wherever it occurs. Anti-Semitism is rising throughout Europe, and as we commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day on Saturday, we must be the ones to say, “Enough is enough.” It is in the best interests of us all to proscribe Hezbollah in full.

Let us demonstrate our commitment to tackling extremism by finally putting aside the mistaken belief that Hezbollah has a political wing. It quite simply does not exist. My constituents think we should not wait any longer before admitting that, and so do I.

3.46 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for securing this important debate. It has been excellent.

I think that it incredibly important for the Home Secretary to take a clear look at Hezbollah, its activities and the positions that it takes. As we know, it is involved in a number of terrorist activities and has made clear its desire to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, but the main concern that I wish to raise today concerns its anti-Semitic language. Let me take a moment to read out some of the comments made by leaders of Hezbollah to emphasise how shocking they are.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, has been quoted as saying—I read this out with deep discomfort—“the Jews…are a cancer which is liable to spread…at any moment.”

He has also said:

“If they all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”

Such views are expressed not just by Nasrallah, but by his deputy. Naim Qassem has been quoted as saying:

“The history of Jews has proven that, regardless of the Zionist proposal, they are a people who are evil in their ideas.”

I am sure that Members on both sides of the House agree that those comments are utterly deplorable and should be challenged at every opportunity. Such language should not be allowed to continue, because it feeds into a terrorist ideology that calls for the destruction of Israel, but also of the wider Jewish people. We have heard it in the past, and we stood up against it then. We should stand up against it now as well, because the use of such language in our society should not be tolerated, whether it is used here or elsewhere in the world. There is absolutely no place for it.

What is especially pertinent when we recommit ourselves to standing up to this hate-filled language is that, as we speak, many people are gathering near Parliament Square to remember the holocaust at the Holocaust Memorial Day service. I was torn today: I wanted to take part in both events, but I chose to come to the House and make my speech. Only a week ago, colleagues stood here in the Chamber and movingly marked that auspicious day.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is the power of words. The aim is to explore how language was used in the past and is used in the present. It reminds us never to be complacent. Right now, an organisation that calls for the annihilation of one of our allies and a whole ethnic population is lawfully allowed to be supported in this country, and last year, as we have heard, its flags were flown on the streets of our capital. Hatred should not go unchallenged, wherever it may raise its ugly head.

The British Government must stand strong with resolve and say, “Enough is enough, and we will not stand for their hatred and terrorist activity.” We can all agree that Hezbollah is a dangerous organisation that commits terrorist crimes across the world in the name of its warped view of Islam and that repeatedly vocalises hate-filled language towards a group that it wishes to exterminate. There is no room for its deep-seated hatred—none at all. Therefore, in response to this debate, I hope the Home Secretary—although not present—will ensure that she listens in full to the concerns raised from across the House today.

3.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in this House, but especially on this issue. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and all other Members who have spoken. If I may pick out one Member, the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) set the scene very well for us all. When she asked me to accompany her to the Backbench Business Committee to request this debate, I was happy to do so, as I wanted to take part in the debate. As someone who has lived through a terrorist conflict and who bears the emotional and political scars that other—some very gallant—Members have, this topic is of great interest to me.

The first question we must ask ourselves is, what is the first duty of Government? As clearly outlined by every Member who has spoken, the first duty of any Government is to protect the public. Are we protecting the public? Can we do better? Yes, we can. Protection cannot, of course, be guaranteed; there will always be those determined to break through or get around whatever security measures our Government have put in place. But it is the Government’s job to do what they can to ensure that in a free society people can go about their lives facing the smallest possible risk of crime or terrorist attack. The debate is taking place because there has been a failure to provide that protection.

On 4 June 2017, the day after the London bridge terror attack in which eight people were killed and 48 injured, the Prime Minister—my Prime Minister, everyone’s Prime Minister—stood in Downing Street and said:

“…while we have made significant progress in recent years, there is—to be frank—for too much tolerance of extremism in our country.
So we need to become far more robust in identifying it and stamping it out—across the public sector and across society. That will require some difficult and often embarrassing conversations, but the whole of our country needs to come together to take on this extremism”.

On 22 June, the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), following a statement on terrorism, called on the Home Secretary to ban Hezbollah. To support his request he gave a first-hand account of what he cited as a celebration of the terror group Hezbollah that he witnessed on 18 June at an Al-Quds rally in central London. He explained in some detail how people were walking down the streets of this city waving the flag of the genocidal terror group Hezbollah—that is what it is—while simultaneously mocking the British laws that allowed them to do so. He described how frustrating that was. There can surely be no greater and more blatant illustration of the Prime Minister’s view that we are far too tolerant of extremists. That shows why this debate is important.

It is also important to remember the context. In 2017, a year marred by terror attacks in Manchester and London, our Government allowed that march to take place. I question why that was allowed.

In response to the hon. Member for Newark, the Home Secretary agreed to come back and discuss the matter with him and if necessary to come back to this House. I understand that there has been a chasm of silence since then, which concerns me. As with many issues, there may be a belief that, if we let matters sit and cool, sometimes people do not demand firm action to be taken. This is not one of those times and the Home Secretary’s commitment must be actioned.

I thank the right hon. Member for Enfield North and the colleagues who backed the call for this debate. We can have a full discussion today and we will hopefully have action. We look to the Minister. The call for action is coming from Members in all parts of the House.

Let me make it clear that this is not a campaign to satisfy a handful of MPs; it goes much wider than that. In a campaign organised by the Israel Britain Alliance and its numerous partners, more than 10,000 people have written to their MPs to register their concerns about the Government’s delusion that Hezbollah is two separate organisations and to highlight the Government’s dereliction of their first duty to protect the public. For the record, the publicly available evidence that Hezbollah is a single organisation with a single command structure has been proven beyond all reasonable doubt. In addition, the Government’s own assessment of Hezbollah’s capability renders their stance untenable and demands the protection that the evidence points to.

I am concerned that we are not being given the full story about the need that is said to be there; it has been said that there may be some evidential base out there. We want to see that in the open. The Government are not being given the full story. Only three and we know who they are. As I said, I am concerned that we are not being given the full story. Only three days ago, in answer to a question from the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), the Minister said:

“...The military and political activities of Hizballah are distinct, though links exist between the senior leaders of the political and military wings. The UK proscribed Hizballah’s External Security Organisation in March 2001 and in 2008 the proscription was extended to Hizballah’s military apparatus.”

My concern is that, by dragging our feet over taking the necessary action, we are placing the British people in grave danger. It is our responsibility to look after them.

**Bob Stewart:** Please do not think that I support Hezbollah. All I say is that there might be some reason that we cannot know about—that even I, who have been in military intelligence, cannot know about—for not banning the political wing of Hezbollah in this country. It might be something very important, and it might be that the decision has been made to protect us from a much more difficult situation. I do not know.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention, but let us make the position clear today: we want the proscription of Hezbollah. That is the thrust of this debate. That is what we are about. There are not two wings in Hezbollah.

**Joan Ryan:** I should like to clarify this point. Most members of the armed forces cannot comment on these issues, but very senior members of our armed forces who are no longer actively serving have made it clear that they think that this is a false division, and that Hezbollah should be proscribed in its entirety. I agree with them, although I understand that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is not saying that he supports Hezbollah.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. In a moment, I will give the House an example of an ex-soldier who has knowledge of the situation and whose position will become clear. Perhaps then, everyone in the Chamber will understand why we need and want this proscription.

Hezbollah leaders have openly stated that there is no separation between its component parts. The group in its entirety meets the criteria for full proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000. Its leaders have repeatedly encouraged terrorism and supported jihad and martyrdom. Hezbollah has been responsible for attacks on Jewish people across the globe, yet last year, as the hon. Member for Newark witnessed, people with Hezbollah flags marched down Oxford Street celebrating Al-Quds day with complete disregard and with the AK-47 on their flags. If that is not provocative and illegal, I would like to know what is. Along with the flags and banners that day, we had all the associated inflammatory rhetoric because the purpose of the demonstration was to agitate for violent resistance and the destruction of the state of Israel under the euphemism of “liberating al-Quds”—Jerusalem. The context was militaristic, not political.

The domestic consequence of the current Government policy that the Minister will repeat in due course is a fabricated division that allows public support for a terrorist organisation and anti-Semitism to flourish freely on our streets. These actions are detrimental to social cohesion and damaging to community relations, and that is why Hezbollah must be banned. Many Members across the Chamber have made it clear that we have taken a stance against anti-Semitism. The Government have taken a stance against it, but there are others who need to be stronger when it comes to taking that stance, and we encourage them to do so.
Colonel Richard Kemp, to whom I referred a moment ago, is the former head of the international terrorism team at the Cabinet Office. I hope that we can all respect the fact that his credentials are impeccable as he explains his view of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s position. He says:

“The Foreign Office deludes itself that by appeasing Hezbollah it can influence the organisation. And that it will do its killing elsewhere. Instead this gives legitimacy to Hezbollah. Piling appeasement on appeasement, Britain and the rest of the EU hope to mollify Iran, the biggest state supporter of terrorism. They know designating Hezbollah would enrage the ayatollahs.”

Ian Austin: The hon. Gentleman is right to quote Richard Kemp. I refer him to Lord Dannatt, the former Chief of the General Staff, who has made exactly the same point. I am not calling into question the motives of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) or asking why he said what he did; I am just saying that Richard Kemp and Lord Dannatt both make the opposite point. I think that, if such intelligence existed, they would be aware of it.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and for putting on record that extra evidential basis. The Foreign Office position appears to be creating two delusions: first, that Hezbollah is not a single organisation and, secondly, that it will do its killing elsewhere. Colonel Richard Kemp’s column in The Times devastates another Foreign Office fable, namely, that we are not in danger. He says:

“During the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hezbollah was involved in Iranian-directed bombings that killed well over 1,000 British and US servicemen. Despite this, in Britain and elsewhere in Europe Hezbollah can freely raise funds for terrorism. Its supporters flaunt their assault rifle-emblazoned flags on our streets. They maintain sleeper cells in this country: planning, preparing and lying in wait for orders to attack.”

I commend our security forces for their good work, which everyone in this House endorses and supports. Our intelligence services are the best in the world and we are very happy to have them.

When we hear such things, we say to ourselves, “What damning testimony there is.” I see you looking at me, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am coming to the end of my speech. Those in the Foreign Office who seek to appease, and who are fearful of offending the ayatollahs, are allowing people on our streets to celebrate an organisation that has been complicit in the killing of British soldiers. We have a responsibility to look after, nurture and care for our soldiers and their families, and the situation cannot be allowed to continue. It is past time that the Government did the right thing and banned Hezbollah. Members may ask what that will achieve. Let me quote Hezbollah’s Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, on that question:

“The sources of our funding would dry up, and the sources of moral, political, and material support would be destroyed.”

If we are looking for a good reason to proscribe Hezbollah, that has to be one.

Dr Offord: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a consequence of the Iranian nuclear deal is that money is going from Iran directly to Hezbollah and other terrorist proxies in the middle east?

Jim Shannon: I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman. I commend him for his contributions in this House, and he has been a stalwart supporter on this matter.

During debates on the Iran nuclear deal, he and I said the same thing on opposite sides of the House, and it was good to have that consensus. Many others joined us.

We need to proscribe Hezbollah for the very reason that I have outlined: its sources of funding will dry up, and its moral, political and material support will be destroyed.

Theresa Villiers: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that extending proscription in the way that pretty much every Member has called for is important if we are to ensure that Hezbollah cannot use the banking system in this country to further its evil ends?

Jim Shannon: If we starve Hezbollah of its funds, we will take away the blood that it needs to exist. It is important that we do that. Proscribing Hezbollah and removing all its resources—the bones in its system—is one way to achieve what we want. I believe that the British people will happily accept the proscription of Hezbollah.

Mr David Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree, however, that although we require the complete proscription of Hezbollah as an organisation, we should never lose sight of the fact that it is a proxy for the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard corps, which is causing so much havoc and distress throughout the middle east and beyond?

Jim Shannon: I fully endorse the right hon. Gentleman’s sentiments. It is clear to me and, I think, everyone in the House that the Iranian national guard has such control that its influence and encouragement extend to Hezbollah. Where do we find it in the world? It is everywhere where there is contention, murder and conflict. That is the frustration we have.

Putting the public at risk and changing the odds in favour of terror suspects and against those who protect us is, at best, grossly complacent and, at worst, disastrous for public security. In memory of the British victims of Hezbollah, this terror group, this scum of the earth, should be banned from this day forth.

4.5 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): This has been a passionate but thoughtful debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and her colleagues on bringing it to the House.

Members have repeatedly made it clear that Hezbollah in its broadest sense has engaged in atrocious terrorist activity. They have highlighted attacks in the middle east and beyond. In 2012 in Bulgaria, a bus of Israeli tourists was blown up. In Buenos Aires in the 1994, the bombing of the Israeli embassy was followed by the detonation of explosives outside the Argentinian-Israeli Mutual Association. Plots and activities have extended to Thailand, Nigeria, Cyprus and many other countries. Those arguing in favour of the motion have made a powerful case for full proscription. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and others have highlighted the knock-on consequences of sticking only with partial proscription for law enforcement here, including the seizing of financial assets.
Is there any possible counter-argument? In supporting partial proscription, the Home Office under the previous Labour Government pointed to the “legitimate political, social and humanitarian role Hizballah plays in Lebanon”. while in a debate just before Christmas, when this issue was raised, the Security Minister pointed out that Hezbollah formed part of the Government of Lebanon. That has meant that much of this debate has focused on whether Hezbollah is just one organisation and whether it is realistic to divide it into political, military and terrorist parts, as some countries do, including the UK—but not just the UK—for the purposes of proscription. In the December debate, the Minister himself said:

“If...the non-military wing is viewed as not separate...we will review the situation, use the law and take the required steps.” —[Official Report, 19 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 1018.]

Members have argued today that these are false and unreal distinctions, pointing even to the rhetoric of Hezbollah itself and arguing that there is a unified decision-making power in the Consultative Council.

The next question is: does it matter that there is a degree of unity at the top, if there are clearly distinct branches that can be separated? It is only fair to record that different countries have taken different approaches to that question. For the Netherlands, as we have heard, it did matter and was conclusive. In its annual report in 2004, its general intelligence and security services stated:

“It can also be concluded that Hezbollah’s political and terrorist wings are controlled by one co-ordinating council. This means that there is indeed a link between these parts of the organisation. The Netherlands has changed its policy and no longer makes a distinction between the political and terrorist Hezbollah branches”.

In fairness, not all countries take that approach. It is not, for example, the approach taken in Australia, where what it refers to as the External Security Organisation of Hezbollah is listed as a terrorist organisation but not Hezbollah as a whole. In the statement explaining their decision, the Australian Government do not seek to argue that they are very distinct organisations. They describe on one hand a “pragmatic political organisation with deep roots in Lebanese society”

that “maintain a social welfare network that encompasses education and health services”,

but at the same time include what they describe as “a branch”—the ESO—responsible for “the planning, coordination and execution of terrorist attacks against Hizballah’s enemies outside of Lebanon”.

Despite the fact that the Australian Government take the view that the ESO is a branch of a bigger organisation, they simply chose to proscribe the branch rather than the whole organisation. So different Governments can come to different views.

As some hon. Members have pointed out, it is relevant to note that under the 2000 Act, the Home Secretary has powers but not a duty to proscribe organisations—it is a “may”, not a “must”. As some have alluded to, one wonders whether there are other considerations at play here, including a desire to keep certain diplomatic channels open and concerns about maintaining stability in Lebanon. In the past, the President of Lebanon has asked the EU and its member countries not to proscribe Hezbollah, describing it as an essential component of Lebanese society. However, in response, the right hon. Member for Enfield North fairly points out that countries that do proscribe the whole group continue to play a diplomatic role in the country—things do not have to end there. So I do not envy the Minister the task he has or the decisions he has to make.

One problem I have raised before in debates on the proscription of terrorist organisations is that the information hon. Members have at their disposal is, I suspect, but a drop in the ocean compared with what is available to the Minister making the decision, and I think that was essentially the point the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) alluded to in his intervention. I wonder whether there may be a role for the Intelligence and Security Committee in scrutinising such decisions and in advising Members more generally.

In conclusion, I congratulate hon. Members on bringing about this debate and on posing serious and difficult questions to the Government. I am sympathetic to the case they make, and I await the Minister’s response with interest, because it is fair to say that, so far, there has not been a coherent counter-argument.

4.10 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): First, I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the application led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and for allowing these important issues to be brought forward. While nobody in the House would deny the right to peaceful protest, we should of course debate in the House when offence and distress are caused by public displays, and we should also debate these important issues of proscription.

I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Dudley North (Ian Austin), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for their contributions to the debate.

I want to deal with the issue of the displaying of Hezbollah flags, which, at least in the short term, is what led to this debate. Let me say at the outset that Labour Members unequivocally condemn support for violence and acts of terrorism, the likes of which have been described in the Chamber today. We are grateful to the police and to our security services for the work they do daily in keeping us all safe.

Many Members have spoken about the current position regarding proscription. It is of course correct that, in March 2001, the Hezbollah External Security Organisation—part of the military wing—was proscribed. In July 2008, that was extended to the whole military wing, including the Jihad Council. The then Home Office Minister, Tony McNulty—a former Member of this House—said in the House on 15 July 2008 that the proscription of Hezbollah’s military wing would not affect the role it played in Lebanon, but it would send out “a clear message that we condemn Hezbollah’s violence and support for terrorism.” —[Official Report, 15 July 2008; Vol. 479, c. 195.]

It is, of course, the case today that Hezbollah forms part of the Parliament and the Government of Lebanon.

More recently, in December of last year, the Security Minister said: “Those organisations”—this includes Hezbollah—“are not proscribed in their entirety. Their military wings are proscribed, but as Hezbollah forms part of the Government in Lebanon...the proscription applies only to the military wing.” —[Official Report, 19 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 1008.]
It is for the Government to keep under review the organisations they proscribe. These are always careful decisions, and clearly, in difficult and volatile situations, there has to be a balance between making absolutely clear our abhorrence at the use of violence to achieve political ends and, at the same time, seeking to facilitate and encourage solutions to conflict through participation in the democratic process.

It is for the Government, on the information they have before them—not all of which, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) pointed out, may be in the public domain—to be vigilant in keeping the list of proscribed organisations under review. The statutory test is under the Terrorism Act 2000, and of course, as the Opposition, we will hold the Government to account on their application of the test, as we did just before Christmas in relation to a number of other organisations. I ask the Minister today for the assurance he has previously given that the situation is always kept under review.

I want to turn to the current position on proscription, but I want first to make an aside, if I may, because it is important. An internal document containing the position of those on the Labour Front Bench got into the public domain today. While colleagues may or may not disagree with it, there is an issue, in that the front of the document contains the work email address of a member of my staff. Before I came into the Chamber today, he had already received an email, as if he personally was responsible for the position of the entire Labour Front Bench, which clearly is not the case. I ask the organisations that are displaying that document on the internet and elsewhere to remove the work email address of my member of staff, so that he does not receive any more emails. It is for us in this House, not our staff, to take responsibility for our positions, and our staff do an excellent job for us.

For the displaying of a Hezbollah flag to be an offence under section 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000—I was interested in the remarks made by the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) about that—it is correct that it has to be in support of the proscribed elements of the group. However, that does not mean that nothing can be done. I have not read the QC’s advice to which the hon. Member referred, but I would be interested in a dialogue with either the Metropolitan police or other police forces from around the country on this matter. Law enforcement agencies on the ground judge the context and circumstances in which the flag is flown, but that of course relates to the 2000 Act. There are other, wider criminal offences in respect of public order; displays that cause harassment, alarm and distress, and incitement, all of which can be enforced on the streets of our country.

Ian Austin: My hon. Friend is completely right to say that his member of staff’s email address should not be displayed on the internet. I imagine that he is referring to the brief.

Nick Thomas-Symonds indicated assent.

Ian Austin: My hon. Friend is completely right about that, but I am concerned about some of its contents, to the extent that he has mentioned the document, why does it not mention Hezbollah’s anti-Semitism? Why does it suggest that Hezbollah could be a partner for peace when it is absolutely clear that it has no interest at all in the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will make two points to my hon. Friend. First, when briefings are prepared, they tend to focus on the narrow issue of the debate, but let me be clear that we condemn anti-Semitism in all its forms. Secondly, with regard to peace going forward, we have to be careful about closing off diplomatic channels. For example, I was interested to read the comments made by former Prime Minister Tony Blair about Hamas only a few months ago. He was talking about the boycott of Hamas after the Palestinian elections of 2006 and said:

“In retrospect I think we should have, right at the very beginning, tried to pull”

Hamas

“into a dialogue and shifted their positions. I think that’s where I would be in retrospect.”

While I do not for a moment underplay the terrible violent acts, we should be careful about our maintenance of engagement in these difficult conflicts around the world.”

Zac Goldsmith: Can the hon. Gentleman give an example of when not proscribing the whole of Hezbollah has in any way facilitated a move towards peace—just one example?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To ask about what would have happened had the whole organisation been proscribed is clearly counterfactual. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that is entirely hypothetical.

Theresa Villiers: Hezbollah is a violent, genocidal terrorist organisation dedicated to the destruction of the state of Israel, and I challenge the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman to support the calls that have come from both sides of the House today to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Nobody supports terrible, violent, barbaric acts; we simply look at the situation as it is and try to strike a balance. I have already set out—[Interruption.] I will deal with the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) in a moment. I have already set out that I would be happy to speak to police forces around the country about using the powers that they have at the moment.

The Opposition absolutely condemn the violence, and we continue to support the proscription of the military wing of Hezbollah, which has been the Government’s position. We believe that engagement with the Government and Parliament of Lebanon is important for the wider middle east peace process, and we should be careful about damaging that engagement, but it is of course a question of balance.

Mr David Jones: It was, of course, a Labour Government in 2008 who drew the distinction between the military and political wings of Hezbollah. Everyone who has spoken in this debate today regards that as nonsense and fiction. What is the position of the Labour Front-Bench team?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have heard a number of speakers make the point about the links. I simply observe that their activities are distinct—the activities of violence, which we absolutely condemn, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, engagement with the democratic process.
Labour Members have supported the balance that the Government are striking, which is not to say that I am not sensitive to the views I have heard from both sides of the Chamber. I respect those views.

When analysing the difficult and important matters of proscription, the balance as it stands, which we support, is proscription of the military wing. That should not at this stage be extended to the political wing, for the reasons I have set out.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I congratulate hon. and right hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), on securing this debate and raising this important issue.

The Government are proud to be a friend of Israel, and we are proud to support working with Israel. No Conservative Member, and no one in this House, supports the use of terrorism or violence. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and I have often been on the wrong side of terrorist attacks. I have first-hand experience of violence, intimidation and terrorism, and no one more than me wants to see people who use violence to progress their beliefs being stopped, prosecuted and put away, or driven out of this country at the bare minimum.

Perhaps I should start by reassuring hon. Members that the Government are determined to do all we can to protect our interests and friends abroad, and to disrupt those who engage in terrorism. Proscription is an important, but not the only, part of the Government’s strategy to disrupt the activities of terrorist groups and those who provide support to them.

As many Members have said today, Hezbollah was established during the Lebanese civil war and in the aftermath of the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in 1982. From the outset, resistance to Israel has been an important part of Hezbollah’s agenda. However, Hezbollah also represents Lebanon’s Shi’a community and, over time, has gained significant support from that community. Hezbollah provides social and political functions in Lebanon. As a major political group and the largest non-state military force in the country, Hezbollah clearly plays an important role in Lebanon.

The UK Government have long held the view that elements of Hezbollah have been involved in conducting and supporting terrorism and, as a result, proscribed Hezbollah’s External Security Organisation in 2001. Not only did I listen but I heeded many of the comments made today about Hezbollah’s statements and beliefs, which are outrageous, disgusting and should be condemned at every opportunity. Hezbollah is anti-Semitic and wishes the destruction of our ally and friend, the state of Israel. We support none of that.

In 2008, in recognition of more such activity, proscription was extended to include the whole of Hezbollah’s military apparatus, namely the Jihad Council and all the units reporting to it. Hezbollah’s military wing is also designated in the UK under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010. Funds or economic resources owned, held or controlled by Hezbollah’s military wing in the UK therefore can be, and will be, frozen. In July 2012, the EU designated Hezbollah’s military wing a terrorist organisation under the EU asset freezing regime.

Although the proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety is kept under review, our current position maintains a balance. I have heard from many Members today that Hezbollah’s military and political wings are indivisible, joined at the hip and centrally led. That is not, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) pointed out, the view of every country. Australia, New Zealand and the EU take a different view. I pledge to the House that we constantly monitor these groups and individuals involved in them. We constantly review the use of proscription as a means to take action where we see fit.

I wish to reassure hon. Members. It has sort of been implied that Ministers pick who to proscribe off the top of their head and that we ignore our security services, the police and the military. Colonel Richard Kemp is often quoted. Ministers do not make up proscription decisions over a cup of coffee. We make them on the recommendations submitted to us by our law enforcement agencies, security services here and intelligence services overseas, and we make a judgment.

Mr David Jones: My right hon. Friend says that it is not the view of every country and every security service that Hezbollah is indivisible. Is not his difficulty that it is Hezbollah’s own view that it is indivisible, and considers itself a single organisation?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point, but he must recognise that it is difficult to separate Hezbollah from the state of Lebanon. Hezbollah is in the Parliament and the Government, and that represents a different challenge from that which we find with many other terrorist groups.

Ian Austin: The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), dealt eloquently with the point about Hezbollah being a single organisation. As the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) has said, Hezbollah’s political affairs official, Ammar Moussawi, stated:

“Everyone is aware of the fact that Hezbollah is one body and one entity. Its military and political wings are unified.”

That is what they are saying; it is not what we are saying. That is the point that the Government should consider.

Mr Wallace: With all due respect, I disagree with my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee. I visited Lebanon in June last year to meet the Government, the Lebanese armed forces and other agencies, including the United Nations, to discuss the future of Lebanon. I disagree with that view about engaging with the Lebanese Government and what barriers could or could not be removed to that.

Zac Goldsmith: I have a simple question: does the Minister believe that the United States has any difficulty engaging in dialogue with Lebanon, given that it has taken the view, as the House has clearly done today, that both parts of Hezbollah are one and the same—that there is no division?

Mr Wallace: The United States finds it harder to engage with Lebanon than does the United Kingdom. I visited the United States embassy when I was in Beirut.
and spent time at the memorial to the US Marines killed there. The United States does not take these things lightly. It does what it can in Lebanon to secure it as a strong state. It has proscribed Hezbollah in its entirety for some time. As we heard from Opposition Members, that has not prevented Hezbollah from growing exponentially—it has not been a silver bullet and it has not stopped Hezbollah behaving as it has. That is why I made the point earlier that proscription is only one tool in dealing with terrorism, hatred and incitement.

**Jim Shannon:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Wallace:** No. I should press on before giving way.

The Government do not condone any terrorist activity and we continue to press Hezbollah to end its status as an armed group and to participate in the Lebanese democratic process on the same terms as other political parties. As hon. Members will be aware, groups that are not included on lists of proscribed organisations are not free to spread hate, fund terrorist activity or incite violence as they please. Not being proscribed does not mean that groups can do lots of things that we would view as illegal.

**Dr Offord:** Let me cut through the rhetoric and ask a simple question: what does the Minister think is the motivation of British nationals flying the flag of a foreign political organisation whose stated aims are to kill every Jew and to annihilate the state of Israel?

**Mr Wallace:** I am not going to speak on behalf of protestors walking down Oxford Street whom I have never met. I listened to the points my hon. Friend made earlier about frustrations with the police taking action, and what I will say is that the police already have comprehensive powers to take action against individuals under criminal law, regardless of whether an organisation is proscribed. The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) also made that point from the Opposition Front Bench.

Whether it is part 3A of the Public Order Act 1986, or part 3 itself, which is about racial hatred, that Act gives the police the powers to prosecute people. It is perfectly possible for someone to stand up with a national flag and incite hatred or religious hatred, and to then find themselves prosecuted for and convicted of a criminal offence. Not proscribing Hezbollah in no way prevents the police or the Crown Prosecution Service from taking action against that type of incitement. I certainly hope that the CPS and the police listen to the concerns expressed by Members today—I shall certainly raise those concerns when I next see them.

I heard the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) that not proscribing Hezbollah somehow hinders our police; it absolutely does not. Those people might be involved in drug dealing or money laundering. I was previously Minister for Security; I am now Minister for Security and Economic Crime. There is a plethora of offences on the statute book and powers that we can use to weaken Hezbollah and prevent it from doing things that are illegal either in the criminal space or in ways that go against our national security. This does not hinder the police in the way being alluded to, which is that without the proscription of the other half, this country will somehow be unable to protect its citizens and its interests from Hezbollah’s actions.

**Jim Shannon:** I am reminded of the analogy of the Siamese twins. The two twins are the Hezbollah of politics and the Hezbollah of armed insurrection and guerrilla warfare. The blood that flows through one flows through the other. We are suggesting to the Minister, very gently—perhaps very forcefully—that we need Hezbollah to be proscribed because by doing so we will take away their money and resources and their moral and political livelihood. If we do that, we can stop the killing. That has to be the way forward.

**Mr Wallace:** With due respect to the hon. Gentleman, we take action against Hezbollah and non-Hezbollah actors where they are involved in criminality and when the intelligence or evidence is provided for us to be able to take action, and we do so across a whole range of issues. It is not the case that because the political wing is not proscribed, we sit back and do nothing about it. We do everything we can when evidence is presented. The worrying thing about the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) is that people have presented evidence to the police, or sat down with them and told them about some of those statements about Grenfell Tower, but no action has been taken. I think that everyone in the House would urge the CPS and the police to use the range of powers at their disposal to take action and not tolerate such horrendous statements and incitements.

**Mrs Ellman:** I gave examples of hate speech on our streets, but it appears that the police are reluctant or unable to take any action against it. Does the Minister not agree that that is appalling? Also, does he not agree that had Hezbollah been proscribed, the people on that march waving flags would simply not have been allowed to go ahead with their hate speech and incitement?

**Mr Wallace:** On the hon. Lady’s first point, it is not acceptable if the police or CPS do not take action when there are offences that would allow them to do so. It is not always that they are not able; it may be a choice that they have made, either because of resources—we can debate that—or perhaps because they have found that, for the public good, they could do something about it later. I stood on the Falls Road for many months of my life watching paramilitary flags go past. When I was a soldier on those streets, we had the power to do something, but, perhaps for the good of the public order, the view was that we should not do anything about it. I do not know about the individual motives of the people on the march the hon. Lady mentions or of the police on that day, but it is not the case that they do not have the power to do something. This House has given them the powers, year on year, over many decades, to take action.

I think that we all feel, especially in this social media age, in which we are often inundated by hate and intimidation, whether on Twitter or in emails, that there is a broader debate about how we can deal with and prosecute hate and extremism in this country. Unfortunately, from my point of view it seems to be on an upward rather than downward curve among some groups of people in society.

Political parties of all colours need to send very strong messages to supporters, allies or over-excited individuals who seek to take our parties’ names and use them alongside hatred, anti-Semitism, racism and Islamophobic comment. All that is unacceptable. We should not forget
though that we need to encourage our police and CPS to take action and to set an example with regard to some of these plans. As I have said, the Government continue to exercise proscription power in a proportionate manner in accordance with the law, and we will continue to monitor groups and people of concern.

Section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000 provides a power to the Home Secretary to proscribe the organisation if she believes that it is concerned in terrorism. The Act specifies that

"an organisation is concerned in terrorism if it commits or participates in an act of terrorism, prepares for terrorism, promotes or encourages terrorism, or is otherwise concerned in terrorism."

If the test is met, the Secretary of State must then exercise her discretion to proscribe the organisation. In considering whether to exercise this discretion, she is also guided by the nature and scale of the organisation’s activities, the specific threat that it poses to the United Kingdom, the specific threat that it poses to British nationals overseas, the organisation’s presence in the United Kingdom and the need to support other members of the international community in tackling terrorism.

Given the wide-ranging impact of proscription, the Home Secretary exercises her powers to proscribe only after a thorough review of the available relevant information and evidence on the organisation. For an individual to be proscribed, the police and Crown Prosecution Service must have evidence to the criminal standard of beyond reasonable doubt that the context and manner for which the flag is displayed, for example, aroused reasonable suspicion that the individual is specifically a member, or a supporter, of that proscribed group and elements of a wider group.

Peaceful protest is a vital part of our democratic society. It is a long-standing tradition in this country that people are free to gather together and to demonstrate their views, however uncomfortable or repugnant those can be to the majority of us, but they must do so within the law. There of course a balance to be struck. Protesters’ rights need to be balanced with the rights of others to go about their business without fear of intimidation or serious disruption to the community. Rights to peaceful protest do not extend to violent or threatening behaviour, and the police have powers to deal with as many such acts, as I have said.

The management of protest is of course a matter left to the police. As I said earlier, the investigation and prosecution of all criminal offences is a matter for the CPS and the police. I will happily push to the organisations—the police and the CPS—the messages that I have heard from the House today to make sure that they step up their efforts in this area.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank the Minister for giving way again. The Government have their reasons—I cannot understand them, but they have their reasons—for not wanting to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety. Will he not accept that maintaining this pretence that there is a division between the two branches of Hezbollah reflects very badly on this place and very badly on the Government? It looks like weakness and it is embarrassing.

Mr Wallace: I hear what my hon. Friend is saying. There are lots of reasons, but perhaps I can offer the House one reason. Members may not agree with it, but it is one that I felt at first hand when I was in Lebanon on behalf of the Government. We believe that the best way to weaken Hezbollah in the region and further afield is to have a strong state of Lebanon. The stronger the state of Lebanon, which represents multi-faith groups, has a democracy and Speakers of Parliament and recognises the individual religious minorities in the country, the weaker Hezbollah will be. It is not in our interests to have a weak, fractured Lebanon.

We should not forget that Hezbollah’s birth and strengths started in the civil war of Lebanon, when Lebanese were killing Lebanese, Druze were killing Muslims, and Muslims were killing Christians. We think that the way to ensure that Hezbollah is contained and persuaded to follow the course of peace—I listened to the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) who may or may not believe this and many of us may agree with him—is to have a strong state of Lebanon. That is in our interests.

The British Government assist with aid, help to train the Lebanese army, so that it can defend the state, and encourage Ministers of all faiths in that Government who believe in Lebanon, rather than in a non-military actor or an overburdened group of one minority or another. That is one logical reason why I believe we have to take some of these difficult decisions and find a balance.

When one visits Lebanon and meets the Ministers struggling to survive in a rough neighbourhood, trying to build a nation state and living with a shadow over their shoulder, as we have discussed, one realises that their best defence is a strong and capable state of Lebanon, with all its safeguards and its constitution. They would be worse off, the region would be worse off and we would be worse off if that state was weakened by a fractious civil war.

Dr Offord: That is all very well about Lebanon, but my concern is the constituents of Hendon, when they cannot go into central London and the police are overstretched, when they are spat at and called Nazis and when people are vile and anti-Semitic towards them. My concern is the people of Hendon—the people of this country.

Mr Wallace: I have listened to my hon. Friend. First, the people of this country will not be better off with an even more fractious, divided and murderous middle east. Secondly, he will know that many of the things he has just mentioned are already criminal offences and can be prosecuted.

Dr Offord: Then why aren’t they?

Mr Wallace: Well, as I said earlier, that is a matter for the police, if people are spitting and inciting hatred. In this country, we have operational independence between Ministers and the police. We can talk about whether we are giving them the right resources—we regularly do across the Dispatch Boxes—but fundamentally what will protect my hon. Friend’s constituents, whether they are Christian, Jewish or Muslim, is for Parliament to give our law enforcement and security organisations powers and to fund them, so that they can use those powers to keep us safe by dealing with the threat based on intelligence, as we receive it, and ensuring that we deradicalise people who might be attracted to hate.
If my hon. Friend’s constituents are being abused, that is not a failure of the Government; it is a question to ask the police. We will help him ensure that the police deal with that, but I have to say that it is not because of the partial proscription or de-proscription of Hezbollah. He must understand—I am sure that he does—that a stable middle east is the best way to provide long-term peace for Europe and the United Kingdom. We do not want an unstable middle east at all.

I have listened to the debate and heed the very valid points that have been made by Members on both sides of the House. My commitment as Security Minister is to continue to keep groups such as Hezbollah under review. We will continue to talk to our friends and allies in the region and around the world, but we will fundamentally focus on what we need to do to keep the United Kingdom safe, for the short and long term. I will certainly do my best to encourage the police, other political parties and all our supporters and friends to ensure that hate is not tolerated, no matter who it is aimed at.

4.43 pm

Joan Ryan: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for accompanying me to the Committee to apply for it. For contributing today, I thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside, the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the hon. Member for Strangford. Their powerful contributions have been much appreciated.

I draw attention to the fact that not a single Back-Bench Member who has spoken or intervened today has opposed the motion, which I think speaks volumes about where the House is on the matter. The public agree with us.

As the hon. Member for Hendon said, a ComRes poll reported today shows that 81% of the public also believe that Hezbollah should be proscribed in its entirety.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), said that he is sympathetic to the motion. We welcome that sympathy and hope that it will turn into something a little more forceful policy-wise.

I very much hope to persuade my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who speaks from the Labour Front Bench, that proscribing Hezbollah in its entirety is the right thing to do. I hope to have further discussions with him on this. However, I appreciate the tone that he took in the debate.

The havoc, death and destruction that Hezbollah has caused in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Israel—indeed, across the middle east—as well as in Nigeria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Argentina, Thailand and other places have been outlined today, to our horror. What about the streets of London? The CST has made it clear that the domestic consequences of the artificial division with regard to Hezbollah has consequences here: a policy is pursued that allows public support for a terrorist and anti-Semitic organisation.

The argument the Minister made is a little tortuous. The US, Canada and others proscribe Hezbollah and still manage to talk to it. No peace has been forthcoming from Hezbollah, despite not proscribing it. We are giving moral, political and social authority to Hezbollah by not proscribing it in its entirety. Hezbollah itself does not agree with the Government. The Government should look again at their position. Keeping this under review is not adequate. They are wrong.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation driven by an antisemitic ideology that seeks the destruction of Israel; notes that Hezbollah declares itself to be one organisation without distinguishable political or military wings; is concerned that the military wing of that organisation is proscribed, but its political wing is not; and calls on the Government to include Hezbollah in its entirety on the list of proscribed organisations.
James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The borough of Sandwell is a place that can be very proud of its identity. It is full of rich industrial heritage, with a network of historic towns, and full of many decent, hard-working people from very many diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, however, in recent times, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has become synonymous with local government incompetence, corruption, and cronyism. Frankly, it has become a stain on the reputation of the area. As a local Member of Parliament with a proportion of my constituency within Sandwell, I am only too familiar, when out on the doorstep in Rowley Regis, with local residents’ concerns, anger and disillusionment regarding Sandwell Council.

Too often, politicians of different parties can make cheap political points out of their opponents, but the issues facing Sandwell Council go way beyond that. This calls into question the abuse of power by individual councillors and officers, a manipulation of processes, and a culture of fear and bullying among those who work for and sit on the authority.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Morris: I will give way once.

John Spellar: Oh—we have quite a bit of time. If the constituents whom the hon. Gentleman encounters in Rowley Regis, part of the borough that I live in, are so disillusioned with Labour, why is every one of their council representatives Labour, and with substantial majorities? That is the real test of public opinion, is it not?

James Morris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. No, I do not think that is the test of public opinion. In the borough of Sandwell, different groups and even members of his own party are becoming increasingly aware of the depth of corruption, lack of accountability and failed leadership within Sandwell council, which I will come on to speak about in more detail.

I thought long and hard about calling this debate mainly because, as a democrat, I had hoped that our institutions would now have stepped in and something would have been done to ensure that the people of Sandwell could have faith once again in their local authority. However, despite the years of police referrals, public speculation, leaks and serious allegations, nothing has changed and, unfortunately, I have lost faith in anything being done soon.

While all this has dominated the minds and actions of so many in Sandwell, its political leadership have ignored the very important work they should be doing, which is running public services. For example, the children’s services department has been failing for years, letting down some of the most vulnerable citizens in the borough, and it has received damning Ofsted inspection reports. While councillors have been fighting each other, children have been left in a broken system, and they often do not receive the help they need.

In this debate, I want it placed on the public record that the people of Sandwell have had enough: they want change and they want it now. They want an end to the ever-flowing supply of newspaper cuttings and headlines about local councillors and officers embroiled in scandal. When I was first elected as the Member of Parliament for Halesowen and Rowley Regis in 2010, I had fairly good and constructive relations with the local authority. Despite the fact that the authority was dominated then, as it is now, by the Labour party, the authority seemed to have been run properly. It did not take long for this to start to unravel.

The late Darren Cooper was elected leader of the council following the arrest of the former leader for theft. I feel uneasy when speaking ill of the dead, but following the death of Darren Cooper, a vacuum was created within Sandwell Council that seemed to lift the lid on much of what had been going on, and I find it very difficult to believe that he did not know and was not involved.

Following serious allegations against a number of councillors, a report was commissioned by Wragge and Co., which is now known as Gowling WLG. The report was never meant to see the light of day. It primarily looked at the allegations surrounding Councillor Mahboob Hussain, then the deputy leader, including selling council land cheaply, cancelling parking tickets for family members and bullying. The public and private squabbling to ensure that these reports were kept private was damaging to the reputation of the authority, councillors and officials. It was embarrassing, and further emphasised the feeling of a cover-up.

Despite the fact that these allegations have been in the public domain for several years and that the Wragge report was published in May 2016, it has taken until this month for the council’s standards committee to hold a hearing into them.

The Sandwell Council misconduct hearing found Mahboob Hussain had broken rules—

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Morris: I will not give way again. I made it clear at the start that I would take one intervention from the right hon. Gentleman in the debate.

John Spellar: Well, you’re misleading the House—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman was speaking from a sedentary position and perhaps he thought he would not be heard, but if he is alleging that another hon. Member is misleading the House, I cannot allow that. Even if he said it from a sedentary position, I would be grateful if he now, from a non-sedentary position, withdrew what he said.

John Spellar: I said I am sure the hon. Gentleman for his clarification.
James Morris: The Sandwell Council misconduct hearing found that Mahboob Hussain had broken the rules in a sale of public toilets. It said that the councillor “ignored” a £130,000 valuation, and instead sold them for £35,000 to a family friend. Councillor Mahboob Hussain has denied any misconduct, and of course he has the right to defend himself. West Midlands police have said that there is “insufficient detail” to launch a criminal investigation into the breach. However, James Goudie QC, who chaired the hearing, found that the councillor had breached the code of conduct a total of 12 times. He summarised that by saying that Mr Hussain “compromised the integrity of other council officers by exercising complete control over the action of the sale of the toilet block...The councillor’s actions brought the council into disrepute.”

I am aware that the Wragge report was a contested document, and there are serious questions about its cost and how it was commissioned. As I have said, it was intended never to be made public, and it has reportedly cost the authority about £185,000—a substantial sum. Since the publication of the report in 2016, further historical allegations about a number of individuals have come to light. In January last year, an audit report brought to the public’s attention further and more widespread allegations, all of which are in the public arena and have been published on Sandwell Council’s website. Some of them have not been investigated properly, and where wrongdoing has been proved, that has not resulted in any action being taken. I do not take a view about the nature of the allegations; I merely describe them to give the House a perspective on the level of allegations that have been made about the conduct of some councillors in Sandwell Council.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Given the serious questions that have been raised about the disposal of council land in Sandwell, does my hon. Friend agree that the council should also investigate the case of my constituent, Patricia Barlow? Her late mother repeatedly tried to buy a piece of land next to her house, only to find out—after years of asking—that the council had disposed of that land to another business without even notifying her. Should the council look at the price at which that land was sold, and at whether it was all above board?

James Morris: I agree. My hon. Friend is right, and I will come on to describe other allegations that have been made about land sales in Sandwell metropolitan borough. Those allegations include land sales to Councillor Bawa and Councillor Hussain, for which an investigation found potential collusion and fraudulent practice in public office. Only Councillors Bawa and Hussain, and their immediate family members, submitted bids for those plots in September 1999, and those bids gave the impression of potential cover pricing and bid suppression. For one plot, four bids were received, all from Councillor Hussain and members of his family, without any declaration to the council that that was the case. Two plots that were sold in March and April 2000 were sold at a value below the guide price, and contrary to the agreement at the time the scheme was approved.

Councillor Bawa failed to declare his role as a councillor when a planning application was submitted on his behalf in October 2007, and there are concerns about the disposal of a plot of land that was removed from public auction in order to sell it to Councillor Rouf. Potential breaches of the financial regulations and the members’ code of conduct have also been found. Furthermore, a council house was allocated to Councillor Rouf, even though he had just sold a house for £125,000. Even more astonishingly, Sandwell Council spent £200,000 on the demolition of eight terraced houses and the clearing of the site, only for that to be purchased by Councillor Rouf’s son for £65,000. He was then granted planning permission for a seven-bedroom house, where Councillor Rouf now reportedly lives.

Former Councillor Derek Rowley was allegedly involved in the disposal of a number of council-owned containers to a member of the public. The council’s investigators could not look into that because the man in question is no longer a councillor, but it beggars belief that nothing can be done about such serious allegations of misconduct in public office. Another allegation was about former Councillor Rowley’s involvement in the hire of marquees that allegedly involve the ownership of a company that was not declared and had done business directly with Sandwell Council. Again, the council has not been able to do anything about the issue. It has decided to strengthen members’ and officers’ protocols, but—

5 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

James Morris: All these allegations have exposed a number of incidents in which Sandwell councillors have apparently crossed the line and exposed flaws in how councillors and officers have behaved.

I come now to the next stage of this saga: the election of Councillor Steve Eling as leader of the Council. When Councillor Eling was elected leader, he said that he wanted to “drain the swamp”. To his credit, he made sure that the Wragge report was published. However, having watched his leadership over time, I am not convinced that anything he has done so far has brought about a new era of transparency or fairness—if anything, he has behaved in a way in which he has used his political power against individuals in the authority.

I am very concerned that the standards and audit committee, for example, has been used in a way that preserves the leader’s position and has deliberately targeted certain individuals. There are currently two standards investigations live within Sandwell Council, but there are serious questions to be asked about the conduct of the standards committee, its composition and the modus operandi being used to investigate two individuals. It is incredible that the council has spent over £7,000 on two QCs to chair a standards hearing against one councillor, while others have been let off scot-free. Far from draining the swamp, Councillor Eling has allowed the swamp to fester.

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Morris: As I made clear to the right hon. Gentleman, I was going to give way to him only once.

The smell of corruption and cover-up is as strong as ever, and I have come to the conclusion that Councillor Eling must resign immediately as leader of Sandwell Council. Someone has to take responsibility for the rottenness at the heart of Sandwell Council. I do not say that lightly.

Probably none of this information would be available today if it were not for the dogged persistence of a few individuals. Although I do not necessarily always approve
of the techniques or the language used on the Sandwell Skidder blog, it would be remiss of me not to accept that it has contributed an awful lot to exposing what is going on in Sandwell. Because of the blog’s work, Councillor Eling and his colleague Councillor Marshall tried to enlist the support of the blog’s author, Julian Saunders.

I have drawn the conclusions I have about Councillor Eling’s leadership because of the publication of a series of WhatsApp messages placed on the blog. The contents are absolutely astonishing. The messages are primarily from Councillor Richard Marshall, but came following a meeting with Councillor Eling, who wanted to open a line of communication to the blog. They include Councillors Eling and Marshall asking the blog to give the assistant chief executive a “kicking” and supplying information relating to her personal life. Messages were also sent in respect of the senior officer’s employment, including that she had been sent home to “consider her position.” In another case, information was shared about a senior officer leaving the authority before a public announcement was made. There were also leaks of information concerning a Travellers’ site, messages including sexual remarks relating to other councillors, and transphobic remarks. Those are just a few examples taken from the many reams of messages and communications.

The behaviour of Councillor Richard Marshall, who appears to have been under the direct instruction of Councillor Eling, is below that which is expected of those in public or any other office. Councillor Marshall has also been subject to a bankruptcy order, but continued for a substantial time as a cabinet member. That is an issue in itself, and I should be thankful if the Minister would look into it. I cannot see how an elected official can stay in office after being declared bankrupt.

Almost all these allegations have been reported to the Labour party for it to investigate, but I am told that after nearly four months there has been hardly any movement towards a conclusion. It is incumbent on us all—Members of Parliament, councillors, and members of the public—to ensure that when allegations of wrongdoing are raised with us they are passed on to the correct authorities, and that we do all we can to ensure that those allegations are investigated properly and quickly.

One of my fellow Sandwell MPs, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson)—who is not in the Chamber—is, of course, the deputy leader of the Labour party. Right on his very doorstep, there are allegations of fraud, misconduct in public office, sexism and bullying, and he has hardly breathed a word. Of all the people who would be able to step in, call a halt to the reign of some of these councillors and ensure that allegations are investigated properly, he would be the one.

I think that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East has some questions to answer about why he has remained so quiet.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I must ascertain from the hon. Gentleman whether he gave the hon. Member for West Bromwich East notice that he intended to refer to him during the debate.

James Morris: I did, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that.

Over the last few years I have written to the Secretary of State several times about these matters. He has looked into them, and I am grateful for his time. Let me now end my speech by asking the Minister to investigate whether the following actions can be taken.

I should like the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make the strongest intervention possible in respect of the capabilities and governance of Sandwell Council. I should like it to make a series of recommendations which would restore public trust and confidence, and which would be overseen by an independent commissioner. I should like it to look into the behaviour and conduct of both elected and non-elected members of the authority, and I should like those who are found to have behaved inappropriately to be removed from their posts. I should like the Minister to look into the rules relating to councillors and bankruptcy to ensure that those who have been declared bankrupt cannot hold public office, and to strengthen the independence of standards committees by keeping them free from political influence by ensuring that independent members are externally appointed.

There are also many questions to be answered by the local authority, including questions about monitoring officers. Perhaps the Minister could look into that as well, because Sandwell has been through a number of them in the last four years. I should like to know how much the redundancies cost, and whether the use of compromise agreements has been used to gag those people. I understand that such agreements have been used. I should like to understand why, and also why it is so difficult for the authority to keep monitoring officers in post.

What I have said today has, in many respects, probably just scratched the surface. No one will ever know the complete story, and I may well have missed out many things that others will feel needed to be said. I initiated the debate primarily because I felt that it was in the public interest to do so: the public need to know answers, and I will continue to press for the truth to come out. I did so also because I have met and spoken to so many people in Rowley Regis, in Sandwell, and further afield who are gravely concerned. I have spoken to residents, faith leaders, businesses, and others who have given decades of service, including members of the Labour party who were in tears as they spoke to me about the state of political authority and control in the party in Sandwell. They now feel that there is nowhere left for them to turn.

I hope that the Minister has been as disturbed by what he has heard today as many residents of Sandwell are, and I hope that he will be able to intervene in a way that will restore public trust and bring an end to this rotten regime.

John Spellar rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The right hon. Gentleman cannot speak in this debate. In order to do so, he would need the permission, sought previously, of the hon. Member whose debate it is and of the Minister, and the Chair would also expect to
know, and that is not the situation in which we find ourselves, so I am afraid that it is not in order for the right hon. Gentleman to speak.

5.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) on securing this debate on the governance and capabilities of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, and I am grateful to him for raising awareness of these issues of public concern.

I know Sandwell Council has been on a number of people’s radar for some time, especially since the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) raised concerns during business questions to the Leader of the House on 30 October last year; Madam Deputy Speaker, I can tell you that I have informed the hon. Gentleman that he was to be mentioned in this debate. His concerns focused on alleged inappropriate behaviour of a councillor and cabinet member at Sandwell Council.

I am pleased to have this early opportunity in my new role to discuss local government, standards and councillor conduct. It is vital that local government operates effectively because, as we all know, it is in the frontline, delivering essential services to some of society’s most vulnerable. The conduct of local councils and their councillors has a direct impact on the reputation of an area and of their fellow members. Their ability to lead a community and impact the lives of all those they serve is significant, and it is only right that they are held to a high standard.

I want to emphasise up front that the vast majority of local government functions well. There are many examples of innovative and excellent practice to be found across all types of councils, being led by forward-thinking and dedicated public servants from across the political spectrum. But, as in all walks of life, sometimes things go wrong and help is needed, and when councils do require help or advice, it is the sector that is best placed to assist in the first instance. That support is available from the Local Government Association, for which my Department provides funding.

John Spellar: Would the Minister therefore be interested to know that the LGA did an assessment of Sandwell, as it does of boroughs around the country, which said that Sandwell had strong and stable financial management and a clear intention and track record of protecting frontline services? That is what the Conservative-dominated LGA said.

Rishi Sunak: I am about to come on to the most recent local government peer inspection.

The £21 million of funding that the Department has provided has supported training and guidance for members and officers, policy briefings and a programme of external peer challenges.

I will now address each of the points my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis has asked me to respond to. First, on the question of intervention at Sandwell, it is important that I take this opportunity to stress that the decision to intervene in a local authority and remove control from those who have been democratically elected is very serious. Only as a last resort would the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government use his powers of intervention, and only where there is comprehensive evidence of extremely serious and widespread systemic failings in a council. Statutory interventions are rare: the powers have been used only twice in the last five years and only six times in the last 15 years.

I am aware of the allegations that my hon. Friend has outlined today, and of the fact that Sandwell Council has been the subject of extremely negative press coverage that has no doubt undermined public confidence locally and raised serious questions about conduct. I am also aware that, in response, Sandwell Council has recently invited a Local Government Association external peer challenge, which was conducted last week with a team led by the chief executive of Sefton Council. The peer challenge team is due to report back to the council formally within the next week or so. I have every confidence that it will have looked forensically at the council’s strengths and weaknesses and that it will provide clear feedback and robust recommendations. I will be particularly keen to review the team’s conclusions and recommendations, and I am urging Sandwell Council to share them with me at the earliest possible opportunity. I would expect the council to take the results of the external challenge very seriously and to take all action required as a result.

I want specifically to address the points raised about councillor conduct, standards and governance. The Localism Act 2011 provides a broad framework for local authority standards, allowing local authorities to tailor their arrangements to meet local circumstances. The Act requires relevant authorities to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the authority. Each local authority must publish a code of conduct that is consistent with the Nolan principles of standards in public life and that covers the registration of pecuniary interests.

Authorities must make arrangements to investigate allegations of failure to comply with their code of conduct, and in many cases councils have standards committees to undertake that role. If a councillor breaches the code, they can be censured and any portfolio responsibilities or memberships of outside bodies can be removed. The council must consult an independent person before making a decision on a breach of its code of conduct. It is vital that that independence is genuine, so that it can provide proper oversight and good governance. The independent person must therefore be among the electorate; have no political affiliation; have no current or previous association with the council; and have no friends or family members associated with the council. Last week, Sandwell Council recruited and appointed an additional independent person for its ethical standards and member development committee, which is now at its full complement with three independent members and eight councillors. I would of course expect those councillors to take seriously their responsibility to hold their peers to account and provide democratic accountability.

It is also a statutory requirement for all councils to have a monitoring officer to ensure that the council operates within the law. The monitoring officer’s duty is to investigate concerns about conduct, and they are ultimately responsible for ensuring the genuine independence of members of standards committees. I expect monitoring officers to live up to those responsibilities with the utmost seriousness. A new monitoring officer has been
in post at Sandwell since September, and I hope that we will continue to see a change in the council’s ability to get to grips with the long-standing standards issues that have been generating negative attention. I understand that some progress is now being made, albeit somewhat belatedly, on two of the long-standing allegations involving the disposal of council property. As we are aware, there are further allegations that are the subject of a police investigation, so my hon. Friend will obviously understand that I cannot comment further on them. I would encourage the monitoring officer to continue his work in transparently dealing with complaints and allegations and acting without fear or favour.

My hon. Friend asked about the rules on councillors and bankruptcy. I can tell him that the existing legislation is clear that any individual who is subject to bankruptcy orders is disqualified from standing as, or holding office as, a member of a local authority. As part of local openness and accountability, it is right that the disqualification ceases only when the individual has paid his debt in full. I wholeheartedly agree with the principle that it is important that elected members are held to high standards of conduct in public office. If there are allegations that this law has not been complied with, as has been suggested, I would urge the monitoring officer to investigate.

The LGA peer challenge and the sharper focus that the council is giving to standards and conduct are important steps in addressing the issues that the council faces. As my hon. Friend has highlighted, however, it is undeniable that Sandwell has had other significant challenges to address in recent years. Since 2010, the council has received attention in relation to its children’s services, with four “inadequate” Ofsted ratings. An independent report concluded that the council did not, on its own, have the capability or capacity to improve children’s services. That led the Department for Education to issue a statutory direction in January 2016, requiring the council to work with an appointed commissioner for children’s services and develop a children’s trust. I hope that the council will work closely with the children’s commissioner, Malcolm Newsam, and the Department for Education to agree detailed proposals about how the trust will work. The Government are committed to working together to make sure that children and families in Sandwell receive the best possible care and support through the new trust.

In conclusion, as my hon. Friend will be aware, local government is independent of central Government—a principle enshrined in the Localism Act 2011. Through elected councillors—and, where applicable, Mayors—councils are accountable to the communities that they serve, through the ultimate sanction of the ballot box.

John Spellar: As the Minister has 10 minutes, will he give way?

Rishi Sunak: No; I am getting to the end of my remarks. It is clear that Sandwell has had sharp challenges, and the issues that have been highlighted today raise serious concerns, but I am pleased to see that the council has invited external challenge. It is important that the council develops its corporate governance and capabilities, and that the drive for improvement is sustained. I hope that those responsible have taken note of our words.

John Spellar: Give way!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The Minister is not giving way. The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) is normally an extremely well-behaved Member of this House, and I hope that he will revert to that within the next few seconds.

Rishi Sunak: I can tell my hon. Friend for Halesowen and Rowley Regis that I will continue to take a very close interest in the situation, including the outcome of the Local Government Association peer challenge and the steps that Sandwell Council takes to respond to it. I commend my hon. Friend for raising awareness of these concerns on behalf of his constituents. It is absolutely right for him and his constituents to expect and demand high standards of conduct from their local representatives. For our system of local accountability to work, it is important that issues are dealt with swiftly, transparently and rigorously. In the first instance, it is vital that we shine a light on areas of concern. That is exactly what he has done today, and I commend him for that.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 29 January 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU: Research and Staffing

1. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on future participation in EU research programmes and staffing levels in higher education. [903576]

10. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on future participation in EU research programmes and staffing levels in higher education. [903585]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):
We have agreed with the EU that we will continue to benefit from EU programmes until the end of the current budget plan. We have also reached an agreement on citizens’ rights, allowing EU citizens to continue to live here broadly as now, which helps to provide certainty to current staff.

John McNally: The Secretary of State will be aware of the comments made by Professor Andrea Nolan when she told the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs about Brexit

“will have a significant impact on the HE sector, on the staffing profile, and on the student profile, in Scotland.”

Does the Secretary of State understand those concerns, and does he agree with the convener of Universities Scotland?

Damian Hinds: Of course people working in the university sector in Scotland, as throughout the United Kingdom, will be thinking about the future in what will be a time of some change, but it will remain the case that the United Kingdom, including Scotland, has an exceptionally strong message to give to the world on the strength of our institutions, on the attractiveness of coming here to study and on the attractiveness of partnering with our institutions on research.

Chris Law: Scotland’s universities have so far been awarded almost €400 million from Horizon 2020, an 11% share of all funding secured by UK institutions. The University of Dundee in my constituency, for example, has received €21 million from the scheme. Given the scheme’s huge importance, when will the Government tell universities how they plan to square the funding circle after the current Horizon 2020 programme finishes?

Damian Hinds: These are indeed important matters, and officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have spoken to academics from Scottish universities—including, I think, from the University of Dundee—about the future. It is important that we have a guarantee until the end of the Horizon 2020 programme. Of course, what happens with future programmes will be a matter for us to agree with the other nations.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new position. Has he had a chance to read the Social Market Foundation report, published today, on the problems of snobbery between higher education and technical education? Does he agree that universities need to do a lot more to embrace technical education students and degree apprenticeships and that financial incentives should go towards those universities that encourage degree apprenticeships and encourage students with BTECs into technical education?

Damian Hinds: I confess that I have not yet read this morning’s report, but I look forward to consuming it when I have the time to do so with proper attention. My right hon. Friend mentions something on which he has consistently campaigned throughout his time in Parliament, and it is so important that we do not have some sort of wall between the academic and the technical and vocational.

Things such as degree apprenticeships are a great opportunity for more people to benefit from certain types of education and to make sure that we widen participation as much as possible.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in echoing the phrase used by the BBC and, despite Brexit, welcoming this year’s record number of international students in our university system?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is correct that the United Kingdom remains an exceptionally attractive destination for international students. As he says, the number of non-EU international students is at a record high, and of course we want that to continue.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What conversations has the Secretary of State had with the Home Secretary on the contribution made by international students and staff to our British universities and about their classification in immigration statistics?

Damian Hinds: I, the Government, the Home Office and everyone else totally recognise the value of the higher education sector to our country. The Migration Advisory Committee will be looking at the question of international students, as well as the question of migration in general, so that we can consider those things fully.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Since the introduction of Horizon 2020, Welsh universities have received more than £83 million in funding from the programme, enabling their participation in more than 2,000 international
collaborations. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the UK Government intend to negotiate association with Horizon 2020’s successor programmes, so that universities in Wales can continue to benefit from and contribute to such programmes?

Damian Hinds: Horizon 2020 has worked very well for UK universities. In fact, we have the second-highest number of participants in those programmes of any EU state. Of course, it is vital and in everybody’s interest that we continue to work co-operatively with our near European neighbours on many things, including university research.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State and his team to their places. He will no doubt be aware of the challenges of getting young people, especially girls, into STEM careers. Given the importance of those subjects to our economic development, does he agree that the UK’s immigration policy for prospective academic and research staff from the EU should not be restrictive?

Damian Hinds: I alluded a moment or two ago to the Migration Advisory Committee and the work it will be doing. This country has always been clear that we want to remain attractive to and welcome the brightest and the best. We have a very successful and very international, outward-looking higher education sector, and I anticipate that continuing.

Carol Monaghan: The Royal Society of Edinburgh said in its evidence to the Migration Advisory Committee that the UK risks undermining the Scottish Government’s efforts on developing interest in and the uptake of STEM subjects if restrictive immigration policies are put in place. What discussions has the Secretary of State had in this area with the Home Secretary and with university principals, to commit to looking at a tailored immigration policy for Scotland?

Damian Hinds: As I say, we will be looking at all aspects of this, with regard to both students and academics. More widely, the Migration Advisory Committee is looking at immigration and the role it plays in different sectors of the economy. We continue to discuss with our European neighbours what will happen in the future, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Higher Education will be speaking to EU Science Ministers later this week. It is in everybody’s interest that we work for the good of the whole United Kingdom to ensure that we continue to have such a highly successful higher education system.

Literacy and Numeracy

2. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve pupils’ literacy and numeracy. [903577]

22. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve pupils’ literacy and numeracy. [903597]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): In 2013, we published a new primary school curriculum that significantly raised expectations in both English and maths, and promoted the use of phonics in the teaching of reading. In 2012, we introduced the phonics check for six-year-olds. The results of the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—PIRLS—showed nine-year-olds in England achieving the highest ever scores, moving England up from joint 10th to joint eighth out of 50 countries worldwide.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful for that answer. Thanks to some tough decisions by the Minister and sheer hard work by our teachers, reading standards are the highest for a generation. Sadly, disadvantaged children still lag behind, so what are he and the Department doing to address that issue?

Nick Gibb: The PIRLS survey links strong performance in the phonics check with high scores in the PIRLS text. Particularly pleasing is the fact that our rise in the global rankings has been driven by improved performance by low-ability pupils. We are now focusing on strengthening the maths, reading and writing elements of the early years foundation stage to help prepare children for year 1 of primary school. The attainment gap has closed by 10.5% at key stage 2, but we want to go further and close the gap altogether.

Helen Whately: I do regular phonics practice with my children, which, as the Minister has said, is helping children get better at reading. However, there does not seem to the same focus on practising core maths skills in primary schools. What is my right hon. Friend doing to improve maths in primary schools, especially the learning of times tables?

Nick Gibb: I thank my hon. Friend for making sure her children learn their phonics, and she is right to emphasise the importance of children knowing their times tables by heart, up to 12 times 12 by the end of year 4 at the latest. That is why we are introducing an on-screen multiplication tables check for all pupils at the end of year 4 of primary school. The prize is to have all pupils leaving primary school fluent in their multiplication tables, ensuring they have the essential foundation for success in mathematics at secondary school.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The reality is that children can improve their literacy and numeracy only if they are in school. In North East Lincolnshire, children lost nearly 3,500 days of education last year alone. What will the Government do to make sure that another 825 children in my borough next year do not miss out on their education through exclusion?

Nick Gibb: We have made it clear that attendance at school is vital. We changed the definition of “persistent absence” from 15% to 10%, and we have increased the fines that would be applied to parents who do not send their children to school regularly.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have seen independent research by the Education Policy Institute showing that Harrow is the best place to send children to school, so perhaps he will come to my borough to see what is working in terms of literacy and numeracy. If he does, he will meet headteachers who are very concerned about cuts to their budgets as a result of a lack of sufficient funding from the Government. What is he going to do about that?
Nick Gibb: I congratulate all the teachers and pupils in Harrow on their receiving that accolade from the Education Policy Institute. We are spending record amounts on school funding—some £41 billion this year. No Government have spent that level of funding on schools in our history. That will rise further to £42.4 billion next year.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister will know that only 1% of children who move from mainstream to alternative provision during their GCSE years achieve good GCSEs, including in English and maths. What more can be done to support this important group of students?

Mr Speaker: I do not want the House to get the wrong idea; we seem to have gone from Harrow to Rugby, but that does not mean that others cannot take part. We are focused predominantly on the state sector.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) raises an important point. The standards of achievement in the alternative provision sector are not high enough. The children who attend those schools are vulnerable and we want to do more to improve the situation, which is why we have recently commissioned new research into the relationship between schools and alternative provision to find out what more we can do to raise standards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Let us hear about the situation in Wirral.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The situation in Wirral is that we have fine teachers but insufficient Government resources. When it comes to literacy and numeracy, I want all the schools in my constituency to be good or outstanding. In the case of one rapidly improving school, Bebington High School, an administrative delay seems to be getting in the way of teaching and learning, and there is an issue with the resources for that. Will the Minister meet me to find a way to use our leadership to stop red tape getting in the way of children’s learning?

Nick Gibb: I share the hon. Lady’s ambition. We want all schools to be good or outstanding and we want parents to be confident that their local school is a good school that will provide a very high standard of education. I am pleased that there are now 1.9 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools than there were in 2010. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the particular circumstances at Bebington High School.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Greenfields Primary School in Kettering? It has just been ranked in the top 1% of schools in England for progress in reading and writing. Prior to becoming an academy in 2013, it was one of the most challenged schools in Kettering, with progress levels significantly below average.

Nick Gibb: I am delighted to congratulate Greenfields Primary School in my hon. Friend’s constituency. I am almost certain that I have very recently signed a letter to its headteacher to congratulate them on the superb achievement at the school.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Evidence from last year’s key stage 2 SATs shows that the attainment gap between children on free school meals and their peers has widened since the year before. The results for the Minister’s precious key stage 1 phonics for kids on free school meals actually went backwards last year. At least the previous Secretary of State talked the talk on social mobility. Is it not clear that the Government do not walk the walk?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman is not correct. The attainment-gap index at key stage 2 has closed by 10.5%. We have seen a significant increase in the proportion of children who achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths: it rose from 53% last year to 61% this year—an increase of 8 percentage points—and the SATs are significantly more demanding than they were in previous years. We are producing a cohort of primary school leavers who are far better equipped in maths and English, ready for the demands of secondary school.

LGBT Awareness

3. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that all schools teach awareness of LGBT issues in an age-appropriate manner.

12. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that all schools teach awareness of LGBT issues in an age-appropriate manner.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Schools can teach about LGBT issues within the curriculum and they must comply with the Equality Act 2010. We have established a £3 million programme to prevent and address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, and we are making relationships education and relationships and sex education compulsory and engaging thoroughly with stakeholders to inform the design and content of the curriculum in those subjects, ensuring that they are both high quality and age appropriate.

Alex Norris: With the change in leadership at the Department, may I ask whether the new Secretary of State shares the commitment of his predecessor that relationship and sex education lessons must be inclusive, gay, bisexual and transgender inclusive and reflect the needs of all young people?

Nick Gibb: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. We are clear that the new subjects should ensure that young people learn that there are different types of relationships. Schools should ensure therefore that RSE is inclusive and meets the needs of all young people.

Rosie Duffield: Can the Minister provide detail of how schools will be assessed to ensure that they are providing LGBT-inclusive relationship and sex education lessons, and what benchmark will be used to measure this?

Nick Gibb: These are the issues on which we are engaging with subject experts at the moment. We have issued a wide call for evidence from parents, pupils,
teachers and young people, and we will assess that call for evidence before we issue further guidance on the matter. There will be a full debate on the regulations in this House when we draft those regulations.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 gave universities a duty to provide additional support to students with special educational needs and disabilities. However, the Government provided no general guidance or any means for students to ensure that their rights are met, apart from taking the universities to court. Does the Minister agree that that is justifiable?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is thinking of a matter of great importance, but its relationship to the question under consideration is not clear. We are grateful to her, and she may be able to unburden herself further at a later stage if she is lucky.

Further Education Provision

4. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of further education provision. [903579]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We have done a number of things in this area. The area reviews have been an opportunity for every college to reorganise and merge, and we have approved £300 million of restructuring money. Plus six grants have been made from the new £15 million strategic college improvement fund. We have appointed seven national leaders of further education, and the work of the FE commissioner, a vital role, has also been extended.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Minister for her answer. Colleges such as East Coast College are doing great work that will improve social mobility and productivity, but they need to be properly funded. Will my hon. Friend outline the steps that have been taken to ensure that that is the case, so that colleges can deliver a high-quality, rounded curriculum?

Anne Milton: Funding is important, which is why I mentioned those figures. The strategic college improvement fund will be very important. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth merged to form East Coast College, which is a much more financially independent institution. We are also putting £500 million a year into technical education to increase the hours of learning for more than 50% of those on technical routes; providing £20 million to help teachers prepare for those routes; and continuing to protect £4,000 a year for 16 and 17-year-olds. I am very aware, however, that this is a complex sector delivering a wide range of courses in quite difficult financial circumstances.

Mr Speaker: Too long.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her efforts on behalf of Exeter College, which, as she will know, was inexplicably not granted the contract by the Skills Funding Agency to provide apprenticeships through small firms. I would like her to continue those efforts, working with officials from her Department and the agency, because if this is not rectified, or a way through found for this, it will do serious damage both to the provision of apprenticeships in the Exeter area and to Exeter College, which is one of the top performing colleges in the country.

Anne Milton: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has worked very hard on behalf of Exeter College. I praise my officials who continue to work with individual Members to ensure that these problems are ironed out.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the input of businesses is key to delivering high-quality further and technical education?

Anne Milton: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that further education colleges—seven out of 10 have been graded good or outstanding—are absolutely critical in drawing together businesses from the local area. Along with local authorities and local enterprise partnerships, they can have a significant impact on the education and training that young people get.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Wakefield College opened its advanced skills and innovation centre late last year. It is a brilliant new centre to help entrepreneurs start up their own businesses. The one cloud on the horizon is the excellent work done by the college through the national collaborative outreach programme, which is still up in the air following the fiasco of the Minister’s Department over the setting up of the Office for Students. When will she announce the funding for the years going forward and when will my excellent staff be able to continue that good work?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady is right to praise the work of Wakefield College. Such colleges are real exemplars of what can be achieved. I appreciate the importance of outreach work, and that is particularly important when we consider social mobility. I am happy to discuss the matter further with the hon. Lady at any time.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does the Minister agree that sixth-form colleges, such as Richard Huish College in my constituency, are an extremely valuable part of our education system, making the great link between education and employment? Will she kindly meet me to discover whether, in the tertiary review, funding might be available from age 16, rather than starting at 18?

Anne Milton: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend; it would be a pleasure. I was recently at the conference of the Sixth Form Colleges Association. Sixth-form colleges do an excellent job, and I will do everything I can to support them.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Twenty-one per cent. less—that is what a student aged 16 to 19 gets compared with what they get between 11 and 16. This tertiary review needs to start with tertiary education at 16 to 19. Will the Minister confirm that tertiary education for 16 to 19-year-olds will be included in the review?
Anne Milton: The review is currently under discussion. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have my tin hat and battledress on, and I will always battle on behalf of the FE sector and independent training providers for the 50% of young people who do not go to university.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): How can the Minister talk confidently about FE provision when the Government’s whole record on the sector is a mess? In the last 10 days, we have seen apprenticeship starts down by 41% since the levy began; traineeship starts down by 16%; the FE commissioner telling the Select Committee on Education that funding is “unfair” and “sparse”; the Public Accounts Committee roasting the Government over learndirect; and five sector leaders calling for a major levy rethink in FE Week. Will she get a grip on the levy? Will she also ensure that she does not claim that those concerned are running FE down? We are passionate about FE and apprenticeships; it is her party that is split on HE and FE policy.

Anne Milton: I utterly reject the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that the situation is a mess. This is the first time that a Government have really got to grips with this issue. I will be running a training session for Members from all political parties. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman come along to discover that it is very easy to get apprenticeships if we do not care about the quality, but I do care about the quality. It is really important that we raise the quality and raise the numbers, ensuring that young people have the skills they need for the future.

Foreign Language Teaching

5. Jamie Stone (Cairnness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve foreign language teaching in schools. [903580]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Since 2010, the proportion of pupils taking a language GCSE has increased from 40% to 47%. In December, we outlined plans to improve the quality of language teaching in England, where schools with a good track record in teaching languages will share best practice and pedagogy.

Jamie Stone: I also welcome the Secretary of State to his place. I listened to his answer with great interest. North of the border, Scotland’s future economic prosperity will clearly be dependent on young people having the very best language skills. Would the Secretary of State’s Department be good enough to share—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. May I remind Ministers that there is no obligation to provide multi-sentence replies? There is no prohibition on single sentence replies. In fact, some people think that they are quite desirable.

Damian Hinds: That is very fortunate, Mr Speaker, as I do not quite know where to go after that. My hon. Friend makes a very good and interesting point about the value of languages.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): We were all suitably impressed when Emmanuel Macron spoke flawless English in his candid interview with Andrew Marr the other week. That is no surprise given that 80% of children in EU member states start learning a second language in primary school. What is the Secretary of State going to do to ensure that children in the UK do not fall behind their European counterparts?

Damian Hinds: It starts with an international outlook and learning about other countries. Of course, it is also about encouraging more teachers to go into teaching modern foreign languages, and we are working hard on that.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The number of entries for GCSE Mandarin has increased by nearly 50% since 2010. Will the Secretary of State continue to support that language and other languages spoken in the world’s fastest-growing economies?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is exactly right about the importance of Mandarin. Of course, this is a hugely important economy. That is why things like the Mandarin excellence programme are so much in focus at the Department for Education.

Childcare Funding

6. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Government’s policy on funded childcare on the financial viability of childcare settings. [903581]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): By 2019-20, we will be spending about £6 billion a year on childcare support, including £1 billion to deliver 30 hours of childcare and pay the higher funding rates that we introduced in April 2017.

Dr Huq: A recent survey by the Pre-school Learning Alliance has found that one fifth of nurseries do not think they will be financially viable in a year’s time. Will...
the Minister—I know he likes his parties—therefore commit to review the funding rates before more places rated “good” and “outstanding” by Ofsted close down?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Government have always been clear that providers can choose whether to offer parents 30 hours and what pattern of days and hours they offer. Our evaluation indicated that a higher proportion of providers were willing and able to offer 30 hours, with no evidence that financial implications were a substantial barrier to that.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Minister to his place? The Government promised 30 free hours of childcare for all working parents of three to four-year-olds, yet it has been revealed that only a third of providers can offer all the hours for free and that four in 10 do not think they will be able to offer the scheme at all next year. The situation will only get worse if Ministers go ahead with the real-terms cuts in funding of up to £600 a year per child. Will the Minister rethink these cuts, pay providers fairly and keep the promises made to families?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have seen no significant issues with parents gaining places with providers for 30 hours. Of course we keep monitoring the situation, but there are no significant issues. Actually, the numbers are very promising at the moment.

Primary Schools: Academies

7. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What progress has been made on converting primary schools into academies.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Since 2010, the number of open academies and free schools has increased from 203 to almost 7,500. The numbers of primary schools converting to academies has grown significantly. As of the first day of the year, there were 4,592.

Stephen McPartland: Herts for Learning is the only local authority-controlled multi-academy trust in the country. Records at Companies House demonstrate that the local authority has more than 25% of shares in it and is an organisation of significant control. It has been converting primary schools in my area since September. Will the Secretary of State clarify the Government’s position with regard to local authority-controlled multi-academy trusts?

Damian Hinds: Our position is that we limit local authority representation on academy trust boards to 19.9% to help maintain the independence of academies, while ensuring that boards can benefit from the right mix of skills and experience. I am of course very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss whatever concerns and wishes he may have.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the new Secretary of State to his position? Since taking up office, has he had a chance to read and reflect on a letter that the Education Committee wrote to the Minister, Lord Agnew, following our evidence-hearing session with the Minister and the National Schools Commissioner about what we feel is a lack of oversight, accountability and, critically, transparency with regard to multi-academy trusts?

Damian Hinds: We have a framework in place around multi-academy trusts. Academies have been a fundamental part of the improvements that we have seen in schools. Multi-academy trusts, in turn, are a fundamental part of making sure that good practice can be spread more widely across the system. We have the good practice guidance that is published. There are audited accounts and various processes. Ultimately, as Secretary of State, I am accountable to Parliament for the performance of the schools system. In turn, the regional schools commissioners are accountable to me.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend, in promoting multi-academy trusts, also show the role that secondary schools can have in leading primary schools that become part of those trusts? That is very important for people attending primary schools and then going on to the secondary school in due course.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend, with his great experience, makes a very important point. The different phases of education, working together, can share a great deal of expertise.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): All the focus on structures is taking us away from the real issue, which is that this weekend even Tory party donors and academy chain heads were talking about real-terms cuts to funding. That is what I am seeing in the schools in my constituency. Will the Government face up to the real crisis, which is the real-terms cut in school funding?

Damian Hinds: There is more money going into our schools in this country than ever before. We know that real-terms funding per pupil is increasing across the system, and with the national funding formula, each school will see at least a small cash increase. 1

Pupil Premium

8. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Whether he plans to review the operation of the pupil premium.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): As with all policies, we continue to monitor the pupil premium for effectiveness and value for money. Through the Education Endowment Foundation, we seek to ensure that schools are confident in using that evidence.

Michelle Donelan: Wiltshire teachers consistently stress their concerns that many parents fear the potential stigma of registering for free school meals, meaning their children do not get the pupil premium. I have stressed that for years. Will the Minister consider introducing an automatic link between the pupil premium and the benefits system, to ensure that all children who need additional funding get it?

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me be clear: we should not allow any stigma to get in the way of parents seeking the best for their children. We will continue to highlight effective

practice by schools that have made a great effort to get children registered for free school meals and share that practice with all schools and local authorities.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I share the opinion of the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). In rural areas, there is still stigma, and people will not put their children forward for free school meals and, therefore, for the pupil premium. Will the Minister look again at the criteria, to ensure that those children are not losing out?

**Nadhim Zahawi**: We want to make it as simple as possible for schools and local authorities to determine eligibility for free meals, and we are exploring opportunities to make the registration process more efficient.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): In my constituency and across north Northumberland, the pupil premium and the service pupil premium for my military children are valuable additions to the school budget, as targeted interventions for those pupils. However, they are used more effectively in some schools than others. Will the Minister tell the House what plans the Department has to get Ofsted to look more closely at usage and drive best practice across our schools?

**Nadhim Zahawi**: There are unique challenges for servicemen and women who move around, and the Education Endowment Foundation is looking at that very seriously.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The pupil premium is there to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds and to address poor attainment. Is the Minister as concerned as I am that the Northern Powerhouse Partnership has identified that there is a growing north-south divide, which is impacting on attainment, too?

**Nadhim Zahawi**: Everything we are about is narrowing that gap.

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I also welcome the new Secretary of State to his place. I wonder whether he will join me in getting a copy of the Conservative party manifesto from the Library, where it is filed under “Political fiction”. He will notice, under the heading “Fairer funding”, a pledge to protect funding for the pupil premium. Instead, it has been cut by more than £100 million in real terms this spending period. Will he now act to keep that promise?

**Nadhim Zahawi**: I confirm that the figures are the same.

### Engineering Careers

11. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage more young people to consider careers in engineering.

15. **Mrs Keni Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage more young people to consider careers in engineering.

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills and STEM (Anne Milton)**: The Year of Engineering, this year, is a cross-government national campaign to raise the profile of jobs in engineering for all young people. More than 980 partners have signed up to be part of the year, which includes workshops, toolkits for use in schools and site tours.

**Mr Speaker**: Yes, but the Minister was seeking to group this question with number 15, from the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch). Ministers seem a tad discombobulated this afternoon.

**Anne Milton**: Mr Speaker, my very sincere apologies. I believe I did that on another occasion, too. I was answering questions 11 and 15 together.

**Jeremy Quin**: Students from Collyer’s in my constituency came first in the UK national robotics competition and proceeded to represent their country in Washington. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is exactly the kind of innovative initiative that gets people interested in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects and will persuade them to take them up as careers in later life?

**Anne Milton**: The national robotics competition must be the subject of young people’s dreams, and I do indeed congratulate Collyer’s. The £406 million put aside in the autumn Budget to improve skills—particularly STEM skills, including a maths premium for 16 to 19-year-olds—will also drive up the interest in engineering.

**Mrs Badenoch**: I am an engineer, and I started my career as an apprentice. It is the year of engineering, but the industry is facing a shortfall of 20,000 places. Does the Minister agree that apprenticeships are a good, cost-effective way to study engineering, and if so, will she tell me what the Government are doing to promote them?

**Anne Milton**: They are an excellent way to study engineering, and I would point my hon. Friend to degree apprenticeships. The first graduates in digital and technology solutions graduated from Aston last year, as did those in quantity surveying from John Moores in Liverpool. We have put aside £10 million to help with the development of degree apprenticeships, which is a brilliant way for young people to get skills.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Engineering is a fantastic career, as I know very well, but because there are so few women engineers—just 8%—it is much harder for girls in particular to see engineering role models. Will the Minister tell me who specifically is responsible for getting more engineers into schools to share their experience and more schools into engineering companies, and how is their success being measured?

**Anne Milton**: Some 980 partners have signed up, and I would point to the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) is the Government’s envoy for the year of engineering. It is absolutely critical: we are putting real money—I repeat, we are putting real money—into improving the teaching of maths for 16 to 19-year-olds.
This is really important. As I said earlier, we are using further education colleges and local authorities to get engineering companies into schools to talk to children and teach them about the prospects that exist. For any young woman, I would point to the gender pay gap, which they will see is large in engineering organisations, so there is an opportunity out there.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is estimated that the UK will require 1.8 million additional engineers by 2025. The Scottish Government have published a STEM education and training strategy. Will the Secretary of State do something similarly concrete to encourage girls into engineering?

**Anne Milton:** There is a lot of concrete work going on. Going back to the apprenticeship levy, engineering companies with a pay bill of over £3 million are putting money aside—0.5% of their pay bill. Employers want engineers and employers will employ engineers, particularly those doing degree apprenticeships.

**Schoolchildren with Autism**

13. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What progress his Department has made on supporting children with autism at school.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is clearly incredibly important that autistic children are well supported in their education. We have funded the Autism Education Trust since 2012 to deliver autism awareness training to education staff in early years, school and further education.

**Maria Caulfield:** I thank the Minister for his reply. We look forward to welcoming the Secretary of State on Wednesday, when the all-party group on autism, co-chaired by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), launches its education report. Will the Minister commit to implementing the recommendations of our report, so that we can improve the educational experience for children with autism in this country?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I wholeheartedly welcome the report, and I know that the Secretary of State is visiting my hon. Friend and her colleagues on Wednesday, as she said. I look forward to meeting and discussing the report fully with them.

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): My county of Derbyshire is about to cut almost £3 million from children’s services, including almost £400,000 from special needs and disability services to support children. Schools are already struggling, so how on earth will these cuts help, and how will the Government ensure that support for special needs children is improved?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No local authority needs to cut those services. There is actually over £9 billion being invested in children’s services because, as in the case of Hackney, for example, it is seen as a priority, so there is no reason for a local authority to do that.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Minister to his place. The healthy pupils fund was designed to help pupils with a range of health needs. The Department promised to protect the fund in full but has cut it, leaving a £200 million gap between income from the sugar levy and its spending commitments. Can the Minister explain why he is content to see funding in this area slashed, and will he guarantee that there will be no more cuts?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Not only is the Department spending the £275 million from the sugar levy; we are going over and above that. We are spending over £400 million on making sure that students are healthy.

**Ofsted Inspections**


The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Schools have always been subject to inspection by Her Majesty’s inspectors and, from 1992, by Ofsted. Since 2010, we have simplified inspection, reducing graded judgments from 27 to just four. We have freed our best schools from routine inspection and introduced lighter-touch inspections for good schools.

**Layla Moran:** We face a teacher retention crisis in this country. One head in Oxford recently described to me how she and her staff felt “criminalised” after a devastating Ofsted inspection. What is the Minister doing to change the “culture of fear” caused by inspection, which his own Department’s workplace survey identified as one of the biggest burdens on teachers?

**Nick Gibb:** The workload challenge identified a range of drivers of high workload, including accountability and perceived pressures from Ofsted. We took steps to address that in our 2017 action plan, including through Ofsted’s commitment to reducing unnecessary workload around inspections, by dispelling myths about inspection and by training inspectors and monitoring inspection reports. The winter 2016 teacher voice omnibus survey showed that 39% of headteachers had used advice from Ofsted to change practice to reduce unnecessary workload.

21. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Morale is low, retention is a challenge and schools face exorbitant agency fees to recruit new staff. St Saviour’s and St Olave’s School at the Bricklayers’ in my constituency spent £100,000 just last year on recruitment alone. When will the Government act to end rip-off agency fees, or introduce their own portal to better link available teachers and recruiting schools?

**Nick Gibb:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are working on introducing a free website to enable schools to recruit teachers.

**Children’s Services**

16. **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps his Department takes when children’s services are found to be inadequate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): All children must be kept safe, and we take tough intervention action when any council fails in its duty.
Mr Wragg: As the case in Rotherham today shows, the introduction of experienced and high-quality leadership is part of the answer. Will my hon. Friend, in his new portfolio, take on board the recommendation of the Select Committee on Education and place a greater emphasis on giving support and guidance to children’s services when considering intervention?

Nadhim Zahawi: Many Government interventions provide support and guidance that works within an authority’s existing structure. In serious cases, an independent commissioner can provide those recommendations, and of course the ultimate reprimand is to be put in a trust.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Clearly, we cannot afford to have failing children’s services, but how far do Ministers recognise the massively increased demand on children’s services in Britain, because of things such as sexual exploitation of our young people and the range of difficulties caused by poverty in the home? What does that mean for the commitment of funding?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have been to see both Hackney and Doncaster. In Hackney’s case, there was a turnaround in 2006; in Doncaster, it was over the last two years. It is about leadership, and a better-quality outcome depends not just on the leaders at the top, but on the social workers on the frontline being able to feel confident in the service that they provide. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The sedentary chuntering of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) would constitute a book in itself, and it might sell rather well.

Topical Questions

T1. [903602] Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): This Government are committing to providing a world-class education for all our young people, raising attainment and narrowing the gap between the affluent and the disadvantaged. Working with our dedicated teachers and professionals throughout education and beyond, we must continue to raise standards, from early years through to further and higher education, and ensure that the right care and support are always there for society’s vulnerable children. I will work to make sure that our education system offers opportunity to everyone, in every phase and in every place. The successes are clear, with 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools, and the latest figures showing the attainment gap narrowed by 10%, but there is more to do to spread opportunity, particularly in areas of the country historically left behind.

Emma Reynolds: I recently visited Ashmore Park Nursery School in my constituency, which provides outstanding education, as do 60% of nursery schools across the country. Unfortunately, the future of their funding is now in doubt. Will the Secretary of State guarantee their sustainable funding beyond 2020?

Damian Hinds: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to her local nursery school. This Government are spending more on childcare and early years than any previous Government, with not only the 30 hours commitment but the extra provision for disadvantaged two-year-olds, and of course there is also the work being done on the hourly rate.

T4. [903605] Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Figures out today show a worrying rise in the number of hate crimes being committed in schools. Does that not underline the vital role that organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust have to play in stamping out these abhorrent attitudes?

Damian Hinds: Yes, it does. Before “Never again” comes “Never forget.” Every young person should learn about the holocaust, which is why it is the only historic event that is compulsory within the national curriculum. I commend the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and other such organisations.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s predecessor this morning admitted that they were wrong to abolish maintenance grants, that the student finance system is regressive, that variable fees will punish the poorest and that their review is intended to kick the issue into the long grass, rather than make decisions. Apart from that, she is very supportive. But she is right, is she not?

Damian Hinds: We have a system of higher education finance in this country that means unprecedented levels of disadvantaged people can go to university and our universities are properly funded. In October, the Prime Minister said that we would be taking quick action, raising the threshold for repayment and freezing the top fees for the next academic year. It is also right that we have a full review, looking at all aspects of value for money for young people and others going to university, and at the alternatives to university, such as taking a degree apprenticeship, as we discussed earlier.

T5. [903606] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What consideration are Ministers giving to implementing the Government’s commitment to ending the faith-based admissions caps for free schools?

Damian Hinds: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. I value greatly the contribution that Church and faith schools make to our education system; they are consistently generally high-performing and popular schools. Every child deserves a good school place, which is why the “Schools that work for everyone” consultation set out proposals to enable a wider group of providers, including the Catholic Church, for example, to set up new schools. I am carefully considering the proposals.

T2. [903603] Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Under the Government’s current universal credit plans, 1 million children in poverty in working families are expected to no longer be entitled to a free school meal, including 2,800 in Sunderland. Will the Secretary of State comment on why his Department
is not taking this opportunity to ensure that all children in poverty, including those in low-paid working families, receive a free school meal?

**Damian Hinds:** Quite simply, the proposals will involve more children being eligible for free school meals than under the previous system. We have a short-term arrangement for the very early days of universal credit, which is different, but we estimate that around 50,000 more children will be eligible for free school meals than under the old system.

**James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What is the Department doing to help children with special educational needs on their pathway to adulthood and, where appropriate, into the workforce?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): We have introduced the supported internship programme for young people with complex needs, which is having a significant impact on supporting young people into work.

T3. [903604] Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Educational institutions in my constituency have lost more than £1.3 million in the past three financial years as a result of the Government’s decision to redirect the underspend in the 16-to-19 education budget away from sixth-form students. Can the Minister confirm whether the review of funding of tertiary education that was promised by the Prime Minister will investigate that underspend and look at returning it to schools and colleges?

**The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):** I will look into the precise issue the hon. Gentleman raises, but let me point out that we are spending record sums of money on education for ages five to 16 and beyond—£41 billion on school funding this year, rising to £42.4 billion next year and £43.5 billion the year after. We can provide those sums only if we have a strong economy providing the tax revenues to fund public services, which we would not have under a Labour Government.

**Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Shepway) (Con): My constituency has one of the highest number of children with special educational needs in Kent. Would the Minister therefore join me in welcoming the news that the Aspire free school, which will cater for 168 young people with autism spectrum disorder, is due to be built next year in my constituency? Would he also join me in congratulating local people who campaigned for many years for such a school and the Grove Park Academies trust, which has taken up the baton to deliver that school?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I congratulate everyone involved in campaigning for and setting up the Aspire free school, including the Grove Park Academies trust, which will oversee the development of the new school.

T6. [903607] Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, our bereaved community needs its local education services more than ever. I was pleased to see that the proposed merger between Kensington and Chelsea College and Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College has been halted and that an overdue consultation on the future of Worthington College is to be opened. Will the Secretary of State act to secure the financial future of a community-led college along with a diverse and locally representative board, if that is what the consultation requests?

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** I was delighted to meet campaigners along with my colleague from DCLG, and I congratulate the Further Education Commissioner on stepping in and having numerous meetings. I know that he is anxious to keep closely in touch with the hon. Lady to make sure that we get the right solution for this precious college—this valuable resource—which has been around for many, many years.

**Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Schools in south Gloucestershire have welcomed the special provision fund, which is providing targeted support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Can the Minister outline any plans he has to continue that fund beyond 2018, so that south Gloucestershire can continue to improve the standard of provision we provide?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** The Department has allocated £250 million of capital funding over and above the basic need funding to help to build new places at mainstream and special schools and to improve existing places to benefit current and future pupils.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Schools in the most deprived areas of Bath are losing between £25,000 and £75,000 under the new funding deal. What should be cut in those schools: teaching posts or mental health services?

**Nick Gibb:** No school will see a cut in funding in 2018-19 or 2019-20. Every single school in the country will see an increase in funding of at least half a per cent., and schools that have been historically underfunded in previous Labour Governments will see very significant rises in their school funding.

**Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): My constituent Mahzia Hart was head of an outstanding multi-academy primary trust in Bath and north-east Somerset. In 2015, she resigned following bullying on social media, which resulted in false accusations that were investigated by the National College for Teaching and Leadership and which were subsequently dismissed. In January 2017, Mrs Hart took the National Union of Teachers to court for defamation and successfully won her case. Two months later, however, the NUT was able to refer Mrs Hart to the NCTL again. Will the Minister look into this case and investigate? How is it right that teachers’ lives can be made a misery by repeated malicious referrals to the NCTL, particularly by those who have a vested interest?

**Nick Gibb:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The regulation of teachers is a very important function of the National College for Teaching and Leadership. I will look into the issue that he raised, and I am happy to meet with him.
The Minister for Higher Education (Mr Sam Gyimah):
I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear, a lot of work is being done on international students by the Migration Advisory Committee. I am happy to consider the issue of Scottish visas specifically and come back to him on it.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Physical education is a crucial part of the school curriculum. Only last week, I visited Westerton Primary School in my constituency, which has been able to secure a minibus to allow children to attend more sport engagements. That is thanks to initiatives that have increased sport funding in schools, such as the primary PE and sport premium. I have seen the benefits of the policies on the ground. Will the Minister reassure the House that the Government will continue to support sport in schools?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why we introduced the school sport premium, a very important initiative. Sport is very important not only for reducing obesity but for ensuring that children can concentrate in lessons.

Mr Speaker: The mention of sport gives me a heaven-sent opportunity to congratulate the inimitable Roger Federer on his latest triumph. He just gets better and better.

T7. [903609] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Universities Scotland told the Scottish Affairs Committee after the Brexit vote that the Scottish higher education sector could lose out “big time”, while the Royal Society of Edinburgh has called for the reintroduction of the post-study work visa. I welcome its introduction in Edinburgh and Glasgow universities, but can the Minister confirm when he will roll that out across Scotland, or will he ensure that Scotland will be able to tailor its own immigration policy for students?

T8. [903610] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Visiting my old school, Notting Hill and Ealing High, which produced not only me but the ex-Conservative MP Angela Rumbold, I found concern, among staff and students, about political imbalance in the new A-level history syllabus. It completely omits the 1945 to ’51 Labour Government, asks candidates for Conservative strengths and Labour weaknesses and stops in 1997. By deleting Labour, are they trying to rewrite history?

Nick Gibb: The A-level history syllabus was widely consulted on before it was confirmed, and the actual detail of the exam board content is determined by exam boards themselves, which are independent, so long as they conform to the subject content, which, as I said, was widely consulted upon.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): With over 30,000 cardiac arrests taking place outside hospitals every year and a disgracefully low survival rate of just 12%, it is no surprise that there is huge public support to make sure that every child is given a half-hour lesson on emergency life-saving skills, so that we can create a generation of life savers. Will the Secretary of State meet me to talk about how we can make that a reality?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend has been consistent in campaigning on this issue for a number of years, and I will of course be happy to meet him to discuss his comments.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The desperate rush to convert schools into academies does not appear to be matched by any rush to ensure adequate financial oversight and value for money. Will the Secretary of State please investigate why the academy trust United Learning received £150,000 to support Sedgehill School in south London, despite the school remaining maintained and United Learning not even becoming its sponsor?

Nick Gibb: We trust schools to manage their own budgets, and most do so extremely well. We are spending a record amount on schools—£41 billion—and academies are required to publish audited accounts every year, while their financial health is closely monitored by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. I will look at the specific issue the hon. Lady raises, but United Learning is a very successful multi-academy trust that is raising academic standards in schools, including a school in my constituency.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I very much welcome the steps the Government are taking to improve the mental wellbeing of school pupils, but does the Secretary of State agree that extracurricular activities such as sport are also vital in ensuring good wellbeing and mental health and that we should promote them at every opportunity?

Damian Hinds: Mental health among our young people is indeed an issue of paramount importance—and something, of course, the Prime Minister has given particular attention to—and the Green Paper is an important indication of the way forward, but my hon. Friend is also right to mention that active lives and sport play a very important part.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Not all children arrive at school equal, and those who are homeless and in temporary accommodation have the worst set of circumstances. Mrs Sheridan, a headteacher in my constituency, recently wrote about her pupil Jack, who has become an absentee student since going into temporary accommodation. What does the Minister’s Department say to those children in temporary accommodation?

Nadhim Zahawi: We know that moving into temporary accommodation can mean changing schools, which is strongly associated with poorer attainment. We provide schools with extra resources to ensure that all pupils, regardless of their home circumstances, can go as far as their talent and hard work take them, but I will look at the case the hon. Lady mentions.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his position, and I do not apportion blame for the problems at Broadfield House in my constituency, which has had school failure after school failure, but can I ask for a meeting to ensure that this facility is back in educational use for the local community as soon as possible?
Damian Hinds: I will of course meet my hon. Friend.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Wirral Metropolitan College failed to secure funds for non-levied apprenticeships from April this year, despite a positive Ofsted report in October 2017, which highlighted the fact that it is a key player in economic and social development in the region. Concern has been expressed about a number of colleges that are currently meeting the needs of employers but have missed out in the procurement process. Will the Minister ask the Education and Skills Funding Agency to look again at the application from Wirral Met, to ensure that the college can continue to work with employers to deliver vital skills training in Wirral?

Anne Milton: We are looking into how we can ease colleges and independent training providers through this process. I should point out that we received more than 1,000 bids totalling £1.1 billion. There will always be providers who are disappointed, but we will be working with those colleges to smooth the transition and ensure that they can provide the valuable training that will ensure that young people have the skills that they need.
Leaving the EU: Implementation

3.35 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on the Government’s proposals for the implementation of their policy on leaving the European Union.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Just this afternoon, the European Union finalised its directives setting out its negotiating position on the implementation period. On Friday, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union made a speech setting out the UK Government’s position. Formal negotiations on this very issue are therefore due to start this week.

As the Secretary of State said on Friday, we will be seeking a strictly time-limited implementation period to allow a smooth and orderly exit from the European Union. This builds on the Prime Minister’s announcement, in her Lancaster House speech in January last year, that there would be a “process of implementation” once the article 50 period ended. It has been supported by businesses both here and in the European Union, which will have to make only one set of changes as we exit the EU. During this period, the UK will be outside the EU. We will have left on 29 March 2019.

This is an absolute necessity. The EU can only legally conclude our future partnership once we are outside if. Such an agreement on the future partnership will require the appropriate legal ratification, which will itself take time. That will need to happen during an implementation period. However, if such a period is to work, both sides must continue to follow the same stable set of laws and rules without compromising the integrity of the single market and the customs union, to which we will maintain access on current terms. Both sides should approach this period in the spirit of our future partnership. That means each side committing itself to taking no action that would undermine the other.

During the implementation period, we will still make our voice heard. We will have to agree on a way of resolving concerns if laws are deemed to run contrary to our interests, and if we have not had our say. We will agree on an appropriate process for this temporary period, so that we have the means to remedy any issues through dialogue as soon as possible. All that will be provided for in the withdrawal agreement that we reach with the EU, which will have the status of a new international treaty between the UK and the EU. We will no longer be formally part of the EU treaties during this period.

As the Secretary of State said on Friday, we have made it clear that during this period we will be able to negotiate and sign our own free trade agreements. Here at home, we have already announced that we will present a withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which will provide for domestic implementation of the withdrawal agreement and the implementation period. We have made it clear that as we leave the EU in March 2019, we will repeal the European Communities Act 1972. That will be done through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which recently received its Third Reading in the House of Commons and will shortly be discussed in the other place.

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Blomfield. [Interruption.] But not before we have heard from Sir William. I was simply seeking to build up an air of anticipation of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield).

Sir William Cash: I am deeply grateful, Mr Speaker.

Given the document to which the Minister has just referred, which was issued by the European Union to the United Kingdom about two hours ago, can the Government reconcile their policy of leaving the European Union with their own implementation proposals during the transitional period? Furthermore, will this apply when EU laws are imposed on us when we will have no say in either the European Council or the European Parliament, and when our courts will be obliged to apply European Court case law without having a judge in that Court?

Do the Government intend to make a new EU treaty? How long is the so-called strict time limit? Given that we are leaving the EU, and therefore the customs union and the single market, and ending the provisions relating to freedom of movement, will the Government reject this new EU ultimatum, including the statement that the European Court of Justice will continue to apply to the UK? Will the Minister reject the idea of the enforcement mechanism set out in the document? Will he reject the suggestion that the European acquis will apply in relation to the United Kingdom, as well as the notion in the document that European Union law will continue to apply to the UK during the transitional period with direct effect and primacy?

Under these arrangements, we will be required to remain in the customs union and the single market, with all four freedoms, and to continue to comply with EU trade policy. Will the Government reject the assertion about the European Union acquis, so that we will not be made subject to supervision and control proceedings under European Union law?

In short, do the Government reject this Council decision as inconsistent with our leaving the EU, which we are entitled to do under EU law itself and article 50 of the Lisbon treaty and which was achieved through the enactment of the arrangements for withdrawal that was supported by 499 Members of this House?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House’s attention to the fact that Members on both sides of the House have voted to respect the referendum and that the UK should be exiting the EU in accordance with the vote in that referendum. My hon. Friend is a long-standing champion of this issue, and I make it clear that the UK will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019. We will then have a strictly time-limited implementation period, which will be as short as is practicable—we currently expect it to be in the region of two years.

The answer to my hon. Friend’s first question is yes, but we must make sure that we reconcile these issues through the negotiations to come. He would not, I know, expect me to speak on behalf of the EU and its directives today; I am speaking as a Minister of the Crown, and we enter these negotiations seeking the interests of the UK and making sure that we exit the EU in a smooth and orderly way.
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): There is a majority in this House that wants a sensible approach to Brexit, so does the Minister agree that it would be right to reach out to that majority instead of letting the European Research Group call the shots? Will he also confirm, as the Chancellor, Business Secretary and Brexit Secretary said in a letter on Friday, that during the transition period, our relations will “continue on current terms”?

Mr Walker: I agree with the Chancellor that our economies should move only “very modestly apart”?

The Government are too distracted by negotiating with their own Back Benchers to focus on the negotiations that matter with the European Union. They are incapable of setting out a clear negotiating position, as Angela Merkel apparently said in Davos at the weekend. Is it not the case that the extraordinary infighting that we have seen again this weekend is the single biggest threat to a Brexit deal that works for Britain?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Gentleman is seeking to provide the real opposition, he might want a few more of his colleagues to turn up for debates in this House. Of course the Government will continue to carry out all the analysis and work that are needed to prepare for this process, but we are going to stick to what this House has repeatedly voted for, which is not to publish anything that would be prejudicial to our negotiating position.

Anna Soubry (Bexton) (Con): The CBI, which represents thousands of businesses of all sizes and from all sectors across the United Kingdom, called on the Government just over a week ago to put the interests of the economy over and above ideology. Does the Minister agree with that, and if he does, when are the Government going to stand up against the hard Brexiteers, who mainly inhabit these Benches—there are only about 35 of them—and see them off to ensure that we get a sensible Brexit? If we do not do that, we will be sleepwalking into a disastrous Brexit for generations to come.

Mr Walker: I can assure my right hon. Friend that the Government have always put the interests of the economy at the heart of their approach to Brexit. We are seeking a successful negotiation that delivers for the UK economy and our neighbours in the EU, but of course we need to ensure that we are prepared for all eventualities. The implementation period has strong support from a wide range of business groups and we are therefore seeking to deliver that as swiftly as possible by the end of this quarter.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the flurry of confusion at the weekend reflects the fact that there are genuinely different views about how Britain should leave the EU that were not resolved during the referendum, especially on issues such as the customs union? Given the significance of the customs union for the future of Northern Ireland, for the issues raised by the CBI and for the future of northern and midlands manufacturers, does he agree that the Government should bring forward a proper vote in this Parliament on the customs union, and not just for the transition period but for the long term?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Lady raises some important points, but her party, like mine, stood on a manifesto that said we would have our own independent trade policy and that we would therefore be leaving the customs union and the common external tariff. I know that Labour Front Benchers have already voted to uphold that, so this issue has been decided by the House, and the Prime Minister has shown real leadership in setting out the way forward.
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What negotiations, if any, will continue into the implementation period?

Mr Walker: We have always been very clear that the benefit of the implementation period will be there when both sides have agreed the shape of the future partnership and we can therefore implement that. We will be seeking to establish agreement on the future partnership before March 2019.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given the damage that the chaos in government is already doing to our economy, if the Minister will not accept the way out that has just been offered by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—incidentally, the vote she proposed should be a free vote—why will he not do as the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) suggests and extend article 50?

Mr Walker: I do not recall hearing that suggestion from my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), the Prime Minister has set out a clear approach, saying that the UK can benefit from its independent trade policy and pursue global trade in the future. That is what we are seeking to deliver.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us hear from the voice of North East Somerset. I call Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): How does my hon. Friend square paragraph 4 of the implementation period? We can argue all we like about the transition period, but it is of course clear from the terms of article 50 that the withdrawal agreement must have regard to the framework for the future relationship, which we are seeking to establish through the negotiations.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have heard of some of the anxieties about Britain during a transition becoming a rule taker rather than a rule maker. May I make a constructive suggestion, because there might be consensus around this point? If we want to get a final trade deal done properly, why does he not explore the option of extending the article 50 timeframe, so that we can negotiate while we are still around the table?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has been clear that we do not want to be in some form of indefinite purgatory throughout the process. We need to take the opportunities for the UK that come from having an independent trade policy, and we have set out to provide continuity and certainty for our businesses through the implementation period. That continuity and certainty will be all the greater if we are clear about the future framework by the time we enter the implementation period.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend and, indeed, the Government for refusing to break faith with the British people by insisting that we shall leave on 29 March 2019 and that, at the end of any implementation period, as the Prime Minister told the House on 11 December, the United Kingdom will have full regulatory autonomy and be free to do our own trade deals with third countries.

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is very important that we respect the referendum, which is of course Members of this House voted for in huge numbers and then voted to respect. The challenge for the Opposition Front-Bench team is to reconcile its ever-changing positions with that decision.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Every Minister and Secretary of State, and even the Prime Minister, when asked, has said that we will leave the common fisheries policy at the end of March 2019. Whatever else is happening in this so-called implementation period, will the Minister please confirm now that we will be leaving the common fisheries policy at the end of March 2019 and that we can then discuss which other countries we want to work with in our waters?

Mr Walker: It is clear that the UK will be leaving the common fisheries policy, but we now need to negotiate the terms of the implementation period. The EU has already set out some of its approaches and argues that we will not be playing a continuing role in some institutions. The logic of that is absolutely there. We will be leaving the common fisheries policy and taking control of our waters.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): In planning for all eventualities, will the Minister confirm that he is looking at the potential benefits and advantages that the European Free Trade Association might provide us with?

Mr Walker: The Government have of course considered that, but the Prime Minister has set out that she does not believe that a Norway option is the right approach for the UK. It is important that we have control of our future trade policy, which is one of the objectives of our EU negotiation process.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We can argue all we like about the transition period, but it is fundamentally just a plunk off a cliff, and we will have no idea where we are going when we walk off the end of it. Does the Minister agree that it is unlikely that a trade agreement would be agreed before we leave and very unlikely that we would have one by the end of the transition period? The real issue is that the Cabinet needs to sort out where on earth it wants this country to go.

Mr Walker: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman and do not share his pessimism. We start the trade negotiations from the unique position of our having a high degree of convergence with countries and territories
that have followed the same rules for a long time. We can therefore be very ambitious about the future trade agreement that we can reach with the EU.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Until recently, I had thought that The Beano was a rather silly boys’ magazine; I now understand that it refers to “Brexit in name only”. Will the Minister confirm that abiding by Brexit in name only is not Government policy, that we will not move modestly apart from Europe, that we are leaving the customs union, the single market and the European Union and that we will have control of our borders?

Mr Walker: I am happy to reiterate to my hon. Friend that the Government’s policy is that the UK will be leaving the EU, and that does mean leaving both the single market and the customs union.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Minister stated that the Prime Minister does not want us to stay within EFTA and has ruled that option out, but that position is supported by only a few Back Benchers—the 35-plus—on the other side of the House. Will the Government commit to ensuring that the wishes of the majority of this House, which wants to put the national interest first, are listened to so that we get to the right place in 2019?

Mr Walker: Of course the Government’s aim throughout this process is to put the national interest first. We have been clear, as was the hon. Lady’s own party in its manifesto at the last general election, that the UK will be leaving the European Union, which includes leaving the customs union.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Our partners have made what seems to be an extremely sensible suggestion that the implementation period should end with the budget period, at the end of December 2020. That is about two years—a year and three quarters, to be precise—so why have we been unable to sign up to it so far?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The negotiations on that issue are about to begin, and there are reasons why we are confident that we will be able to reach agreement by the end of March. We believe that the implementation period should be, as he says, about two years. We look forward to engaging in those negotiations to reach agreement with our EU counterparts.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is it not time that the Minister put the Brexit ultras on the Conservative Benches, and indeed some on the Labour Benches, back in their box and pointed out that every single business sector he has met has asked to stay in the customs union, to stay in the single market and to be subject to the European Court of Justice for at least two years? Otherwise those sectors face chaos, with a huge impact on British jobs and British families.

Mr Walker: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s characterisation. He is right that many business sectors have spoken out for an implementation period, and they share the Prime Minister’s vision of an implementation period that is a bridge to our future relationship, but those businesses also regularly speak about the opportunities they see in the UK having its own independent trade policy.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My hon. Friend has now indicated twice that he anticipates the implementation period will be in the region of two years. Given that uncertainty is the greatest enemy of business confidence, does he not think it would improve business confidence, and indeed assist in the negotiations, if he were to make it absolutely clear that the implementation period will not exceed two years?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend speaks with great expertise on these matters. It will be in the interests of the UK and the EU to reach agreement on the exact period of this implementation period as soon as possible, but it is important that we enter this negotiation by trying to give ourselves sufficient flexibility to achieve success.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Paragraph 17 of the directives for the negotiating team states clearly that “any time-limited prolongation of the Union acquis requires existing Union regulatory, budgetary, supervisory, judiciary and enforcement instruments and structures to apply, including the competence of the Court of Justice of the European Union.” Will the Minister please explain what exactly will be implemented during the implementation period?

Mr Walker: Very clearly, as the Prime Minister set out, the aim of the implementation period is to implement the future relationship between the UK and the EU and to allow us to put those structures in place for that future relationship. As the hon. Gentleman so often does, he speaks eloquently in this House on behalf of the EU, but we need to make sure that we are negotiating on behalf of the UK.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his and this Government’s reasonable approach. I stress again that the European Free Trade Association does not require membership of either the customs union or the single market, but it does provide an administrative and legal framework that might be useful at least for the implementation period, if not further forward.

Mr Walker: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s point, and I know he takes a great interest in these areas. We believe that both the UK and the EU have set out a different basis for the implementation period, and it is one that can deliver such continuity and certainty, as we have seen in the negotiations.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): If the majority of Members of this House vote against the final deal, what will the Government do then?

Mr Walker: It is very clear that this House has already voted for article 50, which means that we are leaving the European Union. What we want to ensure is that we have a good deal that this House will support.
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The welcome news on Friday that the UK economy grew more strongly in the fourth quarter highlights the importance of the services and financial services sectors to this economy. In response to a question on a previous occasion, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said he accepts that the future of financial services relies on a closely aligned regime of regulatory equivalence and mutual recognition. Does the Minister agree that that is still the policy of the Government?

Mr Walker: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course it is the policy of the Government to achieve a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union, building on the strong relationship we have had over the years to ensure we maintain strong market access for our services industry, including financial services. As he will know, the financial services sector is one of the many that has spoken up for this implementation period we are talking about delivering.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Select Committee on Exiting the European Union visited Dublin last week, and every Minister and indeed politician we met stressed the need to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. Last Wednesday, the Secretary of State told our Committee that regulatory alignment, as agreed last year, applies to only six areas. On Thursday, the Irish Government told us that it would apply to 142 areas, as proposed by the British Government. Which is it, six or 142?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It has of course been this Government’s position from the start of this process that we will not allow a hard border on the island of Ireland; we want to secure that through the future relationship between the UK and the EU. She refers to commitments in the joint report, and of course we want to protect north-south co-operation, wherever it exists, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): As well as on the importance of financial services, does the Minister agree that the Government’s objective of maintaining and, if possible, maximising and increasing continuing judicial and security co-operation will also require a continuing very close alignment on regulatory matters, not least in relation to data protection and exchange? Will he confirm that that will remain a priority for the Government, more than artificial or ideological considerations?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We set out in our data paper the intention to reach a comprehensive deal between the UK and the EU on data, which I believe will be in the interests of both parties. He rightly points to what the Prime Minister has said, which is that our commitment to European security is non-negotiable.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister rightly says that a priority for the Government should be to serve the best interests of this country. So if progress has been made towards negotiating a deal but that negotiation has not been concluded by late this year, will the Government consider, in the interests of this country, extending the process of negotiation to secure the ideal deal?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady raises an important point, but we want to make sure that businesses have certainty both about the implementation period and about where they are headed through it. The benefits to businesses of an implementation period will be much greater if they know the shape of the future relationship to which we are headed, so I do not believe that prolonging this discussion will be in the interests of either the UK or the EU.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the excellent Minister confirm that in 424 days’ time, when we leave the EU and start the implementation period, we will know what our future relationship with the EU will be after the implementation period?

Mr Walker: I am happy to reiterate to my hon. Friend that is absolutely our objective.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK will be ended from March 2019 under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but the Prime Minister has made it clear that the ECJ’s jurisdiction will continue into the two-year implementation period to follow. Can the Minister therefore confirm that the implementation and withdrawal Bill, which will come forward in due course, will re-impose the jurisdiction of the ECJ on the UK?

Mr Walker: There is a crucial distinction and difference here, in that the action of the ECJ in the UK currently takes place because we are a member state of the EU, and the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill will implement the agreement between the UK and the EU. That will recognise that the UK is therefore an independent country, adhering to that agreement, which the Prime Minister said should be under the same rules and regulations that we now follow.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Like my constituents, I support Brexit, but does the Minister agree that, given that we have been in the EU for 40 years, it is essential to have an implementation period, so that we can deliver the huge prize of a smooth and orderly Brexit?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, one that has been made by people on all sides of the referendum debate. We respect the decision made by the British people, including his constituents, and we want to make the greatest success of it. A smooth and orderly exit is the best way to achieve that.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Earlier this month, the National Assembly for Wales unanimously—this included Tory and UK Independence party Assembly Members—supported a motion from my colleague, Steffan Lewis, calling for a continuity Bill to protect the Welsh constitution from the power grab inherent in the British Government’s legislative proposals for implementing the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Now that Wales has spoken, will the British Government listen, or are they intent on forcing a constitutional crisis?
Mr Walker: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s allegations of a power grab. The Government have listened. We have been clear that we will bring forward amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and we are seeking legislative consent for that Bill from each of the devolved Administrations. We need to make the process succeed for every part of the United Kingdom, and we look forward to doing that for Wales, as for every other part of the UK.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that from a practical point of view we should not be too worried about new EU law during the two-year transition period, because it takes more than two years for new EU laws to be put in place? Also from a practical point of view, will he confirm that we will set up working groups on important technical issues, such as data exchanges, as soon as possible?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes two important points. She is broadly right about the process of making EU laws, of which she has great expertise from her time in the European Parliament. We want to make sure that the UK has the ability to express concerns when it has them and that we have good technical working between us and the EU. I assure my hon. Friend that, as the discussions move forward to focus on the future relationship, we will be doing exactly that.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I urge the Minister to resist the siren voices from his own Back Benches that are urging him on to the rocks of a WTO-only deal. Is not the real reason for the Cabinet’s policy of destructive ambiguity that it is fatally split on ideological grounds? Ministers are putting the unity of the Conservative party before British jobs, the British economy and British public services.

Mr Walker: I completely disagree with the hon. Lady. The Government have set out a clear strategy to deliver for the British economy through this process, and we will deliver on that strategy. I have seen time and again in votes in this House that the greatest split that exists on these issues is between Labour Back Benchers and their own Front Bench team.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Will the Government make it a red line that no implementation period will begin until a trade agreement with the EU is concluded?

Mr Walker: As I set out in my answer to the urgent question, it is clear that to put in place the agreement on the future relationship, we need to have left the EU. We need to ensure that both parties are able to ratify the agreement, with the UK as an independent territory outside the EU, I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend that, as article 50 itself suggests, the withdrawal agreement should have regard to the future relationship, which it will be in the interests of both parties to secure.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): One in five people resident in Hammersmith and Fulham is an EU27 citizen. Along with, I suspect, the 3.5 million-plus others in the UK, they feel confused and misled by what the Government have said about their future in this country. Will the Minister confirm that people who move to the UK from the EU during the transition period will be eligible to apply for settled status?

Mr Walker: We have of course already confirmed, and agreed through the joint report, that those people who are already in this country—he refers to some in his constituency—are going to be able to stay. They will be able to apply for a new settled status. We are about to enter into the negotiations on the implementation period. We have been clear that people will continue to be able to come to the UK during that period, but they will need to register.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The British people are, in the main, not ideological but practical and pragmatic. They simply want Brexit to work. Will the Minister assure me that the Government’s policy will be dictated not by fringe groups, either in this place or outside it, but by the national interest?

Mr Walker: Yes.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Whether among larger employers or small and medium-sized enterprises, it seems to me that there is currently a consensus that the length of time and potentiality of high costs for the UK in breaking into new markets is going to be devastating, with jobs lost. What change is there in the Minister’s response? Will he start to listen to the voices of industry, rather than of 35 Tory Back Benchers?

Mr Walker: Right from the start of this process, we have been listening to the voices of industry and to businesses large and small. When the Prime Minister set out the implementation period in her Lancaster House speech last January, she was responding to some of those concerns. I am delighted that we can now move forward to secure the implementation period, which will help businesses in the years to come.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Lancaster House speech, coupled with the Florence speech, remains the basis of the Government’s approach to implementing Brexit and delivering the orderly and smooth Brexit to which we are committed?

Mr Walker: Yes, absolutely.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On Friday afternoon, yet another north-east businessman came to see me worried about a cliff edge. Will the Minister now, once and for all, see off the middle-aged swivel-eyed men behind him and make it clear that, in the interests of British industry, he will negotiate a transition period in which British industrialists are on a level playing field with European industrialists?

Mr Walker: I am sure that the hon. Lady will join me in welcoming the fact that the Secretary of State delivered his speech on the implementation period, making it clear that we are seeking an implementation period in the north-east of England.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister said that, during the implementation period, we will be able to negotiate and sign trade agreements. Will he
confirm that there will be no compromise on that and that it will not be added to the growing list of concessions that the Government have made?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend tempts me to pre-empt negotiations—as a number of colleagues have. What I say to him is clearly the position that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out, which is that we will be able to sign those trade agreements, but, as the Prime Minister made clear, what we do not want to do is bring into force trade agreements that would conflict with our responsibilities towards the EU during that period. We want to make sure that this is a bridge to Britain’s future as a global trading nation.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Today, the Welsh Secretary for Finance, Mark Drakeford, said that the Government have still not allayed the Welsh Government’s fears of a power grab. Will the Minister set out when he expects to get agreement from the devolved Administrations, because if he cannot get a deal from within the UK, what confidence can we have of him getting any sort of agreement from the EU?

Mr Walker: It is in the interests of all parts of the UK to exit the European Union with continuity, certainty and control, which is why I think it was a missed opportunity for his party not to support the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but I look forward to seeing that support in the other place. As I said to the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), amendments to clause 11 of that Bill will be brought forward in the Lords.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Prior to the referendum, Her Majesty’s Treasury forecast near economic collapse, since when the economy has done well, with manufacturing and exports particularly strong. How can my hon. Friend assure my constituents that Her Majesty’s Treasury understands the electoral arithmetic of the referendum and will finally get with the programme?

Mr Walker: I can assure my hon. Friend that our Department has been working closely with Her Majesty’s Treasury to ensure that we make a success of this process. He rightly points to the robust growth figures that we have seen from the UK economy. What we all need to ensure is that, throughout this process, we continue to support that economy to grow and deliver the public services that we all want to see.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the Minister confirm that the UK will remain a member of Euratom during the transitional period, and if not, will he inform those working in nuclear medicine where they should be sourcing their radioisotopes?

Mr Walker: I refer the hon. Lady to the paper that we published on Euratom and the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, which the Government are bringing forward. It is not responsible to spread scare stories about radioisotopes, and the point has been clearly made a number of times that they are not restricted by the Euratom treaties.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Businesses and many others believe strongly in orderly change to our relations with the EU. Will my hon. Friend therefore confirm that the implementation period arrangements will include continuity of the UK’s role in many organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations where our role is as part of the EU, so giving us time to negotiate future relations with those organisations both before and during the implementation period?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend, who is an expert on trade issues, raises a very important point about our existing trade agreements. Of course we want to ensure that we roll those over, so that we maintain the best market access with those third countries and other territories and so that the UK can take up wider opportunities in global trade, so as we enter this implementation period, we will seek to secure both of those points.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is not the decision about the deal and implementation period separate from that of the original referendum? Is it therefore not appropriate always to refer back to the “will of the people” when we are talking about decisions on the implementation and the deal?

Mr Walker: I am a little confused by the hon. Lady’s point. I would have thought that her party might support an implementation period, but she appears to be saying that we need another referendum to have one. I do not agree with that argument. It is important that we go ahead with respecting the referendum—a unique democratic exercise in British history, in which millions of people voted—and delivering on it. Part of that can be a successful negotiation on the implementation period.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Minister has spoken about an implementation period of around two years after we formally leave the European Union, if there is to be an implementation period. May I further press him to say that it will be less than two years? I would suggest, as others have, new year’s eve 2020.

Mr Walker: I hear my hon. Friend’s point and I am sure that it will be heard by others on our team. We want this negotiation to secure the stability and certainty that business wants and that will be good for our economy. It is important to enter that negotiation seeking to bring the position of the UK and the European Union—which, indeed, at the moment seems to be closer to my hon. Friend’s position—closer together.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Given the challenges that the amendment to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill gave the Government, will the Minister confirm that he is going to have discussions with the devolved authorities in time, so that we do not come across another problem later?

Mr Walker: I can confirm that the communication with the devolved authorities is ongoing. We have discussed the issues of the Lancaster House speech and the Florence speech with them many times already, and I think they will support us in wanting to secure an implementation period that is good for the whole UK.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I think that our constituents would respect all of us in this place a lot more if we stopped making comments about
Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on both points. We want to make a success of this process for the UK economy, UK business and every part of the UK. I think that our constituents expect us to work together across the House and not to be calling each other names during this process.

Stephen Kinnock: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take this point of order now because I understand that it relates to the exchanges that have just taken place. Let’s hear it.

Stephen Kinnock: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you will have heard during this session, I asked the Minister a perfectly reasonable question. Unfortunately, he chose to respond by impugning my motives and questioning my patriotism. I assure him that I speak only in what I see as the national interest and the interests of my constituents. I therefore ask him to retract those comments and apologise, and we will leave it at that.

Mr Speaker: I said that I would hear the hon. Gentleman. The Minister is not under any obligation to respond, although he may if he wants to.

Mr Walker: I am very happy to give a quick response.

Mr Speaker: Quick is good—much to be said for it.

Mr Walker: I did not mean to impugn the hon. Gentleman’s motives. I would only point out that he was reading directly from the EU’s negotiating guidelines and that today we are, of course, discussing the UK’s policy.

Stephen Kinnock: That is not an apology.

Mr Speaker: No, it is not an apology. It is an explanation. But we will leave it there.
also our support and assistance.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for the strength of his statement, the support he has given to the Afghan security services, and his condemnations of these heinous attacks, as he put it. I totally agree.

We used to have regular updates in this House on Afghanistan, yet the last major debate we had was in March last year, and we have had very few statements, particularly in the past year. Since then, as the Minister pointed out, the Taliban, Daesh and others have carried out a series of horrific attacks killing many civilians, Afghan security personnel, and, in the particularly heinous act last week, deliberately attacking humanitarian workers from Save the Children and civilians in Jalalabad, resulting in seven deaths. Our thoughts and prayers must surely be with all those who have lost their lives or been injured.

UK and global attention to events in Afghanistan has significantly waned in the past year despite the significant ongoing UK military presence, with over 500 troops stationed, plus an additional 85 recently added, as well as our diplomatic, development and non-governmental organisation involvement. The recent horrific events suggest that the situation is becoming increasingly violent and volatile. NGO members of ACBAR—the Agency Co-ordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development—report to me that over the past year there have been 156 attacks on aid workers, resulting in the deaths of 17 aid workers who have been killed while providing this crucial humanitarian assistance. Only today, 11 Afghan soldiers were killed in Kabul. This week, over 100 people were killed and hundreds more injured when an ambulance filled with explosives was detonated in Kabul. Last week, 22 civilians were murdered by the Taliban in an attack on a hotel. We know that 2017 was a record year for civilian casualties. The Taliban are gaining increasing momentum. Nine million people still need humanitarian assistance. Pakistan has been accused by some of a deliberate campaign to force out 600,000 Afghan refugees. There was a litany of serious and horrific attacks during the course of last year.

What will the Government do about the growing culture of impunity for those breaking international humanitarian law that we see not just in Afghanistan but in so many conflicts across the world? What assessment have the Government made of the involvement of elements from Pakistan, Iran and Russia, in differing ways, in the growing unrest, including very serious allegations of arming the Taliban and/or facilitating attacks? What assessment has the Minister made of the strength of the Taliban and Daesh? What steps are we taking at the United Nations Security Council? What have we given to increasing our military, diplomatic and development contributions? What discussions have we had with our NATO and other allied partners?

In the last written statement on Afghanistan, the then Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who I see in the Chamber, said:

“The UK will never forget the sacrifice made by the 456 members of the armed forces who died during operations in Afghanistan. They helped protect our country...and, through our continued support to the mission, we are working to protect their legacy.”—[Official Report, 29 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 19WS]

I agree. It is completely vital that that legacy of bravery and sacrifice is protected, for our own and regional security and for the safety and security of the Afghan people.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He has made a very worthwhile contribution. I very much agree; we have to recognise not only that we work collectively in the region but that the international counter-terrorism network is now so extensive that for us simply to leave Afghanistan is not an option.

While the insurgency remains persistent—the hon. Gentleman catalogued some of the dreadful events of the past 10 days—the Government of Afghanistan remain determined to build a better future for Afghanistan, and there have been some notable successes by the security forces against Taliban forces over the past year. The attacks in Kabul that we have seen over the past 10 days garner, I fear, more international publicity than they would if they were in other parts of the country and reflect the manner in which the ANDSF has depleted the insurgents’ capabilities outside the capital city.

I work closely with international partners, not least in the United Nations, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out. I also believe that regional partnerships are crucial to achieving long-term peace and security. As I say, I spoke 10 days ago in a debate that was initiated by the Kazakhs, who have the presidency this month of the UN Security Council. It was in their interests to talk about the way in which central Asian states can make some genuine and sustainable progress. I welcome the efforts to improve links between Afghanistan and its regional partners in south and central Asia. There is a tendency for us to look upon Afghanistan alongside either Pakistan or Iran without recognising that there are other near neighbours, many of which can play an essential part in improving the long-term future for all Afghans.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the tragic severity of these attacks underlines the threat that these terrorist groups continue to pose to the state of Afghanistan? There would be huge implications for western Europe, and indeed for us, if that very fragile democracy, which we have done so much to sustain, were allowed to collapse, and therefore however grim these attacks are, it is all the more important that Britain and NATO stay the course.

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend has a particular knowledge of not only Afghanistan but Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, and he recognises the interlinked network of criminality and terrorism that is involved. There is no doubt—I very much agree with him—that security remains an ongoing challenge in Afghanistan. The ungoverned spaces and terror groups remain persistent. The Taliban, I fear, remain capable of attack across the country, and in Helmand province they remain the single biggest challenge for the security forces.
My right hon. Friend touches on the issue of democracy. We are very keen to see both presidential and parliamentary elections take place over the next 18 months or so in Afghanistan. It is important we have a Government in Afghanistan that is legitimate and widely regarded as such. However, those elections and that progress must be Afghan-led, and we very much hope to see progress towards democracy continuing. As I said, there will be yet another peace conference in Kabul on this issue, which will bring neighbours from the region together. I very much hope we will see steps forward that will take some attention away from the rather woeful headlines of recent days.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing it.

Saturday’s attack on Kabul’s Chicken Street area was one of horrific savagery and soullessness. To use an ambulance as a weapon of terror against innocent civilians shows—not for the first time—that there are no depths of depravity and evil to which the jihadists will not sink. It is part of a calculated strategy to show that even the best-guarded areas of the country are not safe and to worsen the political instability already gripping Kabul.

In the space of the last week, we have seen similar deadly attacks on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, the Save the Children office in Jalalabad and the Marshal Fahim military academy, otherwise known as “Sandhurst in the sand”. At least 142 innocent people have been killed in total and hundreds more injured. We send our deepest sympathies to all those victims and their families, and we send our solidarity to all the people of Afghanistan.

Let me ask the Minister three questions. First, what are the Government doing to urge President Ghani to reach a settlement with his political opponents, so that all the country’s democratic forces can present a united front and stable defences against those who want to destroy this fledgling democracy? Secondly, amid reports that humanitarian agencies are having to review their presence in the country, given the increased threat to their staff, what are the Government doing to support the British aid agencies working in Afghanistan, particularly in improving their security?

Finally, the Minister knows the concern felt all across this House about the Afghan interpreters who have worked with our forces and who face a constant threat from the jihadists. Last month, the Government said that not a single interpreter had been relocated to Britain from the jihadis. Last month, the Government said that

“the changing security position ... is kept under careful review.” — [Official Report, 12 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 11WS.]

Given the rapid deterioration of the security position since then, will the Minister advise us what plans he has to bring more of our former interpreters to safety here in Britain?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Lady for her thoughtful comments. We obviously very much hope that next month’s Kabul peace process will be part of bringing all sides together, with democracy in mind, in Afghanistan. Having met President Ghani, I have to say that I have been impressed by his resilience in the face of great difficulties. As the right hon. Lady will know, with a national unity Government, there are inevitably ups and downs. Broadly speaking, however, things have held together, and that is to the great credit not just of Ghani, but of all the people who have been playing their part and recognising the importance of this process.

The UK Government remain very committed to a diplomatic presence in Kabul, to support the Afghan Government in their efforts to secure peace and stability. The support the UK provides to the Afghan Government, along with our NATO allies and partners, in improving security, development and governance is in my view crucial to ensuring stability and reducing the terrorist threat to the UK.

If I may, I would like to pay—I am sure the right hon. Lady would join me in paying—the warmest possible tribute to all our courageous staff on the ground in Kabul. As I said, I was there in October, and I realised the great difficulties and the very challenging conditions under which they work. It is very dangerous not just to leave the green zone, but even to live within it. The esprit de corps of our embassy in Kabul—this applies to other high-profile places such as Mogadishu—is something of which all of us here can be incredibly proud.

On the issue of the interpreters, the right hon. Lady will appreciate that I cannot comment on the individual cases that have made it into the press, but I am very happy to say a few words. Our local staff policies were developed having regard to the then Afghan Government’s concern to retain their brightest and best citizens to help build a more stable and secure Afghanistan. Afghan local staff who are eligible for the ex gratia scheme but not for relocation are entitled to appeal such a decision, and MOD staff will assist individuals where the Department holds the relevant evidence. If the right hon. Lady or other Members have specific cases that they would like to bring to my attention, my door remains open and I am very happy to take up such cases.

Rightly, this country takes very seriously the cases of those who are putting themselves at grave risk—as grave as, if not more grave than, the risk to our embassy staff abroad—and they should be properly protected. I would obviously be very disturbed to hear if that were not the case. The right hon. Lady will recognise that there is a procedure and a protocol that needs to be gone through on such matters, but if there are specific issues to be raised, I hope she will do so.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I note the Minister’s remarks about the threat in and outside Kabul, but what should one make of current reports that the Taliban control 40% to 50% of Afghanistan’s 400 districts, which is the most since the NATO intervention in 2001? Will the Minister give us his assessment of the rather surprising resilience of both the Taliban and ISIS in the face of everything we are trying to do to assist the force in Afghanistan in taking them on, and will he also give us his assessment of the resilience of Afghanistan’s armed forces in the face of this threat?

Mark Field: Others will have observed that, as I have said, the solution for long-term peace and stability lies not just with the military, but in a broader peace process.
Although my hon. Friend is right to identify the fact that the Taliban have clearly not gone away, equally they have not been able to take any major cities during the past two or three years. That means that large, relatively ungoverned parts and open spaces of Afghanistan may well be under Taliban control, for want of a better phrase, but most of the larger towns and cities are assuredly not.

I can appreciate the concern of my hon. Friend, who has great experience in these matters, that perhaps our efforts in Helmand are perceived as wasted. It is certainly an argument put by some—I am not trying to put words into his mouth, but that is an increasing concern. Without doubt, UK personnel served with great commitment in Afghanistan, and our forces could play an important ongoing role in training the Afghan security forces to help to create the conditions for a more viable state moving forward. My assessment is that Afghanistan remains a dangerous place, but I am optimistic for its longer-term future. It is the view of the UK and our NATO allies that we have to look upon our presence as conditions-based rather than time-based.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We are appalled to witness the surge in deadly attacks in Kabul. Such indiscriminate attacks against civilians are a complete violation of human rights and humanitarian laws, and we strongly condemn them. Our thoughts are with all those who are affected. As we have heard, at least 11 soldiers have been killed today in the attack on an army post in Kabul, and just two days ago an ambulance packed with explosives killed more than 100 people in a busy shopping area. Last Wednesday, an attack on the Save the Children office in Jalalabad killed at least five people, while 22 people were killed in a Kabul hotel on 20 January.

Can the Minister set out how precisely the UK Government’s counter-Daesh strategy is addressing the situation in Afghanistan? What steps is the UK taking to bring an end to the attacks? Will he tell us what more the UK Government can do to provide humanitarian assistance to those affected? Lastly, what have the UK Government done to provide assistance to humanitarian workers who were affected by the horrific attack on Save the Children?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Let me touch on the issue he raised last, that of humanitarian aid and the NGOs on the ground doing incredibly important work in difficult circumstances. Although the UK Government do not pass on information on threats to NGOs or other project partners directly—due to our security rules, we can pass on only what is on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel page, although he will appreciate that in many districts there will also be an opportunity for ongoing dialogue—we do require NGOs receiving official development assistance to manage their security, and an assurance process is required as part of that due diligence. He will therefore appreciate that there is a lot of ongoing dialogue, and we remain open to providing assistance to any humanitarian organisation on the ground there that has UK connections or may have UK employees. However, I appreciate that the parents and other relatives of those working out in such difficult circumstances must be increasingly alarmed by what they have seen in the headlines over the past 10 days.

From the UK’s perspective, we feel broadly speaking that progress is being made. It is sometimes very slow and painstaking progress, and when such events happen, particularly in quick succession, one is inclined to think that the Taliban and others have suddenly decided to do what they are doing in part because of the peace process conference taking place in February.

If I may respond to a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made earlier, it is our understanding that, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, only 13 districts are under Taliban control. Although that is still 13 too many, I hope the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) will recognise that that provides some evidence of progress. However, some of that progress is slow and painstaking, and we have to be patient.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is the insurgency in part being reinforced and supplied from outside Afghanistan? What action are the Government and their allies taking to try to tackle that aspect of the crisis?

Mark Field: While I agree that there is clearly some of that taking place from outside groups, my right hon. Friend will recognise that a lot of it is subject to close intelligence that I would not wish to comment on at this stage. He is right to say that we are doing our level best to try to ensure that any assistance to terrorist groups from outsiders is kept to a minimum. However, he will also recognise that, as I have said, there are now, I am afraid, global networks of terrorist groups. The Taliban have received co-operation not just from the Pakistan side but from other sides of the Afghanistan border, and Daesh or so-called Islamic State are a global network and can utilise help from beyond the Afghan borders.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I join the Minister and others in condemning these senseless attacks, particularly the attack on Save the Children, which has been active in Afghanistan for 42 years. Will he take this opportunity to confirm that the UK will maintain its spending on overseas aid and will not allow it to be diverted to military activities?

Mark Field: As the right hon. Gentleman is well aware—not least because it was his party that, as part of the coalition Government, put this into statute—there are already strict rules about where overseas aid can be utilised through the OECD, and our own legislation makes the whole issue of official development assistance even more complicated. However, I hope that he will recognise that where projects can involve UK aid through the Department for International Development alongside the military, it makes sense to do so. There are strict rules in UK and international legislation that prevent vast sums of money being transferred away from aid, but the reality of the situation, as we all know, is that the proper resurrection of a state such as Afghanistan requires development work on a tremendous scale, much of which will require making the country more secure, and that means co-operation with the military.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that we have a long way to go to build a better future for Afghanistan given that the vast majority of Afghan refugees who return home have to flee violence again very shortly afterwards?

Mark Field: I very much agree. None of us is under any illusions; there is a long way to go before Afghanistan’s Government and people achieve their goal of building a more stable and prosperous country. But we will continue
to play our part, and not just in terms of expenditure. One of the most important things that our non-combat troops are doing on the ground is working closely to help train some 3,000 Afghan cadets, who are Afghanistan’s military leaders of the future.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op):
What is the Government’s estimate of the number of Daesh operatives who have transferred into Afghanistan from Iraq and Syria, and of those how many do they estimate are British?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that these are sensitive issues. I will try to reply to him in writing, in as transparent a way as I can. Clearly there is a concern that the porous borders on all sides of Afghanistan are open to Daesh or so-called Islamic State, and obviously there is a risk that some of the many hundreds of UK nationals who have been fighting in Syria and Iraq might find their way to Afghanistan.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con):
My thoughts are very much with the people of Afghanistan. The Minister talked about Pakistan. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Pakistan. Can he confirm that Pakistan has lost 40,000 civilians and 5,000 military personnel to acts of terrorism by the Taliban? Pakistan has put in place effective border management controls on its side, but it needs co-operation from Afghanistan so that everyone can see where the problem is coming from—from which country to which country. What steps are being taken to work with groups such as the quadrilateral co-ordination group and the tri-ministerial group to help achieve that?

Mark Field: It is entirely fair to point out, not just as a friend of Pakistan, which I regard myself to be, that a huge price has been paid by the Pakistani civilians who have died. However, what has traditionally been a porous border along the Durand line has often been open for terrorist groups to co-operate—I do not think that anyone would deny that. It is also fair to say that the Pakistani authorities are not only aware of that but continue to do their level best to try to ensure that the porous border is corrected.

Let me just clarify, in answer to an earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), that we believe some 13% of Afghan territory is currently under Taliban control.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Although there was universal approval in the House for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, by 2006 we had lost five British soldiers in battle and a decision was taken on the firm promise by the Government that no shot would be fired. We went into Helmand and the result was the deaths of 450 of our brave British soldiers. Do we not have to challenge the idea that force always produces peaceful results and have an inquiry into why we went into Helmand in 2006? If we do not understand our past mistakes, are we not in danger of repeating them?

Mark Field: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that essentially, there has only to be a political and diplomatic solution. The military cannot be enough and we recognise that in our relations with Afghanistan. In fairness, he slightly misquoted Lord Reid in talking about the idea of not firing a shot. That was felt to be an ideal, but we all recognised that by going into Afghanistan we would be in a dangerous place. Anyone who is as keen a student of history as the hon. Gentleman is will recognise that Afghanistan has been a difficult place for—I was going to say for a couple of hundred years, but I suspect that it is rather longer than that.

The United Kingdom has an enduring commitment to Afghanistan. We will continue to support the defence forces there to help to prevent it from becoming a safe haven for terror and to keep space open for a politically negotiated solution to the conflict. In truth, whether we like it or not, a safer Afghanistan is the only guarantee of a safer United Kingdom. A peaceful, prosperous Afghanistan is crucial for wider regional stability and the dismantling of global terrorist networks.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):
There have been attacks on foreigners in hotels, attacks on aid workers and bombs in ambulances. None of that is new, but perhaps the recent attacks in Kabul have taken this to a new level. To what extent should we be concerned that Afghanistan is an incubator for new terrorist techniques that then disseminate around the world’s trouble spots?

Mark Field: To be honest, I think it would be somewhat premature to suggest that Afghanistan is somehow an incubator for new terrorist events. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out, humanitarian workers have been targeted, not just in Afghanistan, but in many other parts of the world. We keep an eye open and have as much intelligence on the ground as we can to determine whether there are new terror techniques. Although we all very much hope that my hon. Friend’s somewhat apocalyptic claims about new terror are incorrect, we will keep an eagle eye on progress on the ground. When I speak to my counterparts in Afghanistan, I am always struck by the fact that a lot of very good people who have other options, who have spent much of their lives living elsewhere, have returned to Afghanistan because they have a strong commitment to that country. That gives the best possible push not only for peace, but for prosperity and stability in that country.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab):
I thank the Minister for his statement. Although it is probably right that our commitment in Afghanistan should be conditions-based and not time-based, it cannot be left to go on forever. Mercifully, no British troops are in combat missions there, and therefore, we shall not add to the 450 combat troops who died when we were engaged in our role there, but evidence from the past few days—13 provinces, or 13% of the territory—shows that the Taliban are still a very potent force. The only solution in the end must come from the Afghans reaching some sort of political accommodation. Is the Minister sure that we will always indefinitely contribute to that?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that there is a very complex tribal history in Afghanistan. We want the entire process of moving towards democracy and more stability to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. He is right: in the long term, the ideal would be that we will not have to have large numbers of troops there. However, as we saw in the past, putting a date on that
simply allowed the Taliban and others to go to ground, as they did for a period of time essentially waiting for the clock to run down. That clearly was not a sensible or viable strategy for Afghanistan or for the safety of us here in the UK. We are a P5 nation in the UN and have a proud record of playing our role on the humanitarian stage, and part of that role is to ensure that we leave a safer Afghanistan going forward. As much as we would all like to think that that moment will come sooner rather than later, even to speculate as to a date would be unwise at this stage.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The current US strategy seems to be based on ramping up troop numbers and bombing the insurgents to the negotiating table. What can the British Government do to encourage a more comprehensive strategy based on nation building, including in respect of some of the very valid points the Minister himself has made today?

Mark Field: I am sorry the hon. Gentleman feels that that is the current NATO or US strategy; it simply is not. As I say, the process in Kabul taking place in the coming weeks will try to bring all parties together. There is a sense of commitment to a democratic Afghanistan, with full parliamentary and presidential elections coming in over the next couple of years. All these things do, I fear, take time, though, and we have to be patient. He is right, however, to this very limited extent: clearly, those who would do harm to that process—those who are set on terrorism—are being eliminated, not just by NATO forces but by Afghan security forces. We have seen the dreadful impact on the civilian population in the past 10 days, which makes it very clear that there needs to be an opportunity at least to hold those people properly to account on the battlefield, if they choose to carry out military work. As I say, I am not of the view that we are there simply for a military solution. If there was ever a military solution to Afghanistan, the lessons of history—even relatively recent history—have made it clear that nowadays we need an approach that is very much focused on nation building, and that has to be an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process.

Contaminated Blood Inquiry

4.52 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on progress establishing the Inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The contaminated blood scandal of the ’70s and ’80s was an appalling tragedy that should never have happened. The victims and their families have endured so much pain and hardship and deserve answers as to how this could have happened. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing this issue to the House today. I am also grateful for her leadership and for the leadership of right hon. and hon. Members across the House on the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, which has done such consistent and constructive work on the issue. As she will know, I myself have been part of that group and have worked for my constituents, as I know all right hon. and hon. Members in the House have done.

As the House will know, following the Prime Minister’s announcement last July of an inquiry into these terrible events, the Department of Health launched a consultation on what the form and scope of that inquiry should be. I would like to thank all those who contributed to that process. We understand how difficult and painful describing these events must have been. The responses to that consultation were carefully considered by Cabinet Office officials and we listened to victims’ concerns. As a result, we confirmed that the inquiry would be chaired by a judge. We have asked the Lord Chief Justice to provide us with a nomination, and we hope to announce the name of that judge very soon. Once the appointment has been announced, the Cabinet Office will have early discussions with the chair about setting up the inquiry and will encourage them to quickly hold further consultations with the affected communities over the inquiry’s terms of reference.

I would like to add my personal commitment, and that of all my Government colleagues, to seeing this happen. This is a vital issue. We are all fighting on the same side to ensure justice for the victims of this terrible tragedy and scandal.

Diana Johnson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting me the urgent question. I also thank the Minister for her response and, of course, welcome her to her new post. I know that one of her constituents was affected by this scandal and that she understands what the issue is about.

Six and a half months have passed since the announcement of the inquiry. The previous Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), set out his intention to appoint a chair before Christmas. That did not happen. We were then promised a statement in the new year, but, after nearly a month, there has been no further progress. It took precious months, and an intervention from the former
Bishop of Liverpool—and chair of the Hillsborough inquiry—to persuade the Government to move the inquiry from the implicated Department of Health. That was achieved by working with all those affected in a unifying way and it concerns me that the same approach has not been adopted in recent consultative meetings with the Cabinet Office.

Not only have we seen a change of Minister, but we understand from press reports that the senior civil servant responsible for the inquiry is due to leave the Cabinet Office. I therefore have three questions for the Minister. First, will she publish a clear timetable setting out when she intends to appoint a chair and agree the terms of reference and specifying the date on which those conducting the inquiry will meet? Secondly, will she commit herself to a “families first” inquiry, with evidence taken in regional hubs across the United Kingdom and with a public-facing inquiry secretariat working with all those affected? It is essential for the inquiry chair to adopt that approach and to be able to work alongside a panel of experts. Finally, will the Minister confirm that the terms of reference will be set independently by the chair, following a consultation with all those affected, and that they will cover the aftermath of the scandal rather than just the run-up to it?

This is a treatment disaster of huge proportions, in which the Government are implicated. It has already taken the lives of 2,400 people and has blighted the lives of many more. For those who have died in the last six months, justice delayed is justice denied. The lack of progress is causing huge distress and upset to the families affected. The Minister must take immediate steps to secure for this community the truth and the justice that they have been denied for far too long.

**Chloe Smith:** I have seen a copy of the letter that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) sent you this morning about the urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I have therefore come prepared with responses to the points made in that letter. I hope to be able to deal with them now.

Let me begin by reiterating that we intend to make a further statement about the chair very shortly. I take the hon. Lady’s point that there should be no further delay. The Government are committed to getting this right and to getting it done as quickly as possible, for all the reasons that she has already given.

The hon. Lady suggested that this could have been done more quickly. It was important for the consultation launched by the Department of Health to be allowed to reach its conclusion, so that all who wished to contribute had a chance to do so. As soon as that was complete, an early decision was made to transfer the sponsorship to the Cabinet Office, in line with the strong feeling of respondents. I think it important that we listened and acted accordingly.

Following the written ministerial statements made by the Cabinet Office in November, the Prime Minister made a further statement before Christmas confirming that the inquiry would be judge-led, which reflects the gravity and complexity of the issues to be considered. Again, we listened to the respondents who had asked for it to be judge-led and agreed. We now understand the importance—the absolute, imperative importance—of getting the inquiry under way as soon as possible, and as I have said, we will make a further statement as soon as possible as well.

The hon. Lady mentioned the former First Secretary of State held a number of meetings with representatives from the affected communities. The Government will of course be more than happy to continue that engagement if it is necessary and, moreover, I am confident that the chair of the inquiry will take that up and want to hear views and testimony from all those affected across the UK.

The hon. Lady asked explicitly about the terms of reference. I expect that the chair will want to consult the affected community on those terms. Once the chair has done so and has made a recommendation to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, there will of course be a further statement to this House setting out what the scope of the inquiry will be.

I reiterate that I want to ensure that those affected get the answers they deserve as quickly as possible and that they receive what many have been asking for. This is a judge-led inquiry that will be independent and, I hope, effective in getting answers.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): My hon. Friend is new in post and has a phenomenal reputation in her previous Departments for getting things done. Will she now take a personal grip on this issue and give it the kick-start it needs?

**Chloe Smith:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think, undeserved compliments, but he is absolutely correct that I do personally wish to see this done. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North has mentioned, like many other Members, I have constituents affected by this. I think this is a national disgrace and I want to see it put right. I do therefore bring the personal passion that has been asked of me to this and I have pressed my officials to move on this as quickly as we possibly can.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for raising this important issue and echo the concerns that she and others colleagues in this House have raised.

The victims of this appalling tragedy have been waiting decades for answers and for justice, and it is unacceptable that they are now having to wait even longer as the Government miss their own deadlines. That is simply not good enough. It has been over six and a half months since the Government first committed to an
inquiry into this tragedy. Can the Minister today finally commit to a clear timetable for action, including for the appointment of a chair and setting the terms of reference, because “as soon as possible” is not going to be good enough for the families and victims who are listening to this statement, who have seen the issue kicked into the long grass for too long? Can the Minister also explain why the Government have failed to do so to date?

It is vital that families are put first and that the Government avoid the failings that have plagued the ongoing inquiries into child abuse and Grenfell, with the resulting loss of confidence in both. Will the Minister outline what lessons have been learned from these inquiries and how she intends to ensure that the voices of families and victims are heard throughout the inquiry process?

Chloe Smith: I believe I have already answered those questions in answer to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, but I reiterate that the Government expect to be able to announce the name of the judge leading this inquiry as soon as possible—very shortly indeed. Mr Speaker, you have already heard me refer to my personal interest in seeing this happen and the same goes for every member of this Government. This is too important an issue to play party politics with, which I am sure the hon. Lady on the Labour Front Bench was not doing. None the less, let me reiterate that I, too, want to see this done for the sake of victims and for the sake of those who have asked that this should be a judge-led inquiry. That means getting it right and taking the necessary time to do this properly—not more time than is necessary, but the right amount of time that is needed. I want there to be confidence that the inquiry will get to the root of the answers.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s decision to set up a full inquiry and allocate a judge. There were 800 responses to the recent consultation, so can the Minister assure me that those people will all get an individual response and that families and victims will always be at the heart of this because they have waited for far too long for answers?

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for her impassioned and thoughtful contribution. I would prefer to answer her question about individual responses once the Government have had a chance to discuss the matter with the chair of the inquiry. It is important that that person, once appointed, should be able to properly engage with victims and with those who have responded to the consultation, and indeed to do a small amount of further consultation, including on the terms of reference. That much was made clear in the Prime Minister’s written ministerial statement to the House. I will return to the hon. Friend with a specific answer to her question, but I do expect the chair, once appointed, to take evidence all the time and effort to respond to the consultation, including those who are quite ill. As I said earlier, we are grateful to them for taking the time to do that, and I certainly want to see them well treated and respected in this process.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for asking this urgent question and pay tribute to her work in continually pressing for justice for the victims and families affected by this tragic scandal. As others have pointed out, campaigners were told that the chair of the inquiry would be in place before Christmas, yet we are still waiting. When will this actually happen? Can we define “shortly”? After finally doing the right thing and taking the inquiry away from the Department of Health, will the Government now ensure that the inquiry looks into all matters, including documents, patient records and things that were altered and hidden? Will they also ensure that anything hidden behind public interest barriers will be opened up, so that light can be shed fully on this whole matter? Lastly, will the inquiry have broad enough terms of reference to allow those in Scotland to give evidence as well?

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making those points on behalf of his party. I mentioned earlier that I expect the chair to be able to take evidence all the way around the UK, so I hope that that answers his last question. I also said earlier that the Government will of course ensure that the inquiry has the resources it requires. I will come back to him on the specific list of types of information that he just mentioned. Finally, to be absolutely clear, I am saying to the House today that we expect to be able to announce the name of the judge shortly. I am not able to give it greater definition than that, but I know that that will answer his first question, which others might also put. We expect to be able to announce that name shortly.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Cabinet Office taking responsibility for this inquiry is a good thing. Will it also mean that the Department of Health can really be investigated fairly and rigorously?

Chloe Smith: Yes.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Can the Minister reassure families such as the Smiths, who lost their son aged just seven and who have fought tirelessly for justice and answers for decades, that the Government truly mean it when they say that there will be no further delay and that the public inquiry will get it right this time? These families have been through so much and we just cannot let them down again.

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady speaks for many of us in our roles as constituency MPs. We all feel for those families and we can all relate their experience to other tragedies that we know of in our constituencies. I would very much like the word to go out to the Smith family and others who might be listening that, yes, we mean every word of what we are saying here today and that we all wish to see this inquiry completed with no further delay, as effectively as possible, so that they can get the answers they deserve and perhaps be able to move on from there.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Minister for reaffirming in the House today her commitment to, and personal interest in, this issue. I also represent a constituent who has been suffering for decades, and I am sure that she will welcome the fact that this is a priority. Will my hon. Friend confirm that it is also a priority for the Government as a whole, including her senior Cabinet colleagues, because I am sure that that message would be very welcome?

Chloe Smith: I most certainly can provide that reassurance to the House. Hon. Members will know from the fact that it was the Prime Minister herself who laid the written ministerial statement that the passion for resolving
[Chloe Smith]

this issue and being able to move an inquiry forward goes right to the top of the Government, as should absolutely be the case. We are all agreed that this is a tragedy that should never have happened, and we are determined to see it put right.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her tenacity in following up this issue. I do not doubt for a minute the Minister’s commitment to wanting to see the situation resolved, but she has been sent here today, after the matter had been kicked into the long grass, to tell us that the Government are deliberating what lawnmower to use. The Department of Health’s interference in the terms of reference was wholly unwelcome, and if the inquiry is to be independent, the judge leading it must set the parameters regarding what happened prior to the incidents and how people were treated afterwards. The judge must set their own terms of reference.

Chloe Smith: Indeed, and that was why I was unable to answer the question of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who asked me to provide the terms of reference to the House or to provide a timetable for when I would do so. The hon. Gentleman is exactly right that it will be for an independent judge to do all those things, and rightly so.

I dispute the hon. Gentleman’s analogy about cutting grass—in fact, I think it makes light of the situation. The fact is that we have listened and responded to the concerns of those who thought that the Department of Health was not the correct body to run things. We have listened and responded to those who have said that they would like a judge to lead the inquiry. We are doing the right things in response to what victims have asked for, and while it will take a little time to put all that in place, I hope that the correct answers will be delivered.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Inquiries Act 2005, under which this inquiry will be established, imposes legal obligations on the Government to consult with the devolved Governments. The Minister has recent experience in Northern Ireland, so how will that happen there while there are no Ministers? It is all very well to consult civil servants, but there is a legal obligation to consult Ministers, so I would be grateful if she clarified the situation.

Chloe Smith: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that important point. He will have heard me say that the inquiry and the judge who leads it will, of course, want to engage with victims from all over the UK, but it might be simplest if I write to him with the specific legal answer that he seeks regarding how that would be properly carried out in respect of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for asking this urgent question and to you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. Despite losing their son many years ago, my constituents Maureen and Les Dodd were only able to come and see me thanks to the intervention of Mr Andy Burnham, the former Member for Leigh. They said that their son, Graeme Jonathan Dodd, was “courageous, witty, funny and inspirational”.

I know that the Minister will be thinking of all those who have lost someone. Has she read Bishop James Jones’s report into the experience of the Hillsborough families? There are many lessons to be learned, so will she ensure that a copy is distributed to all the officials who work on the forthcoming inquiry?

Chloe Smith: I have not yet had a chance to read that report, but I am happy to look at it and to share it with officials.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): There are nearly 300 sufferers of the scandal in Wales. Given that health is a devolved matter, will the Minister commit to ensuring not only that there is a voice for Welsh families, but that full consideration is given to the aftermath of the inquiry and the implications for health services in Wales?

Chloe Smith: I welcome the fact that the hon. Lady raises that point because, along with the comments of colleagues from Scotland and Northern Ireland, it allows us to begin to get the full picture of what is required across the devolved nations. I do not think that I can speak for the judge in saying how he or she will constitute the inquiry and select those who will conduct the inquiry alongside him or her, so I am unable to answer the question whether there will be a Welsh voice. However, I reiterate that I certainly expect the judge to be able to listen to Welsh victims, and I say that with no hesitation whatsoever, because it is absolutely the right thing to do. As I have said to other colleagues, if it would be helpful, I will be happy to get back to the hon. Lady should there be more detailed questions about the relationship with the devolved nations.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Like the Minister, I have constituents who are affected by this terrible situation. I welcome the letter I received today from the Prime Minister confirming, as the Minister has today, that the families will be consulted on the terms of reference before they are set.

A constituent, whom I had not met before but who had written to me, stopped me in the street back in the autumn and tellingly said, “We have been victims once. We don’t want to be victims again because of prevarication or other circumstances.” Will the Minister take that on board and, particularly thinking of my constituent in Blackpool, will she take on board the need, as some have suggested, for regional hubs so that people who either are not able to come to London—or, frankly, are not capable of coming to London—will have a proper opportunity to have their voice heard?

Chloe Smith: I very much sympathise with the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I am glad his constituent has been able to have his voice echoed in the Chamber today.

The hon. Gentleman makes his point for many of us. We can all think of constituents who are too ill to travel and have been too ill for too long. It has taken too much time to put this right over the many years since the 1970s and ’80s. It is a good thing that it is now being put
right and that there will be a judge-led inquiry. I will ensure that the judge who is appointed hears that reflection from the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

For the benefit of the House, I reiterate what was in the Prime Minister's written ministerial statement:

“We can assure...everyone who contributed that the findings will be passed to the proposed chair to help inform the discussions regarding the draft terms of reference, on which we expect there will be further consultation.”—[Official Report, 21 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 63W]

I reassure the House that there will be that further level of involvement, which is appropriate and important.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that this is a matter that affects the whole House? I would not think there is an MP whose constituents have not been affected one way or another. Is she also aware that this goes back to the mid-1970s—as far back as Callaghan's Government and perhaps even Wilson's—and that what is effectively a cover-up has been carried on under all Governments since? This is an all-party issue.

To this Government's credit, we finally have an inquiry that I believe we first called for during the very first Backbench Business Committee debate—you were in the Chair, Mr Speaker. Coming now to the present, having taken this initiative, it is vital that the Minister now sees to it that the inquiry is genuinely independent and that there is no withholding of documents, because the prevailing attitude that we have come up against is of the retention of sensitive documents by both the Department of Health and the NHS itself. No public indemnity certificate or anything of that kind should be used to prevent us from getting at the truth of what happened.

Mr Speaker: I remember that first Backbench Business debate on the matter well, including, if memory serves me correctly, a Government Whip rather impertinently rebuking me for the non-selection of a Government Whip rather impertinently rebuking me for the non-selection of a Government amendment. I do not think he quite realised at the time rebuking me for the non-selection of a Government amendment. I do not think he quite realised at the time that we were into new territory. The clue is in the title: Backbench Business Committee debate. There was no requirement to select a Government amendment, especially a wrecking one.

Chloe Smith: I, too, remember speaking on behalf of my constituents in a Backbench Business Committee debate, as many of us have done.

I thank the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) for his contribution, and for his recognition that this is a cross-party affair. It has been because of the length of time—decades—it has taken to get to today. I particularly welcome his recognition that the Government are now acting and that they, in his words, deserve credit for doing so.

As I said to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), there are certain categories of documents that will be desirable when executing this inquiry. As I said before, the Government will give the inquiry all the resources necessary, so that it can complete its work. We would all wish to see an inquiry that is comprehensive, independent and effective for the families who need answers after too many years.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have spoken before about the experiences of my constituent David and others who have been affected by this tragedy, and this is also of great interest to members of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS, given the number of individuals who were infected by HIV, some of whom of course went on to develop AIDS and to die from it, in a national disgrace. I must press the Minister further: can she say whether we are talking about days, weeks or months until the judge is appointed and the inquiry gets underway?

Chloe Smith: We are talking about this happening very shortly—it certainly will not be months—and I look forward to being able to make an announcement to the House.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): My constituents just want this over, so that they can get their lives back on track. Will the Minister confirm that when she does appoint the judge, they will be working full time on this? Does she anticipate when recommendations will finally be made?

Chloe Smith: Unfortunately, I am not able to answer that question, as I do not have the answer with me today, but I will make sure that either I or the Secretary of State writes to the right hon. Gentleman.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On behalf of my party, I welcome the Minister to her post. I recognise the constructive nature of her answers. Will she guarantee that groups such as the Haemophilia Society, the Hepatitis C Trust and TaintedBlood will be fully consulted on the contaminated blood inquiry?

Chloe Smith: As I have said, the Government have already committed, through the statement that the Prime Minister made to the House in December, to further consultation with those affected, so that the terms of reference can be set and the chair can commence their work. I certainly expect that that will involve individuals affected—or, indeed, family members—and representative groups.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As the Minister is aware, there is a two-tier approach for the families affected. Will she be able to look at the postcode lottery that exists for different people now? As she has said, many people are very ill right now and there are differing patterns across the UK. Will she look at bringing those approaches into alignment, perhaps even in advance of the review?

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that question. I shall pass it to my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care who remain responsible for the policy on victims and the funding, as it operates today. The inquiry, about which I am answering today, is about how the situation came about and the more historical nature of things, but I shall ensure that her questions, which are of course in the minds of many hon. Members in relation to constituents who are suffering now, are heard by the Department, as it might be able to provide her with an answer.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Minister must be tolerant if there is a cynicism about the “shortly”. An urgent question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) brought
us here in July, when we asked urgently for the inquiry to be moved into the orbit of the Cabinet Office, but that took four months to do. We were promised a judge in December, but we are still waiting. Given that we are now at the end of January, does “shortly” mean before the end of February? Can we at least give ourselves some hope that we will not need another urgent question from my hon. Friend to bring us back here again, nagging for a decision?

**Chloe Smith:** Mr Speaker, I do not think we will need to trouble either you or hon. Members for another urgent question. I do expect us to be able to return promptly to the House with an update—the update that the House rightly asks for and our constituents and the victims of this scandal rightly require. We are working hard and fast so that victims come first and can be served by a judge as quickly as possible.

**Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** With respect, the Minister has said nothing to advance this matter today. I have been supporting affected constituents with declining health for eight years, which sounds like a long time but is a fraction of the time that victims have waited for justice. Does she now regret the four-month delay in moving the inquiry from the then Department of Health to the Cabinet Office, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) asked for last July?

**Chloe Smith:** I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman’s tone is helpful. I have endeavoured to answer every question as constructively as I possibly can. I think I have made clear my personal commitment, as well as the Government’s, to ensuring that the matter is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible for the benefit of the victims, for whom every hon. Member present wishes to speak. The Government have listened and responded by making the inquiry judge-led, which is the right thing to do. They have listened and responded by removing responsibility for the inquiry from the Department of Health and giving it to the Cabinet Office. It has been important to take what little time has been needed to get that right, so that we can have a better inquiry that better responds to what victims have been asking for.

**ARMED FORCES (FLEXIBLE WORKING) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)**

Ordered,

That the Order of 30 October 2017 (Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.  
2. Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.  
3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.  

(Mr Ellwood.)
in Committee, in their consultation on the change the Government made clear the purpose of reporting the figures. The consultation said:

“The main purpose of these statistics is to measure the performance of the MOD against government and Parliament targets, and also to inform general debate in government, Parliament and the wider public.”

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly agree with the approach that my hon. Friend is setting out, and with the new clauses and amendments before the House. He will recall that I have been trying on a monthly basis to get from the Government many statistics on the crucial issue of recruitment, and they have shown some serious gaps in recruitment. Does he agree that it is crucial that we get the figures on part-time working because they are often used to inflate the overall size of a force, particularly the Army. When we hear about the crazy proposed cuts to the Army, we need to have the full facts in front of us.

Gerald Jones: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend that it is essential to have transparency and clarity on the figures. If the Government do not give the full picture, they are not fully informing the public debate or allowing us to see a true picture of the Ministry of Defence’s performance. Indeed, they are potentially encouraging a debate based on inaccurate information.

The Government have been accused of trying to fiddle the numbers before. Later in my speech, I shall talk about the mystery that is the Government’s armed forces targets. New clause 1 is an opportunity for them to show that they are committed to transparency and clarity when it comes to the size of our armed forces and the ways in which personnel are serving. It would not be right to suggest that the Army, or any of the services, is at a greater strength than it actually is by failing to separate part-time from full-time personnel, so the personnel statistics must include specific details about the number of personnel who are working part time. I appreciate that the new flexible working practices in the Bill will require personnel to deploy on operations should the need arise, but the Government must admit that it may take time to recall personnel, so it will build a clearer picture of our capabilities if we know how many personnel are serving part time.

Let me turn to the biannual diversity statistics. The Government have been clear that one reason for the introduction of this Bill is to improve the number of women in our armed forces. On Second Reading, the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), said that “we are committed to see women account for 15% of our new recruits by 2020, and evidence suggests that they see greater opportunities for flexible working in the services as particularly attractive.”—[Official Report, 30 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 624.]

It is good that the Government are taking steps to get to grips with this because, unfortunately, at present, the situation leaves a lot to be desired.

5.30 pm

The latest diversity statistics were not out when we last discussed the Bill, in Committee. Now that they are out, we can see that progress remains slow. In the latest statistics published at the end of November, female representation made up 10.3% of the regular forces, which represents an increase of just 0.1% in 12 months; and just 3.6% of officers ranking OF-6 to OF-9 are female.

It is disappointing that the Ministry of Defence is now without any female Ministers, especially in the light of the fact that the Department has a very capable female Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), with whom a long-standing interest in defence issues whom the Prime Minister could easily have promoted during the recent reshuffle.

The picture is similarly disappointing for black, Asian and minority ethnic personnel, who now represent 7.5% of the regular forces.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the reason why the female intake is so important is that we have a pretty atrocious record of females getting to senior positions in all three services? If we are to change that, we need young women joining now.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. This highlights more than ever that active steps need to be taken if we are to reach the targets that are in place. The new advertising campaign for the Army is a good example of that. In spite of the negative reaction in some parts of the press, we welcome this new campaign and think that it is quite right that the Army does not limit its recruitment pool, but looks to get the best people from across society.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On the subject of diversity, particularly the number of BAME and African personnel in the Army and the geographical spread among our armed forces, is he as surprised as I was that when I asked a written question about the geographical split in our armed forces—the number from each local authority area and from each constituency—the MOD was unable to provide an answer? Would it not be useful to have those statistics so that each Member of Parliament could take pride in the number of their constituents who were joining our armed forces?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend highlights my point that we do need absolute clarity and transparency in the figures, not only on diversity, but across the board.

As I have said, diversity is a strength; it minimises the risk of groupthink. As operations take place in varying locations, a diverse force offers different ways to connect with local populations. If the purpose of the Bill is, in part, to increase the number of female personnel in particular, including through greater retention, why do the Government not see the logic in including information about part-time working in the statistics to show how progress is being made in the numbers of female personnel?

I simply cannot see a good reason for the Government not to adopt new clause 1. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), told us in Committee:

“The number of applications...is likely to be low in the early stages, so collating and reporting information on a monthly or biannual basis on the number of regular personnel undertaking new forms of flexible working would not provide significant or beneficial data.”—[Official Report, Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Public Bill Committee, 14 November 2017; c. 27]
How long does that remain the case? Is there a plan for the Government to bring in reporting when the number of personnel reaches a certain percentage of all personnel? If so, what would that figure be?

Moreover, even if the number of applications is low initially, if there is a data from the initial implementation of the scheme then we could look at trends over time. Of course, the monthly personnel statistics are now quarterly and the diversity statistics are published only once every six months. It does not seem too difficult an ask to include within these statistics the number of those who are serving under the flexible working scheme. Indeed, the Minister told us in Committee how important monitoring would be, saying that “it will be crucial to ensure that all cases of flexible working are properly recorded and monitored to provide personnel and commanding officers with a record of all the discussions and agreements, so that they can understand the impact and success of the entire process.”—[Official Report, Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Public Bill Committee, 14 November 2017; c. 27.]

If there will be a clear record from the outset, why will this not be added to the statistics? It seems that there is a plan for this not to include this information?

I hope the Government will see that this new clause is about ensuring transparency and allowing scrutiny and will accept it into the Bill.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the measures in the Bill that aim to address some of the issues around recruitment and retention of personnel. However, we are concerned that they do not go far enough to tackle the crisis. Unless some evaluation of these measures is carried out, we run the risk of this simply becoming a paper exercise.

The most recent figures show that there was a net outflow of 2,740 personnel from the UK regular forces in the 12 months to the end of September 2017. The MOD said that this difference has increased compared with the 12 months to the end of September 2016, when there was a net outflow of 1,930. According to the 2017 armed forces continuous attitude survey, 35% are dissatisfied with service life in general, and the impact of service on family and personal life remains the top reason for leaving.

There are a number of operational pinch points, which are areas of expertise “where the shortfall in trained strength...is such that it has a measurable, detrimental impact on current, planned or contingent operations”.

Data on operational pinch points are published in the MOD’s annual report and accounts. The latest report shows that the total number of pinch points, as at April 2017, is 30. Broken down by service, there are four pinch points in the Army, relating to logistical roles; 15 pinch points in the Navy, in engineering and specialist warfare; and 11 pinch points in the RAF, in engineering and intelligence roles, with emerging shortfalls in aircrew.

New clause 2, which is in my name, would ensure that a review is carried out allowing Parliament to monitor and evaluate whether the provisions in the Bill are having a positive impact on recruitment and retention. It would allow Parliament to hold the Government to account, and to monitor whether the measures are addressing the underlying crisis in recruitment and retention.

According to the explanatory notes to the Bill, clause 1(4) will give a commanding officer “the ability...to vary, suspend or terminate the arrangement in prescribed circumstances, for example: national emergency or some form of manning crisis”.

I do not believe that anyone has a problem with the suspension of the agreement during times of national emergency—we discussed this point on Second Reading and in Committee—but we know that there are long-standing shortages in key areas and that the operational pinch points are increasing. We are concerned that a large number of service personnel will not benefit from the provisions in the Bill. The SNP amendment would allow Parliament to keep a close eye on the uptake of flexible working in the armed forces.

We welcome measures that could have a positive impact on recruitment of women, but it is clear that the Government need to do more to meet their 2020 target. The 2015 strategic defence and security review stated that by 2020 at least 15% of the intake into the UK regular forces would be female. In the 12 months to 31 March 2017, only 9.4% of the total intake was female. With women making up just 10.2% of the armed forces, more effort needs to be put into attracting female applicants. What impact does the Minister think the measures in the Bill will have on recruitment of women to the armed forces? What more do the Government intend to do to meet their target for 2020, because on current statistics we are a long way off?

As I said, the SNP welcomes the measures in this Bill, but we believe that this was the opportunity to do far more for service personnel and their families. Although the Bill aims to tackle some of the issues around dissatisfaction, unless personnel are properly represented among defence policy decision makers, it runs the risk of being a paper exercise. I do not think that any of us in this place want that to be the outcome. Having an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing is the norm in many countries. Recognised representation is a key way that the UK Government could better understand the needs and requirements of our armed forces and their families. If the UK Government are serious about improving the lives of our armed forces, they should look at putting an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): May I say how wonderful it is to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker?

I speak in support of the new clause and the wider provisions in the Bill. We have spoken before in this House about the challenges that we as a country face, and how vital it is that our armed forces have the capabilities that they need to tackle the threats that we are confronted with. Much of that discussion has understandably centred on funding, equipment, and having the right number of platforms. However, it really does not matter how many platforms we have and what their capabilities are if we do not have the skilled service personnel trained and retained in enough numbers to staff them.
We currently face a personnel deficit of 5%, with no fewer than 38 operational pinch points across the three services. Clearly, therefore, recruitment and retention is a real problem, and it is beginning to undermine our ability to deploy. While there are multiple issues that we need to address in this area, we know that flexible working offers the chance to begin to rectify the problem. As I have mentioned previously in this House, 46% of service personnel within the Royal Navy cite the lack of flexible working as a reason why they would consider leaving the military. Conversely, a third of all our armed forces cite flexible working as a reason why they would stay. So there is a very real and genuine demand in our military for provisions of the sort that this Bill brings forward.

However, for flexible working to succeed, it is vital that recruitment numbers increase, so that flexible working is a real option afforded to all service personnel. After all, introducing more flexible working at a time of static recruitment would risk exacerbating the problems we face, as we lack the numbers to fill the gaps, and people will not be able to take the options available. It will be important to monitor how many service personnel are working part-time, to identify and fill potential gaps in capacity, and to assess the effectiveness of this Bill’s aims. That is why I welcome my Front Benchers’ new clause requiring this information to be included in the armed forces biannual diversity statistics.

While a lack of flexible working is often cited as an obstacle to recruitment and retention, it is by no means the only one. There are challenges to be addressed in all four areas being looked at in the new employment model—pay and allowances, accommodation, terms of service, and training and education. In the case of accommodation, the recent collapse of Carillion—as everyone in this House knows, a major partner in the delivery of appalling service accommodation—means that these conversations are now even more urgent, and reassurance is a necessity.

On the matter of pay and conditions, little will change until we know what the pay review body is going to recommend this year to move us away from the appalling 1% pay cap. We also need certainty about the other allowances. The pay rise cannot be funded by cutting tour bonuses or other allowances.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I am profoundly aware of the debt we owe to the men and women of our armed forces. Their commitment to our country is unwavering every day. Our commitment to them, to their families and to their welfare should be unwavering, too. I fear that the message the Government are sending on this front remains mixed. Nevertheless, I welcome the Bill as an attempt to tackle some of the problems we face and a good start on the work of improving recruitment and retention in our armed forces.

5.45 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I say at the outset that I fully support the thrust of the Bill? It is before us for the very best of reasons, which I think is recognised in all parts of the House.

I would like, in my brief contribution, to comment on the two new clauses. I am attracted very much by the idea of a breakdown of the stats by either local authority or constituency areas. That would be extremely useful to all of us as Members of Parliament and would mean we know where we have a shortfall that we ought to be tackling. That is very attractive.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) is correct that it is a changing scene. This is only the start of a story, and we need to evaluate where we have got to. That is a wise suggestion.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth)—this sounds a bit like a summing-up speech, which it is not supposed to—displays, as ever, a deep knowledge of the subject, which is to be recognised.

I am sorry to do this again, but I should have reminded the House that my daughter is a serving officer with the armed forces. [Hon. Members, Hear, hear!] You are very good to me.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said, it is a moving situation. Mention has been made of accommodation and what the fall of Carillion means for that. We have work to do on the accommodation front. It is a gripe and a source of unhappiness among our armed forces personnel. I merely put down a marker at this stage that there is unfinished business there, but the Bill is worthy, and I applaud the Government for bringing it forward.

**Toby Perkins:** I support new clause 1, which would allow us to examine how those delivering the recruitment contract will adapt their working practices to promote the new working practices and take advantage of the new recruitment opportunities they present.

It is very important that we hold to account those who are recruiting on behalf of the MOD. There has been significant criticism of the role they have played and their performance so far. There have been a number of amendments to the way they have done that in recent months, which I hope brings about the intended improvements. It would be worth while to examine the way they are delivering on that contract. The intentions behind the Bill are entirely positive and should be supported, as I am glad they are by those on the Labour Front Bench.

I would like to expand on the point that I raised in my intervention about my disappointment and my urging of the Minister to examine how successful we are in recruiting on a geographical basis. Members right across the House take tremendous pride in not only our armed forces generally but their local regiments and the contribution that people in their constituencies make to the armed forces. When I am on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I am struck by how Members in Northern Ireland want to meet up with the Irish regiments. It is similar for Members in Scotland and for people like me; I have wanted to meet up with those in the Sherwood Foresters—or the Mercian Regiment, as it is now—to recognise the local contact that we have with the armed forces.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): It is great to see you back, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Gentleman—my friend—for his speech. The worry for me is that the more we try to recruit locally, the more we realise we have made a mistake in not actually keeping local regiments local. For example, my hon. Friend—in inverted commas—mentioned the Sherwood Foresters, who are
now part of the Mercians, which covers a big area. People I know would much prefer regiments to be much more local, and local normally means good recruiting.

**Toby Perkins:** I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I am too much of a traditionalist to call him an hon. Friend in this place, but he knows I call him a friend elsewhere. I agree entirely with what he says about the importance of locality. We could have a wider debate about whether the Sherwood Foresters should have been put into the Mercian Regiment. When I was on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, we talked about our local regiments, and it became clear that the Mercian Regiment is considered to be the local regiment for people over an incredibly diverse geographical split.

All the more reason, therefore, where information about the original home address of all the new recruits clearly exists, for that information to be made available. That would enable MPs to be part of the programme of trying to drive recruitment and to take pride in the level of recruitment in their area. Just imagine, if we had three MPs all within a few recruits of each other as we approached the end of the year, how much we could be driving such a programme. It would be a real force for good.

If geographical challenges were thrown up in relation to communities—religious or race communities—or areas where the Navy or the Air Force particularly recruit, and the figures were available to all of us, it would put positive pressure on the Government to take action on such things. We talk about diversity, and it seems to me that this is one of the ways in which we could drive it. To sum up, I would be very interested if the Minister would consider the idea of making the information that currently exists publicly available.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** As I said in Committee, I broadly welcome the proposals. At the top of the armed forces and obviously at ministerial level, there is a recognition that society is changing and that if we are not only to attract people to the armed forces but to retain them, we need flexibility in the way in which they are employed.

The new clause moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) is very clear, and I cannot understand what the objection to it could be. We need to ensure that one of the main aims of flexible working is to attract more women into our armed forces, but without being able to monitor that through the Department producing reports, I am not sure how we can gauge whether it is a success. The Minister may say that we could rely on tabling parliamentary questions, but I have to say that the quality of the answers from the Department recently has not been great, and it takes two or three attempts to elicit any answers. I do not see anything wrong with how the new clause is structured. It is a matter of making sure that we monitor what is going on.

The same applies to the new clause tabled by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). The other side of this issue is about knowing why part-time or flexible working is refused. In other workplaces, people refused this type of thing have a course of redress. It is important to be able not only to see whether flexible working proposals are being used, but the reasons why they are not being implemented, which could lead to a lot of dissatisfaction. It will be important to have some oversight to ensure that we know if, for example, people leave because at a certain level in the Army or other armed service they decide that they do not like it.

On the broader issue of armed forces recruitment, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) raised some interesting points. We are failing on recruitment, and the MOD is now reverting to the usual answer, which is to say, “The reason why we are not attracting people is the economic upturn and we are in a very competitive environment.” That is an old chestnut, and I think I even used it on some occasions when I was a Minister. I am sorry, but that is not the reason. The fundamental issue is that the privatisation model used for recruitment has failed and, as was mentioned earlier, it has also broken the link to local areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) raised the important point that flexible working is part of a bigger package, which is not only about career opportunities for individuals, but about accommodation. In Committee and when we debated the Bill previously, the Minister talked about the future accommodation model. I must say that he is going to have to get on with it, because anyone who reads today’s National Audit Office report on Amington Homes will find that it does not make for very pretty reading. This was one of the worst decisions ever taken by—well, I have to say—a Conservative Government in 1996, and the legacy it leaves for not just this Government but future Governments is quite frightening.

Ministers think that the future accommodation model is the way out, and I hope it is, but it will have to be done creatively. To look at one statistic alone in the report, if the discount the MOD currently gets is reduced from 58% to 38% when it comes up for renegotiation in 2021, that will cost the MOD and the taxpayer an additional £84 million from a budget that is already very restricted. There will have to be some very creative thinking about how to extract the Government from that contract, but it should not be done at the expense of servicemen and women who rely on accommodation as part of their package. As I said in Committee and the last time we discussed this in the House, I am not opposed to a new accommodation model, but there are two issues: one is that it will take time to introduce; and the other is that it will cost money.

I do not know whether the issue of accommodation will be a priority in the current MOD review, but I ask Ministers to consider it an important part. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North rightly said, we concentrate a lot on equipment and it is quite right that we should have the equipment that people need. However, we can have all the equipment in the world, but if we do not have skilled, highly trained personnel behind the equipment—if we do not retain people and keep them, and more importantly their families, happy—we are not going to be successful.

To finish, I would urge that personnel are seen as an important integral part of our defence effort, and nothing should detract from that. The Government have created their own mess with the budget for it. I wish them and the Defence Secretary well in trying to sort this out and in pleading for more money from the Treasury. The current
Chancellor was the Defence Secretary when some of these decisions—chickens that are now coming home to roost—were taken. At the end of the day, these are the people we rely on to keep us safe, and the men and women of our armed forces and their families are the ones we should always bear in mind.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber for the Report stage of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill and to see again right hon. and hon. Friends and colleagues who have been on this journey from the very beginning. I have listened carefully to those speaking in support of new clauses 1 and 2 and amendment 1, which I will come on to specifically in a moment. Lots of views have been put forward that are technically beyond the scope of a Report stage, but that does not prevent hon. Members from raising such points, which are all valid. It reflects the House’s commitment to understanding and indeed scrutinising defence matters as a whole, as well as matters being considered on Report.

There has been much talk about recruitment on a geographical basis and understanding the numbers. I am pleased to be joined on the Front Bench by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is responsible for this issue and is looking at it very carefully indeed. I say this as a former infantryman. The history of our armed forces—indeed, the Army—across Britain varies depending on whether the unit in question is a corps, a service, or indeed an infantry regiment. There are some huge and wonderful geographical connections, including with my own regiment, the Royal Green Jackets, going back to the Rifles and the Ox and Bucks regiment and so forth. Then there is the RAF and the Royal Navy, which recruit nationally.

6 pm

We will listen carefully to what people say. There is an interest in understanding what goes on in each constituency. I very much hope that hon. Members will take advantage of the forthcoming Armed Forces Day to make sure that their constituency and local authority can promote and recognise what our armed forces do in this country.

Much was also said about the membership of the Front-Bench team. The Minister for the Armed Forces asked how many Ministers there had been from Labour, going back over its entire history, in Defence and indeed how many there had been in No.10. We can both play that game, but we are all here for the right reasons.

Pay was also mentioned, as it is regularly on these occasions. We have made it clear that the 1% pay freeze has been lifted by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. It is up to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body to do its due diligence and to make its recommendations, which will be coming our way shortly.

On targets for women and ethnic minorities, we absolutely need to work on this, and that is partly why we have an armed forces people programme to recognise exactly the challenge we face. We want to achieve the percentage changes we are aiming for, which is why these changes are being introduced. I hope the House would agree that one of our success stories across the armed forces is recruitment and retention and the work done by our cadets, of which I was proud to know 126,000. That number is growing, and it is growing in key areas. These are people who have already bought into and understand what the armed forces ethos is all about. Whether they go on to become reservists or regular members of the armed forces, they buy into the importance of supporting those in uniform, which is very important indeed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise that I was not here at the crack of the Minister’s speech. As he and other hon. Members will know, the cadet force plays a significant cross-community role in Northern Ireland, in both the nationalist and the Unionist communities, and the force has grown. I am proud to be the spokesperson for the cadet forces in Northern Ireland in this House, and I would reiterate what he has said. What happens in Northern Ireland helps us to move forward as a country.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend, if I may call him that, makes an important point. I had the opportunity to visit Belfast recently for Remembrance Day, which was very moving indeed, and I know that the Minister for the Armed Forces is to visit Belfast shortly.

Let me turn to the group of new clauses and amendments we are debating. I welcome the opportunity to speak again about whether there is benefit to imposing a statutory requirement to evaluate and report on the impact of the new flexible options on the armed forces. The size and strength of our armed forces is of course important. It has been a recurring theme in recent debates, most recently in Westminster Hall. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing that important debate, and I pay tribute to all who contributed. The Minister for the Armed Forces said in that debate that we must do everything we can to persuade our young people that the armed forces remain a great place to work.

Recruitment remains a challenge for the armed forces, as has been reiterated today. We face strong competition from other employers. We acknowledge that, but we also acknowledge that we can do more to encourage our people to stay, so that we do not lose their valuable skills and experience. That is why we are responding with a range of short and long-term initiatives to ensure that the offer of a career in the armed forces remains competitive. This Bill will help by enabling us to make the changes necessary to enable our armed forces to work flexibly, reflecting the realities of modern life.

The amendments and new clauses in this group revisit the theme of placing various obligations on the Ministry of Defence to publish reports on the effects of flexible working measures on the armed forces. These measures involve a major change of approach to the terms under which some of our brave armed forces serve this country and are an important part of how we modernise our armed forces. The changes are as important as some of the other modernising steps taken in recent years, such as our change in policy on homosexuality, introduced in 2000, and our decision in 2016 to allow women to serve in close combat roles. The measures we are considering are another positive step in the right direction and are aimed at making serving in the armed forces a more attractive proposition, both for those who already serve and those considering serving.

What we propose in this Bill lies at the heart of our armed forces covenant. For that reason, Earl Howe committed during the passage through the other place to report on the impact of the new measures in future armed forces covenant annual reports. I commend this to hon. Members as an appropriate place for reporting
on the impact of the new measures. Indeed, the latest report, published in late December 2017, trailed the introduction of the measures in this Bill. In debates and in the information we have published, we have been clear that the introduction of these measures is not a silver bullet that will instantly resolve the recruitment and retention challenge that we face—and that the hon. Gentleman who is about to intervene has raised.

Mr Kevan Jones: The publication of that information is obviously a welcome step. The Minister says that the report will talk about progress, but will it produce the statistics or, more importantly, the numbers declined and the reasons for that, as would be required under new clause 2? If the good intentions behind this Bill are not followed through, we could have people declined flexible working, which could lead to more disenchantment rather than success.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will come to how we recognise and acknowledge the impact of the Bill, which I think will answer the hon. Gentleman’s question.

We believe that these measures, along with a range of others that the Department is introducing, will impact on recruitment and retention, not immediately but in the longer term. We should also be clear that we are competing with other, wider societal factors that are affecting our ability to recruit and retain, such as record youth employment and a smaller number of 16 to 24-year-olds entering the workforce over the next few years. This is an ongoing journey of change, which will be undertaken at a steady rather than a high-speed pace, against a background of continuing societal change. However, we fully recognise the importance of maintaining effective metrics following the introduction of these measures, to enable us to judge how well they are working and whether we need to make other changes.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister is rightly dwelling on how these measures could help with recruitment in other areas, but this is also about looking at capabilities, particularly in cyber. The Bill provides a different opportunity for people to serve and bring skills into the armed forces that we may need in the new online space.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will perhaps touch on in more detail on Third Reading, when we come to it. It is important to recognise that the conduct of wars is changing. The type of people we need to recruit is also changing, and he gives an excellent example of the need for us to improve our cyber-capability. A great example of that is not necessarily to train in-house, but to recognise that there are high-end skills in the civilian sector that we can introduce through greater use of reservists.

Mr Kevan Jones: Let me ask a clear question: what is the resistance to producing these statistics? The Minister talks about a matrix, whatever that means in civil service-speak, but this is a pretty straightforward question.

Mr Ellwood: It is a straightforward question, and I did tell the hon. Gentleman that I would get to it shortly. I then gave way to another Member and he asked me the same question again. If I can make a little progress, before he asks me a third time, I am sure we will get to where we want to be.

We absolutely recognise the importance of keeping the effect of these changes under continuous review, in terms of the benefits to our personnel and the impact on recruitment, retention and diversity. I remind hon. Members that the overall number of personnel taking up the new opportunities will initially be small and that flexible working is just one of several initiatives aimed at improving recruitment and retention in the longer term. It would therefore be extremely difficult to isolate the impact on recruitment and retention that is due solely to the Bill. Introducing a system of measurement would be difficult and would delay what we are trying to achieve.

Mr Kevan Jones: That is complete and utter nonsense. I accept that the numbers might be smaller as the system gets going, but surely there must be a way of logging this. I do not know why the Ministry is so opposed to producing these statistics. Clearly, in the early days, it could say that the system was bedding in. The Minister is going to get freedom of information requests and parliamentary questions about this, so he might as well produce the information.

Mr Ellwood: I fear that unless I say something to win the hon. Gentleman over, we might go around this merry-go-round many times. I will certainly look at this, but in Australia and other countries that have successfully gone down this road, the initial take-up has been so small that introducing a measurement system would delay the initiative’s introduction, and the numbers will be so small that it would be difficult to determine whether the effect is the result of the initiative or others that are being introduced. To discourage him from intervening again in two minutes, let me say that I will be more than happy to look at this and discuss it with him in the future.

The Ministry of Defence meets its obligations under the public sector equality duty to provide information on the workforce in relation to the protected characteristics identified by the Equality Act 2010, through the disclosure of information relating to the gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion and age of personnel. Our new UK armed forces quarterly service personnel statistics will, like the monthly publications they replace, provide detailed information and analysis on the number of service personnel by strength, intake and outflow, and detail is provided for both the full-time armed forces and the reserves. The number of people who take up the new arrangements will be significant to us, because obviously they are the people we want to retain, but it will be modest at first—somewhere between 0.5% and 1% of the armed forces. We therefore judge that collating and reporting information on a cohort of such a size would not provide significant or beneficial data, particularly in the early stages.

Mr Jones rose—

Mr Ellwood: Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes again, let me say that as the system grows and develops, I will certainly consider whether introducing such a thing would be worthwhile.
The principal long-term aim of the Bill is that we attract, recruit and retain people from a more diverse cross-section of society with the knowledge, skills and experience that we need to deliver operational capability. Let me be clear that we will not see results overnight. We are proposing good, positive steps in the right direction, but this is one of several proactive initiatives that we are introducing as part of an ongoing journey of change. We need to modernise our armed forces if we are to attract and retain the right mix of people and skills, which is why we are introducing these measures alongside others, collectively managed under the armed forces people programme. That programme includes the future accommodation model, which has been touched on, and the enterprise approach.

The MOD has been transparent about the challenging recruitment and retention climate in which we are operating. British society is changing and, if we are to compete in the jobs market, so must defence. Shortages in our traditional recruiting grounds and record youth unemployment mean that we must modernise and make our offer more attractive to those who are already serving and those we want to recruit. These measures will benefit a small but significant cohort, such as women and men starting a family, those with caring commitments and those who wish to undertake long-term studies. We have a good body of evidence on the demand for such ways of working that has been derived from external reports, internal surveys and focus groups. Our ongoing flexible duties trial shows that providing our people with modern choices will help us to retain highly skilled personnel who might otherwise leave.

I should reassure hon. Members that intake and strength by rank, trade and specialisation are regularly monitored and managed at service level and centrally by the MOD. Commissioning an external body to evaluate the early impact of the flexible working measures would serve only to delay their introduction in 2019.

6.15 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)

Mr Ellwood: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Chamber.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I remember the Minister bringing the Second Reading debate to a conclusion 40 minutes early. I just want to touch on what he said about looking at evidence. The 2015 peer review body highlighted in its evidence that people sometimes join the forces to get skills before moving on to better-paid jobs elsewhere. One of the ways around that would be to give them a decent pay rise. Will he commit to that?

Mr Ellwood: If the hon. Gentleman had been here at the start of the debate, he would have heard me say that a pay rise is being considered by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. The 1% pay freeze has been lifted, which is good news, and we look forward to the recommendations that will be made in March.

The MOD already gathers evidence on the impact that new forms of flexible working will have on our people. We think that that will provide more value than any evaluation from an independent contractor. We do not need to introduce more evaluation, further levels of statistics or additional reporting. It remains our view that imposing new statutory obligations would be unnecessarily costly, delay the introduction of the new measures and benefits for our people, and add little value to what we are trying to achieve. As I have said, we recognise the importance of keeping the effects of these changes under continuous review, in terms of the benefits to personnel and the impact on recruitment and retention.

Mr Kevan Jones: If after one year the Minister gets a parliamentary question or an FOI request on this, how will he respond?

Mr Ellwood: If the hon. Gentleman asks the parliamentary question or makes the FOI request, I will respond.

I said earlier that the introduction of the new flexible working opportunities falls firmly within the scope of the armed forces covenant, which I think the whole House can be proud of. I assure the House that we will monitor the introduction of the new measures during the first year of implementation from 2019, and report on the impact in future armed forces covenant reports.

Given the reassurances that I have offered, I hope that the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) will withdraw new clause 1.

Gerald Jones: I thank the Minister for his response. We tabled the new clause largely for probing reasons. If he will not accept it, I hope that he will reflect on our debate and that the Government will publish the information available. I do not think that arguments about cost and delay stand up when the evidence is already there and no additional work would be required. However, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

6.19 pm

Mr Ellwood: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a fourth time.

As the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have said, we have the best armed forces in the world, as I believe is illustrated by their standards, commitment, training and actions. We need only look at what they have achieved in defeating Daesh in Syria and Iraq, at the training they are providing with troop-contributing nations in Somalia and at the humanitarian support they provided in the Caribbean last summer. They help to define our international reputation and how we are seen across the world. That crucial hard power sits behind the soft power that we utilise so well, so we equip our armed forces well and train them well, but their professionalism comes from our ability to recruit and retain the best.

The work of our armed forces in defending our shores and interests, and in working with our allies, is all the more important to provide capable, visible and enduring hard power, given the more dangerous chapter that the world is experiencing, as is illustrated by various threats to the international rules-based order that we helped to create after the second world war. As I said on
Report, the conduct of war has changed as technology and tactics have advanced. We ask different things of our armed forces—our soldiers, sailors and air personnel—than we did even just a decade ago.

The Bill completes its passage through Parliament much as it started its journey last year. That is testimony to the wide support given to the new flexible working arrangements here and the other place, where the Government agreed that any regulations made under the new provisions that the Bill will insert into the Armed Forces Act 2006 will be subject to the affirmative procedure. It shows, too, the willingness to ensure that we all do what is right for our armed forces.

I am very grateful for the positive engagement and support from hon. Members on both sides of the House. I thank the Public Bill Committee for its excellent work in thoroughly examining the Bill and how it will support our armed forces. I also thank its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), for keeping all members of the Committee in good order.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for his involvement in Committee and his careful probing of the Bill. Of course, I thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who has a long history of involvement—as well as interventions—for his positive contributions at the Bill’s various stages. I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for her interest in and concern about the Bill.

We all recognise the challenges that we face in recruiting and retaining our people. The Bill is a small but important step towards improving opportunities for our armed forces. I make it clear, as I said on Report, that it will not lead to sweeping changes, but it is the right thing to do. It will help to modernise our approach and make us more competitive in the jobs market. We believe that the Bill will help in the long term, and improve recruitment and retention.

While the new measures will be made available to all regular service personnel, we believe that they will be particularly attractive to women and those with caring responsibilities. We hope that the Bill will make a difference by providing our people with an alternative to having to choose to leave the service that they love. It will make a difference to our success in helping to keep the skills, knowledge and experience that we need in defence.

We have made it clear throughout the Bill’s passage that operational capability is our red line and that this is not about creating a part-time armed forces or, indeed, saving money. The vast majority of our people will remain in full-time regular service. The Bill has the support of the service chiefs and, more importantly, of the services and the families federations. We are immensely proud of the achievements of our armed forces. They work hard for us and we owe them and their families a great deal. This flexible working Bill will provide our servicemen and women with an opportunity for some respite from their full-time commitment when they need it most. The Bill is for them.

I will end on a personal note by saying what impact I think the Bill will have on our armed forces. In the history of our armed forces, seismic moments have changed things for good or bad, and for ill or positive. They have changed the conduct of war. Going back to Agincourt, for example, the introduction of the longbow changed how war moved forward, as did the introduction of the tank at the battle of Cambrai. The introduction of the first aircraft carrier—HMS Hermes—in 1919 was another critical moment for our armed forces. However, with less fanfare, I believe that this Bill, which I hope will gain Royal Assent, will make its mark by changing the way in which our armed forces are perceived and our ability to retain important people in them. It sits next to two other major changes—they will not be as big as those procurement changes that I mentioned—with the opening up of all roles to women in our armed forces and the change on rules regarding homosexuality.

In closing, I thank General Richard Nugee, the Chief of Defence People, and his team for their work on putting the concept forward and seeing it all the way through to the end stages. I also thank the Minister for the Armed Forces, who, in the role that I have today, pioneered this approach. It has been a real honour to take the Bill from Second Reading through to today, and I hope that it will have the House’s support.

6.25 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I pay tribute to the unthinking work of our armed forces. The Opposition will support the Bill on Third Reading this evening because we want to see greater flexibility for our armed forces personnel to serve in ways that are compatible with the demands of modern family life. We also want to attract the widest possible pool of people to the excellent careers that the forces offer, including those who may require flexible working conditions to serve.

I thank my noble Friend Lord Touhig for his work on the Bill in the other place, including the important amendment that he secured to ensure that the Bill’s finer details that are introduced through regulations will be subject to the affirmative procedure, as the Minister confirmed, meaning that both Houses will have to vote on them. That will give further opportunity to explore and address some issues that we have raised today.

As I have said, we welcome the Bill and hope that its provisions will make a meaningful difference to personnel who may need temporary periods of flexible or part-time working and/or limits on separated service. The reality is that any of us could find ourselves requiring this kind of flexibility in our work, particularly as the complexities of modern life mean juggling work and home responsibilities, and when often both parents work full time and a complex set of arrangements is in place for childcare and the care of elderly relatives.

Family arrangements can be all the more complex for members of the services, with the expectations of constant readiness and deployment. In these circumstances, it is understandable that some service personnel may look for greater flexibility by moving into civilian sectors. However, it makes no sense to lose highly skilled and dedicated service members simply because they need a more flexible working arrangement for a specified period of time. That is where the Bill comes in. If the flexibility encourages more potential recruits to consider a career in the forces, that is a very good thing, because the services will benefit from being able to draw from the brightest and the best, from all backgrounds and communities.
6.31 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I rise briefly to support the Bill and to congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on its successful passage, which I hope the House will support in a few minutes’ time.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister said, this is a modest Bill, but sometimes the smaller steps are the most important. Like him, I too believe that in time the Bill—soon an Act, I hope—will be seen to have quite radical consequences. Of course, as he said, it is part of a series of wider reforms, but it is an important part. Seven years ago, only 8% of our serving personnel were women, for example. That is not right for our country, but it also was not right for our armed forces, which were missing out on all the talent and expertise that might otherwise have been available to them. That is why we set a new target of 15% female participation among each new intake by 2020, and we are now, I understand, well on the way to meeting that target. The Bill will help. It will show anybody—male or female—considering a career in the armed forces that they are now modern employers able to recognise people’s changing expectations over the lifetime of their careers. It will enable employees, for the first time, to apply to work for the days and hours that suit them best.

I make three final comments on the Bill. First, we will have to do more to attract women leavers back into the armed forces. We will have to find ways of working harder at not missing out on the experience they had and which they might have had to give up, perhaps to start a family or move elsewhere with their spouse. I believe—my right hon. Friend might want to respond to this—that we will have to look at how women coming back into the armed forces can quickly recover the rank and entitlements they would otherwise have achieved.

Mr Ellwood: It was remiss of me not to acknowledge the work of the former Secretary of State in this area and in pioneering the Bill. He has long been passionate about this subject, as is reflected in his speech today. Does he agree that the line pursued during his time of allowing those who leave the armed forces well to rejoin well after perhaps a spell in civilian life is worth pursuing?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is definitely worth pursuing, but we need then to focus particularly on women who have left the armed forces and look at further ways of encouraging them to rejoin at a later stage of their lives or careers.

Secondly, women and recruits from the black and ethnic minorities still need more role models: it is not just about seeing other women or other members of the black and Asian communities alongside them; it is about seeing more senior officers who have built successful careers who they can look up to. We need to see more women and ethnic minority candidates reaching three-star and—one day, I hope, in the fullness of time—even four-star rank. If we are to attract more people from outside to areas where we are short, we have to show them that they can not only have worthwhile careers but get to the very top.

Finally, of course, that applies to the Government themselves, as was pointed out a little earlier, I think. I, too, regret that after the recent reshuffle—I will not
comment on how successful or not that reshuffle was—there is now no female Defence Minister. As the matter has been raised, the House might wish to know that when the Prime Minister formed her first Administration, back in June 2016, and was moving my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), I made it very clear that we needed at least one woman Minister on the team, and I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) was appointed a Defence Minister. I congratulate her, of course, on her promotion to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but that does leave a gap, and it is a mistake—if I may put it as boldly as that to the Treasury Bench—to have five Defence Ministers and for them all to be male. If we are to get more women in the team, and I was delighted that my hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), I in June 2016, and was moving my right hon. Friend the Member on the team, and I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) was appointed a Defence Minister. I congratulate her, of course, on her promotion to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but that does leave a gap, and it is a mistake—if I may put it as boldly as that to the Treasury Bench—to have five Defence Ministers and for them all to be male. If we are to get more women and—in the fullness of time—more people from the ethnic minorities to join up, we have to show that this kind of change is embedded from the top.

That said, I support the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friends on getting it through.

6.36 pm

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for his work on the Bill around which there has been much consensus across the House, and I pay tribute to those involved in drawing it up.

I am disappointed that the Minister has not committed to publishing the statistics called for in the amendment and new clauses tabled by the Opposition and the SNP. No doubt, however, we will return to this issue, through parliamentary questions, freedom of information requests and so on, to ensure we are properly capturing the picture. I understand what he says about the small uptake initially, but we need to know that there is a small uptake initially and that it is increasing, and without the statistics, that is not possible.

The SNP has some concerns about the housing that armed forces personnel and their families are expected to live in. I repeat some of the comments about pay. It is imperative that we get the pay correct for members of the armed forces if we are to recruit and retain the best. I have raised leave entitlement several times. It is not enough that it can be carried forward and carried forward; safeguards must be in place to make sure that people can take their leave when they need to. There must also be safeguards in place for families to make sure they are supported when spouses are deployed and when they are on base and that the education of their children is considered when they join up.

The SNP will continue to call on the Government to set up an armed forces representative body. It was in our manifesto, and we will continue to raise this issue. The Police Federation is able to liaise with the Government. The armed forces and armed forces personnel do not have similar abilities. It would give a voice to those affected by the issues raised today—issues that affect retention and recruitment, not simply flexible working. I call on the Minister to look seriously at the issue of a representative body, but I thank him once again for his work on the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Kirstene Hair.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Did you call me, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker: For the sake of clarity, I will say it more loudly: Miss Kirstene Hair.

6.39 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank all Members who have already contributed to this important debate.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to have armed forces personnel stationed in our constituencies will know of the tremendous effort, both physical and emotional, that those men and women put into their work every day, and will also know of the impact that the Bill will have on people who, whether in times of conflict or in peacetime, are determined to provide us with the greatest protection possible.

In my constituency, the distinguished servicemen of RM Condor are a constant reminder to residents that they can rest safe in the knowledge that world-class professionals are nearby. Although most of those who serve in 45 Commando come from hundreds of miles away, the Royal Marines are rooted in the community. Locals are incredibly proud of the base, which is, quite simply, an integral part of the fabric of Angus.

Given the sacrifices that armed forces personnel are prepared to make, not only in risking their own safety but during the difficult extended periods away from their friends and families, it is morally right for us to do everything in our power to help them in their chosen career. I am therefore delighted that the Bill has received support from Members on both sides of the House. As has been said before, it is a Bill for families. Long periods previously separated parents from children and partners from each other, and personnel were unable to be with ill relatives. That need not continue, because the Bill offers balance.

The changes will benefit those who currently serve, and will also support recruitment in the future. Like other Members, I am particularly hopeful that more female personnel will be attracted to such roles—or, perhaps, attracted back to them, if they have previously left. We have said that we want to recruit the best, but that means that we must offer the best, and the working practices proposed in the Bill are more in line with structures that are commonplace throughout the private and civilian public sector in the United Kingdom.

The Bill is a small but significant step. It deals with an issue that has been much considered and debated, with the needs of our troops measured against the necessity of maintaining our country’s security and national defence at all times. Much has been said in the other place about the term “part-time”, which has been granted a note of derision and scorn that it does not deserve. The Bill relates to hours of work, distance from families and the question whether increased flexibility will help soldiers and their loved ones to lead better, more balanced lives. Its benefits are part of the commitment that the Government have made to transforming the armed forces into the modern, diverse and more effective organisation to which the Secretary of State again outlined his commitment in the House last week: a military in which personal circumstance or background is not important—unlike commitment to professionalism, skill, and making the people of the United Kingdom so incredibly proud and undoubtedly safe.
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Bill. I was trying to work out how many armed forces Bills I had dealt with over the past 16 years, either as a Minister or as a Back Bencher. [Interruption.] As the Minister says, I am a veteran.

This, I think, is one of the simplest Bills I have encountered, but, as the Minister has said, it is important. It is intended to ensure that working practices in our armed forces are modern, but also attractive to those who are thinking of joining. The Minister may think me pedantic in wanting to know how its implementation will be monitored. However, I think we need to ensure not only that the armed forces are offered these opportunities, but that the information is cascaded down the chain of command, so that people are aware that they can ask for flexible working arrangements, and those who are in a position to make the decisions recognise that they can use them.

Training will be needed, and, in some cases, attitudes must change. I have no problem with the senior levels of the armed forces, who have, I think, bought into this, but the Bill must have an effect in practice, throughout the chain of command. That is why I think it important for us to monitor the number of people who take up these opportunities, and also when and why they are refused. Is there a good reason for that? I know that civil servants have convinced the Minister that such monitoring would be an onerous task, but I do not accept that. As the system beds in, the information will obviously need to be produced internally in the Department, for monitoring purposes, and I find it difficult to understand why it cannot subsequently be published. I think that in future, as a result of freedom of information requests or parliamentary questions, the Minister, or his successor, will have to publish it anyway. I also think that it would be positive to project the fact that the forces are introducing flexible working by giving examples.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This is the first of five interventions that I intend to make.

The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point about the need to trickle information down to commander level to ensure that people are aware of the opportunities. That will be incentivised and supported by local commanders, but there will be a higher approvals authority. It is all based on operational capability, which we must not lose sight of. I hope that that clarifies the way in which the system will work.

Mr Jones: I accept that. I do not question for one minute what the armed forces will do in trying to ensure that the information is instilled in the chain of command, but this is a new way of working for them. I am not criticising them, because it is inevitable that when such a change is introduced in any company or other organisation, some people will not get it, and some will positively resist it. Some people will see it as a radical change. I think we should ensure that those who ask for flexible working are given good reasons why, in some cases, it cannot be implemented. I accept that there will be operational reasons.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when we are considering introducing a new element of flexibility into service in the armed forces, we should look again at the maximum enlistment time? Although the military have moved towards extending the retirement age in view of our ageing population, perhaps it is time to revisit that as well. People who are well into their 60s, and even 70s, are quite capable of doing some of the modern jobs in the armed forces, which would not have been the case 20 or 30 years ago.

Mr Jones: I think it is a fact of life that the pool of 18-year-olds is becoming smaller. I hope the right hon. Gentleman was not suggesting that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) should be brought out of retirement; I do not know whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing for the armed forces, but it would certainly be interesting for them. However, he has raised an interesting point. When I was a Defence Minister, people who could have made a further contribution were leaving the forces in their early to mid-50s, for reasons connected with, for instance, pensions. Given that that pool of 18-year-olds is getting smaller, we should also revisit the idea of recruitment from Commonwealth countries, which has been successful in the past. It has made a tremendous contribution to our nation’s defence over the last few years.

Ruth Smeeth: My hon. Friend has referred to serving personnel of a slightly more mature aspect. Might not the most effective way to ensure that flexible working proceeds as the Bill proposes be to ensure that at least one one-star officer takes the opportunity to sign up for it?

Mr Jones: That is an interesting concept, which returns me to an important point made by the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon). We need new role models, and not just in the context of flexible working. We need, for instance, to see a senior general who is a woman. We can do all the talking we like about trying to encourage women to join the armed forces and take an active part in advancing their careers, but unless there is a career path that will help them to progress, many will assume that that will never be achievable. We need only look at our US counterparts and others, where female officers have attained the highest rank. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth): why can these provisions not be open to senior managers and others in the military and other armed forces? That would send a positive message that it is important.

I welcome the Bill, but disagree with the Minister in that I do not think it is a silver bullet, because people join our armed forces and are retained for reasons not only to do with work-life balance, but because of pay and other things such as career breaks, which other armed forces in the world offer, enabling people to leave the armed forces and then come back. That does two things: it gives the expertise that those individuals have learned in the armed forces to business, charity and other sectors, and brings a wealth of knowledge back into the armed forces, which is needed. Career breaks are not unusual in the United States and other countries. This Bill is a start in terms of flexible working, but I hope that that will develop through career breaks and other initiatives.
Carol Monaghan: Some countries make far better use of reservists for that same reason. They bring their armed forces skills into civilian life and vice versa. Some countries’ armed forces have huge numbers of reservists making up their ranks, as opposed to UK armed forces which have only a very small number.

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady makes a good point; reservists do add something, but I am talking about regular members of the armed forces being able to leave for a certain period of time on the understanding that they will come back. In the United States, many on senior military courses leave to do doctorates or work in business and do other things and then come back into the armed forces, and doing that is not seen as a black mark against their career; on the contrary, it is seen as enhancing both the armed forces and those individuals’ careers.

This Bill is a start, therefore, and I assure the Minister I will be scrutinising how it works in practice and the uptake of its provisions. I also join him in thanking the Clerks and everyone involved in the Bill on making sure it has gone through both Houses with a degree of consensus from all sides and with additions to the offer that we can now give to people who want to join our armed forces.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call the hon. and gallant Bob Stewart.

6.52 pm

Bob Stewart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful for colleagues’ full support for my re-joining the armed forces; the uniform would probably be a bit bigger, but I remind Members that Blücher was much older than I am when he effectively won the battle of Waterloo by turning up and helping Wellington. [Interruption.] I Late? He was just in time—which was the system used for equipping the Army about 20 years ago.

I will make three quick points. First, I support the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who made the very good point that flexible working works best when units are fully recruited. If they are not fully recruited, the numbers available to carry out the jobs are much lower and consequently the units will be less efficient. So there is a direct link between recruiting and flexible working.

My second point is a damascene conversion. I was always until recently against women serving in close combat roles. I had to be convinced, but society has changed, which was crucial to that change in me, and perhaps my full support for it has come from within my own family. My wretched but beautiful daughter has said she will only join the armed forces if she can serve in a combat role. I applaud her for that and right at this moment she is on selection.

My third point is something on which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) and I fully agree: the move to returning recruiting to regimental unit level. Commanding officers—as I was once, when Blücher was a lad—have always had, and should always have, a responsibility for recruiting their units. This has diminished recently. I understand that the MOD intends to bring back regimental recruiting teams; some have never gone because they have always been on-strength. The other form of good recruiting practice is keeping the Army in public eye-type arrangements, where they march through the county. That is a good way to demonstrate our armed forces’ presence.

I summarise by saying that this is a jolly good Bill and I fully support it.

6.56 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It is a pleasure to speak on Third Reading. I am slightly concerned that there will be a diminution now in the regularity of what seems to be our weekly defence meetings, as this was the only Defence Bill in the Government’s Queen’s Speech for this two-year Parliament. However, it has been a good Bill and I thank the Minister for his kind words about my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and the way she has engaged with it on behalf of the SNP. He and the House know of her long association with the armed forces, of which she is rightly proud, and she better informs all of us whenever she takes part in these debates.

I wish to pick up on what the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), said about the fact that there is now no woman in the ministerial team. There are no women serving as heads of the armed forces of course, and there is unlikely to be one any time soon. Only three of the 12 senior managers who make up the senior civil servants at the MOD are women. I think I am right in saying that that makes the MOD the only all-male-run Department in terms of ministerial faces. I invite the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks or one of his esteemed colleagues to intervene on me to save a recommendation, which I fear might have the opposite effect, that I made last time for the promotion of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan). I fear my recommending her promotion is perhaps the kiss of death, so I invite the right hon. Gentleman or someone else on the Conservative Benches to redeem that recommendation, if not now, certainly behind the scenes.

I feel as though I am repeating myself—forgive me for this—but I want to pick up on some of the things the Government have not brought forward. If they do bring them forward, however, they will find 35 Members of the SNP willing to support them. One of those things is an end to the Capita contract, as mentioned by the shadow Secretary of State. It is a rip-off and it is farcical. We largely agree across the House that it is farcical and it needs to come to an end. It does a disservice to those who serve in uniform.

I mentioned the issue of housing to the Minister at the recent Defence Question Time. The housing is in a dreadful condition. Carillion receives 1,500 calls a day in complaints from people living in the CarillionAmeny estate up and down the country. We can read all about that. It goes beyond broken lightbulbs. We are talking about boilers remaining broken down for weeks on end and people moving into accommodation whose kitchens have no units or cookers. They deserve so much better. Frankly, some of the standards would not pass the social housing standards of the 1970s and 1980s. If the Government were minded to resolve that issue, they would have the support of 35 SNP Members of Parliament, of many on their own Back Benches and of many, if not all, on the Labour Benches.
My last point relates to pay. I accept that there is an independent pay review body and that the 1% cap has been lifted. That is to be welcomed. However, the review body only makes recommendations to the Government and the Government can of course go much further. I understand that they could go further right now and that they do not need to wait any longer.

It is regrettable that members of the armed forces and other public sector workers across the board have had a real-terms pay cut because of the freeze and because of other public sector workers across the board have had a real-terms pay cut because of the freeze and because of inflation. It would show a bit of goodwill to give those people a decent pay rise. If the Government were minded to do that, they would have our support.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There are a lot of good things in the Bill, but one of the tests to determine whether the Government value the public services and the armed forces will be whether they award them a decent pay rise. Obviously that has to be negotiated. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that a recommendation from the pay review body is simply for a minimum and that the Government could go a lot further.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. We have previously had a debate on pay. I accept that it is not the dominant issue for members of the armed forces, but we would be kidding ourselves on if we did not accept that it was a major factor in recruitment and retention, as the pay review body’s own evidence suggests.

Kirstene Hair: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it is regrettable that the Scottish Government increased the income tax for servicemen and women?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am amazed that it took the hon. Lady so long to make that point. As she knows, because she attends these debates—sometimes—the changes in taxation have actually brought in a tax cut for the vast majority of serving personnel in Scotland, including some in her own constituency. They are among the lowest-paid members not only of the armed forces but of the public sector across the UK. By contrast, the pay freeze for someone on, say, £21,000 represents a cut of £400. I am willing to engage in a debate on pay, and I am happy to defend my Government’s record, but would she accept that it is time for the pay cut imposed by her Government to go? Nothing?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot really ask questions across the Floor of the House if the hon. Lady is sitting there being quiet and well-behaved.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I think there was some looking at the feet there, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I take your point.

It has been mentioned that members of the armed forces do not have a body like the Police Federation to advocate on their behalf, so it falls to Members of this House to do so. Some Members of the party of government—albeit a minority—seem unwilling to take on Ministers about this, although I commend Conservative Members who are not backward in coming forward in that regard. We do our armed forces a disservice if we do not do that. So let us be radical and follow the good practice that we see elsewhere. Let us give them a body on a statutory footing to make sure that they are represented around the table.

Mr Ellwood: I could not resist intervening on the hon. Gentleman. To suggest that Ministers are not making the case, along with Back Benchers on both sides, for funding for the armed forces in the defence budget is to misunderstand and indeed to be asleep in the debate that has been taking place over the past couple of months. He is also completely ignoring the banding and the progressive pay scales that are in place. It is absolutely right to have a debate about pay, but he must recognise that the banding does not mean that there is a pay freeze. He is missing out a chunk of understanding about armed forces pay.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I almost do not know where to begin with that. As I have mentioned, there was a debate in this House specifically on armed forces pay, and I am well aware of the banding that is in place, but the Minister has the power to offer a pay rise. He does not need to wait for a recommendation or to take the recommendation from the pay review body. It is after all only a recommendation. I know that he fights his hardest for cash for his Department and for the armed forces—I read about it in The Times newspaper on a daily basis—but let us be honest: the defence review has been kicked into the later part of the year, the Government have apparently removed its fiscally neutral element, and from what I can see, three of the four announcements made by the Secretary of State on Thursday are going to amount to more cuts in capability elsewhere. I do not doubt that he and other Ministers do their best to take on what the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) described as “the pinstripe warriors at the Treasury”.—[Official Report, 24 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 120W.] However, it is about time that we started to see some of the fruits of their labours and of those who sit behind them on the Back Benches.

7.5 pm

Jim Shannon: It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates. I commend the Minister and his Department for their hard work and for the support that they have managed to gain on both sides of the Chamber for the Bill, which represents a step forward for our armed forces personnel. Service in uniform in my constituency is normal and recruitment levels are high. These debates resonate closely with the people back home. Recruitment is also at an all-time high for the part-time services, and it is good news to be able to report that in the Chamber tonight. Government policy is obviously going in the right direction, not only in my constituency but across the whole of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Bill as an appropriate set of measures that will better reflect the needs of 21st century service personnel and their families than the arrangements that we have previously had. However, I would like to highlight an anomaly about the appeals process. I am not sure whether the Minister will be able to respond to this point tonight, but, if not, I would be happy to hear from him at a later date. There does not seem to be anything about it in the Bill. It is not an earth-shattering matter, but it has been brought to my attention by soldiers who have asked me to raise it here.

The system outlined in the Bill will involve going through the ombudsman if a service person wishes to appeal. However, it has long been a securely held view that the ombudsman experience is not a good one,
and that it probably involves too lengthy a process for the sort of events for which this measure is designed. I know that the Minister is keenly interested in introducing a measure that will help soldiers, and if we can introduce one that will improve the appeals process, we should do that. There are families who need help and resolution, and the ombudsman appeals can often run for months, if not years. The management of that caseload represents a considerable burden.

The present process does not seem to have been terribly successful in bringing about resolution in a timely manner, and it is my opinion and that of others outside the House that the opportunity presented by the Bill to change the system has not been fully utilised. I look to the Minister for a response when he is able to give me one, if he does not mind, and I respectfully ask that the matter be given further consideration. Would it not be more appropriate and in keeping with the spirit of the Bill, which seeks to empower the service to be a better employer, to refer appeals to the immediate chain of command? I personally would like to see that happen and I believe that many others would as well. It would be much more in keeping with how almost all other personnel issues are managed.

The Minister referred to the excellent work of the cadet forces across the whole United Kingdom. I commend the Government for the way in which we are building up the cadet forces not only on the mainland but back home in Northern Ireland. When both communities there see the cadet forces as an option for younger people, it enables us to achieve cross-community involvement and integration in a way that is also helping us to move forward politically, now and further down the line. I commend the Minister for his commitment to extra reserve forces in Northern Ireland and to the capital build, which will enable us to grow. The Minister has given us that commitment. The confidence and supply agreement we have in partnership with the Government has sought to achieve that as well. We look forward to it being delivered.

I also welcome the commitment to the recruitment of and elevation in the ranks for women and those from black and minority ethnic groups. On a recent visit to Shrivenham and in other visits, it was clear from our discussions that there is a strategy in place and that the Minister and the Department have committed to making these changes, which are starting to work, with recruitment figures already starting to rise. We obviously recognise that there are other things that must be done, so it is good to have this continued recruitment strategy.

I gently ask the Minister to consider the ombudsman issue and the appeals process because that could lead to a smoother operation for our armed forces, and the Bill is designed for that. I commend the Minister, the members of the Public Bill Committee, the Hansard staff and all the Committee staff who do such hard work behind the scenes to make these things happen.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

AUTOMATED AND ELECTRIC VEHICLES BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 23 October 2017 (Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.
2. Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.
3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—(Jesse Norman.)
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

TRANSMISSION OF DATA RELATING TO CHARGE POINTS

(1) Regulations may make provision for the purpose of ensuring the ongoing transmission of charge point data to a prescribed person or to persons of a prescribed description.

(2) “Charge point data” means prescribed information relating to a charge point (which may include information about energy consumption and geographical information).

(3) Regulations under subsection (1) may impose requirements—

(a) on operators of charge points that are public charging points, and

(b) in relation to charge points that are not public charging points, on prescribed persons or persons of a prescribed description.

(4) Regulations under subsection (1) may make provision about when, how and in what form charge point data is to be transmitted.”—(Jesse Norman.)

This new clause confers power to make regulations for the purpose of ensuring the transmission of charge point data to a prescribed person or to persons of a prescribed description.

Brought up, and read the First time.

7.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Public facility operators: provision of public charging points—

(1) Regulations may impose requirements on owners and operators of public facilities falling within a prescribed description, in connection with the provision on their premises of public charging points.

(2) Regulations under subsection (1) may, for example—

(a) require owners and operators of public facilities to provide public charging points;

(b) require owners and operators of public facilities to work with local authorities on the provision of public charging points;

(c) require public charging points to be available for use at prescribed times; and

(d) require services or facilities prescribed by the regulations to be provided in connection with public charging points.

(3) In this section “public facilities” means—

(a) supermarkets;

(b) public car parks;

(c) airports;

(d) train stations; and

(e) such other public facilities as prescribed in regulations.

This new clause would provide the Secretary of State with the power to make regulations requiring owners and operators of certain public facilities to work with local authorities to provide public charging points and to ensure that public charging points are maintained and easily accessible to the public.

New clause 3—Charging points strategy: public transport and commercial vehicles—

(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay a report before Parliament setting out a comprehensive UK charging points strategy for public transport and commercial vehicles.

(2) The report must, in particular, consider the establishment of charging points for—

(a) buses;

(b) electric bikes and other mobility vehicles;

(c) haulage vehicles;

(d) commercial vehicle fleets; and

(e) such other public transport and commercial vehicles as considered relevant by the Secretary of State.

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to set out a strategy for establishing charging points for public transport and commercial vehicles.

Government amendments 1 to 3.

Jesse Norman: Following a fruitful debate in Committee, the Government decided to table new clause 1 to part 2 of the Bill. Smart charge points will play a vital role in managing the demand on the grid created by charging electric vehicles. Estimates from the national grid suggest that the increase in peak demand caused by electric vehicles could be significantly reduced by smart charging. Less electricity generation and fewer network upgrades would be required, thereby reducing energy costs and costs to bill payers. Smart charging can not only ensure that vehicle owners receive the required amount of electricity within the time required, but adapt power flow to meet the needs of consumers and various parties in the energy system.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I support the new clause because smart charging is the way forward. Filling station owners currently need to display the price per unit of their petrol, diesel and liquefied petroleum gas on a large sign, so that motorists can decide whether to go to that particular station before they enter the forecourt. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that electric charging points are required to display similar information?

Jesse Norman: I certainly agree that consistency in the presentation of information is important, and I take my right hon. Friend’s wider point about whether such information should be displayed in the same way as petrol prices. He makes a valuable contribution to the debate.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): One of the most frustrating aspects of filling up a car is the tax on top of the cost of the fuel itself. Do the Government have any intention to levy any form of taxation on electricity bought at petrol stations?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend will be aware that we have already wandered quite far outside these narrowly defined amendments to a tightly defined Bill. I am not going to comment on future Government policy.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Jaguar Land Rover builds its cars in my constituency, and Geely, which makes black cabs, has also invested a lot of money. What sort of consultation has the Minister had with those companies and, more importantly, with people who run small garages?
Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman refers to a variety of groups. I met the chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover only a few months ago. My colleagues are regularly in touch with representatives of fuel retailers, and the same is true for the other group that he mentioned.

7.15 pm
The information provided by smart charging also helps to predict future demand on the grid and local network hotspots, so that infrastructure can be planned as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. Clause 12 gives the Secretary of State the power to introduce regulations to stipulate that all new charge points must have smart functionality. However, as was pointed out in Committee, it stipulates that smart functionality must only be operational at the point of sale or installation, and the policy intent is that smart functionality would not be turned off once operational. Consumers will be encouraged to keep their smart functionality switched on through incentives such as cheaper time-of-use electricity tariffs and the ability to monitor and manage their vehicle’s energy consumption.

However, as was discussed in Committee, if the Bill is not amended, there is a chance that data from a domestic or public charge point may not be transmitted to the specified persons after the installation is completed. That could mean that bodies such as the national grid and distribution network operators do not receive information that would help to plan for demand on the grid.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I understand the purpose of new clause 1, which has good intentions. I am sure that the Minister has considered the implications for privacy and personal data, so will he explain how that will be secured under this system?

Jesse Norman: A considerable amount of work is being done in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe on how data is to be handled in terms of safety on the autonomous vehicles side. As for the electricity side, there is no reason to think that the protocols that are being developed will impinge upon privacy, but that remains a matter for definition in future secondary legislation.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I am grateful to the Government for bringing forward this new clause, for which I argued in Committee, and I think the drafting is appropriate. The answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is that the data transmitted will be highly aggregated and will be used by the grid and DNOs to manage the system better. It is important that the Government persist with this change, because it alone provides the basis for the kind of interactivity that we need between electric vehicles, as a latent battery for the country, and the grid.

Jesse Norman: As I am sure the Secretary of State will say on Third Reading, we are all in the debt of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for his excellent work in Committee, of which this change is a good example.

New clause 1 addresses concerns raised in Committee by introducing a requirement for the continuing transmission of data from charge points to prescribed persons, who could include the national grid and distribution network operators. Consumers will be still encouraged to keep the smart functionality operational once installed, with regulations taken forward only if the information required for effective energy infrastructure planning is not made available. Full consultation will be carried out before regulations are brought forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some people may be worried about whether the grid can cope with the demand from electric car charging. Are there enough charging points across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Is the infrastructure in place so that we can move forward and get the benefits of this sector? There is a skeleton, but are the bones ready?

Jesse Norman: This country is publicly recognised as being at the forefront of a group of nations that is leading the way on electric car infrastructure. Something like 11,500 charge points have already been installed, and the Bill provides plenty of scope to encourage and support further installations.

Two further consequential amendments are required to clause 14, which concerns the Secretary of State’s power to create exceptions in regulations and to determine that regulations should not apply to certain persons or things. The amendments ensure that the new clause is fully operative within the Bill.

This change is illustrative of the rigorous and constructive discussion of the Bill in Committee, the members of which I thank again for their time and dedication, which has resulted in a better product.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I did not have an opportunity to serve in Committee, but I am privileged to be the chairman of the all-party group on electric and automated vehicles. Would the Minister care to comment on the latest apps, such as that which allows Tesla drivers to plug in their vehicle when renewables are being used, thereby reducing the cost of electric motoring even further and, more importantly, making electric motoring very, very green?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend will be aware that one of the purposes of a smart grid is precisely to allow people to recharge their car at the most cost-effective time. I recently had the opportunity to drive a Tesla, and it is extraordinary how the car is continually updated with patches that can reduce its impact on the atmosphere and improve other aspects of driving in a very green way.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, the new clause was tabled at my behest, having been prompted by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) in Committee. Ruskin said “when we build, let us think that we build for ever.”

What we build in respect of electric charging points is vital. The Minister will be familiar with the RAC Foundation’s analysis in “Ultra-Low-Emission Vehicle Infrastructure—What Can Be Done”, which shows that, although the number of charging points is growing reasonably quickly, the number of rapid charging points is growing much more slowly. Is it not vital that, in his work to build this infrastructure so that it is fit for purpose, account should be taken of the need for more rapid charging points?
Jesse Norman: We must all thank my right hon. Friend—I am sure the Secretary of State will want to echo my thanks—for the careful, judicious and wise way in which he has hitherto steered this Bill and its predecessor, including in Committee. He quotes Ruskin to good effect, and secondary legislation under the Bill will allow us to reflect changes in the market. My right hon. Friend’s general point is absolutely right and, as he well knows, it is part of the purpose of this Bill.

Amendment 1 to clause 13 will provide more clarification about the enforcement of regulations under part 2 of the Bill. It provides for an appropriate civil enforcement regime to ensure that any requirement under the power can be properly enforced so that the desired effects are achieved. The clause gives explicit examples of the expected elements of such a regime, including details about identifying failures of compliance. The amendment adds further detail to what one should expect to be included in regulations to assist inspectors in determining whether a breach of the rules has taken place.

Examples of that detail include taking photographs or removing materials from a site to provide evidence of compliance or non-compliance when inspections are carried out. In general, the Government aspire to be as transparent as possible regarding what they intend to include in regulations, and the amendment adds further clarity on what will be included in the inspection regime.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Any initiative to try to expand smart charging has to be good news, but I put it to the Minister that if there is to be a step change in certainty for many drivers, it will be through the expansion of on-street charging outside people’s homes. What initiatives will the Government take to expand that, particularly with regard to the holy grail of wireless charging?

Jesse Norman: At the moment, there are many mild yet reducing impediments to buying an electric car, such as range anxiety and the resale amounts that might be achieved. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the importance of the charging network. As he will know, the Government have put in place substantial funding not merely for the plug-in car grant, but for a £200 million commitment, to be matched by a private commitment, not merely for the plug-in car grant, but for a £200 million investment fund that will allow us to reflect changes in the market. My right hon. Friend’s general point is absolutely right and, as he well knows, it is part of the purpose of this Bill.

Amendment 1 to clause 13 will provide more clarification about the enforcement of regulations under part 2 of the Bill. It provides for an appropriate civil enforcement regime to ensure that any requirement under the power can be properly enforced so that the desired effects are achieved. The clause gives explicit examples of the expected elements of such a regime, including details about identifying failures of compliance. The amendment adds further detail to what one should expect to be included in regulations to assist inspectors in determining whether a breach of the rules has taken place.

Examples of that detail include taking photographs or removing materials from a site to provide evidence of compliance or non-compliance when inspections are carried out. In general, the Government aspire to be as transparent as possible regarding what they intend to include in regulations, and the amendment adds further clarity on what will be included in the inspection regime.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Any initiative to try to expand smart charging has to be good news, but I put it to the Minister that if there is to be a step change in certainty for many drivers, it will be through the expansion of on-street charging outside people’s homes. What initiatives will the Government take to expand that, particularly with regard to the holy grail of wireless charging?

Jesse Norman: At the moment, there are many mild yet reducing impediments to buying an electric car, such as range anxiety and the resale amounts that might be achieved. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the importance of the charging network. As he will know, the Government have put in place substantial funding not merely for the plug-in car grant, but for a £200 million commitment, to be matched by a private commitment, to create a charging infrastructure investment fund that is dedicated to addressing precisely the issues he describes.

New clause 2, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), understandably highlights many other locations, such as supermarkets and hotels, where it might be appropriate to require the installation of charging facilities. We want people across the country to have the opportunity to make the transition to buying and using an electric vehicle. The vast majority of electric vehicle drivers choose to charge their car at home overnight, but appropriate and adequate provision of public charging is still vital to supporting thousands more electric vehicles.

We understand that regulating for provision in the wide range of areas contemplated in the new clause will not always be the right approach—sometimes the carrot is more important than the stick. The Government already offer a variety of grants, schemes and policy measures to support the installation of charge points, where they are needed, in the types of locations identified. For example, we are committed to placing more emphasis on the delivery of charge points at railway stations as part of the franchising process. Planning policy, and the national planning policy framework in particular, is proving to be an important tool in leveraging infrastructure and future-proofing developments.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): That is precisely what we have been saying about making it widely practical for people to consider buying an electric car. New clause 2 would work as not only a carrot but a stick. Given that we need to move forward so quickly, it is important that the Government consider new clause 2.

Jesse Norman: By tabling new clause 2, the hon. Lady has placed the issue firmly and properly on the public record. The new clause would require owners and operators of “public facilities,” which is a wide term, to provide public charging points. Those public facilities would include: “supermarkets; public car parks; airports; train stations; and such other public facilities.”

That is a very wide definition, and it does not specifically address the issue of range anxiety. The attraction of targeting large fuel retailers and motorway service stations, as we have done, is that doing so precisely addresses concerns about range anxiety.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) refers to charging at supermarkets and public places. What has been the response from the supermarket chains? Has the system had private buy-in? Do we have figures indicating that the supermarkets want to be part of this system, and will the Government encourage them?

Jesse Norman: The key point is that we must allow the market to operate and require installation only in places where we can be certain that it will serve a public purpose. That is the balance that the Bill is designed to strike. Many supermarkets, of course, will regard fitting charging stations and charging points as a competitive advantage, and the same will be true of the other locations set out in new clause 2.

In addition to the measures I have described, enhanced capital allowances have also been introduced as a tax relief for companies that support the development and installation of charging equipment for electric vehicles. The first-year allowance of 100% allows businesses to deduct charge point investments from their pre-tax profits in the year of purchase. As a result of those measures, and because of the opportunities in this new market, the private sector is increasingly taking the lead, with chargers going in at destinations including hotels and supermarkets.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I appreciate that the Minister wants the market to apply, but London Underground owns the car parks at my stations in Chesham and Amersham. What incentive can he give London Underground and the Mayor of London to install more charging points in those car parks? My constituents do not have a single vote for a member of the London Assembly or for the Mayor of London. Without a carrot or a stick, there is no reason for them to install the charging points. Can the Minister help?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend is talking about a democratic deficit as much as a failure of public policy to seize the opportunity. Unfortunately, as she knows, the Mayor of London is outside my Department’s
policy remit and has separate devolved budgets. She makes the wider point well that there is a democratic gap that means that the Mayor of London cannot be held to account for such actions.

As a result of the measures that I have described, the private sector is taking the lead. Further to our consultation, we have suggested that it would be more appropriate to mandate provision at sites, such as fuel retailers and service areas, that are already invested in providing services related to vehicle refuelling. By that means, we can address concerns about range anxiety without placing regulation on others that might be unnecessarily burdensome and expensive to comply with.

7.30 pm

The hon. Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) have proposed a new clause to require the Secretary of State to bring forward a strategy specifically on electric vehicle charge points in the UK. I agree that it is important that the Government take a strategic approach to encouraging the uptake of electric vehicles, and that is precisely the intent behind this Bill. Indeed, in 2013, the then Government published a strategy entitled “Driving the Future Today”, which set out a path that they planned to take to achieve their aims. Of course, much has changed since then. Although many of the aims of that strategy remain relevant today, it is right that we reconsider our approach to delivery. We need to reflect on the automotive sector’s much more positive approach towards electric vehicles, on progress in battery technology and on the upturn in consumer confidence that saw more than 10 times more electric cars bought in the UK in 2017 than in 2013.

I am therefore pleased to confirm that, as was made clear by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who gave me a “binding assurance” in Committee that the Government would come back to Parliament with more detail and specific proposals. The Bill originally did not include much detail on regulations for the distribution of data relating to charge points, so I am grateful that the Government have listened to the Opposition on this point.

Sir Hugo Swire: Is the hon. Gentleman reassured about the transmission of data relating to rural petrol stations, which may not use much electricity—they may not be used very often? Is he assured that the transmission of such data elsewhere may lead to a tendency for such petrol stations not to maintain that service in the way that they might, thus discriminating against more remote areas?

Karl Turner: The strategy has to address the issue of remote areas—that is essential. In Committee, the then Minister gave assurances that it would. We now know, of course, that the strategy will be published in March. I would like to press this Minister on how security will be assured in regards to the transmission of data from charge points. That issue was brought up repeatedly in Committee, and the Government’s new clause does not seem to address it head on.

The Opposition are also supportive of Government amendment 1, which relates to enforcement. It expands Clause 13 so that the requirements allow for the inspection or testing of “any thing” to do with charge points rather than just allowing the person “to enter any land”. That position was ambiguous and we welcome any tightening up of the wording in the Bill. The original subsection gave prescribed persons permission to enter land but did not include much else. The Government amendment extends the scope of enforcement and defines what documents and other important data and information can be investigated in order to inspect whether the proper regulations have been complied with when it comes to charge points.

We are also supportive of new clause 2, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). Currently the Bill regulates for the provision of public charging points at large fuel retailers. The new clause would mean that owners and operators of public facilities such as supermarkets, public car parks and airports would also be required to provide charging facilities. Such locations would already have the service areas for vehicles to park up and be placed on charge. Having accessibility to charging points is vital to promoting the use of electric vehicles, and the new clause seems a sensible way of doing just that. The objective of the new
clause is commendable, and I trust the Minister will bear that in mind when he is devising the Government strategy on this.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. At the moment, electricity charging points at motorway service stations are separate from petrol stations. Does my hon. Friend anticipate that when we have fully accessible electricity charging point provision they will be one and the same, on the same location—or will they remain separate?

**Karl Turner:** I think they will be an integral part of these sites. That is how things would have to work in order to be practical.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on tabling new clause 3 and put on record my personal support, and that of our Front-Bench team, for the new clause. New clause 3 focuses on public transport and commercial vehicles, but it raises many of the issues I was hoping to speak to in relation to new clause 4. For uptake to be encouraged, electric vehicles need to be practical, affordable and convenient for users, which means putting in place the necessary infrastructure. There are currently nearly 12,000—11,862, to be precise—charging points for electric vehicles in the UK, but there are multiple charging point operators, each with their own plugs, software, customer charges, billing systems and payment methods. These are also unevenly distributed, with more charging points available on the Orkney Islands than in Blackpool, Grimsby and my own fair city of Hull combined. New clause 3 would ensure that the Secretary of State assesses the costs, benefits, location and feasibility of charging points to enable the promotion of a national network of sustainable charging points for commercial and public transport.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the visibility and recognisable features of the charging points will be a spur to the take-up of electric vehicles?

**Karl Turner:** I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. There were many suggestions in Committee that we call the charging points Hayes hooks. The former Minister, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings, was keen for schools and colleges to get involved in some sort of national competition on the design.

Mr John Hayes: As I have been mentioned by name, I feel obliged to intervene to thank the hon. Gentleman for his earlier complimentary remarks and to say that I know that the competition is indeed envisaged. One of the last acts that I commissioned in the Department was to sort out the detail of who would judge what and when. I am sure that the Minister will want to enlighten the House on the progress that has been made, what day the competition will begin, when it will end and what the criteria will be.

**Karl Turner:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. In Committee, we discussed making the charging points as recognisable as telephone boxes. That is essential. I hope that the Minister has taken on board what was said in Committee and appreciates the work that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings did on the Bill.

It would be eminently sensible for the Government to promote a national network of sustainable charging points for private vehicles. We welcomed the announcement in the Budget of £200 million of public money to be invested in charging infrastructure. Of course, that matched Labour’s manifesto commitment to invest £200 million to support ultra-low emission vehicles.

This Bill was an opportunity to set out a long-term plan for building the infrastructure needed to encourage the uptake of automated and electric vehicles, and it is a little disappointing that it has failed to do so fully. The Bill could have been a major step forward in taking high-emitting vehicles off our roads. We know that air pollution is linked to the premature deaths of around 50,000 people in the UK each year. That is a staggering number and the Government need to do an awful lot more to address that.

Electric and alternatively-fuelled vehicles are key to reducing air pollution and meeting the UK’s climate change objectives. In Committee, the then Minister said:

“It is very important that we monitor closely how charge points are rolled out. We have spoken about workplaces, local authorities, service stations and so on and so forth, but we need to get a clear view about where the concentrations of charge points are and what needs to be done to fill in any gaps that emerge.”

[Official Report, Automated and Electric Vehicles Public Bill Committee, 14 November 2017; c. 186.]

Sir Oliver Letwin: I remind the House of my interest in the Faraday Institution.

Given that the whole House agrees, roughly speaking, with what the hon. Gentleman said and that the Minister has announced that he is going to produce the strategy that the Opposition Front Bench team very sensibly want, may I beg the hon. Gentleman not to press his new clause to a vote? Were he to do so, it would have the sad effect of dividing the House on an issue on which we really do not need to divide and on a Bill on which we are all agreed.

**Karl Turner:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I do not intend to push anything to a vote.

We agree with what the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings said in Committee, which I just read out, and believe that the Government should take this opportunity to set out in the Bill their strategy for doing that.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am happy to support Government new clause 1 and the consequential amendments.

I rise to make one point only on a matter that was discussed in Committee, particularly when we took evidence from witnesses before line-by-line consideration commenced. It follows on from the point the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), made about the need for the charging network to be as accessible and easy-to-use as possible, so that we can encourage the uptake of electric vehicles. One of the key requests was that we have a simplified payment system for use of the charge-points. There is evidence from Ireland and the state of California that
some Government intervention was required to achieve a harmonised payment system, before which users were having to carry around a multiplicity of payment cards to use the system. New clause 1, in conjunction with clause 9, will give the Government sufficient powers to nudge the industry to achieve that. I just wanted to put on the record that that requirement will be integral to making the charging system and the uptake of electric cars as complete as we would like.

7.45 pm

Helen Goodman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was not expecting to be called to speak so early as I have not tabled an amendment. I did not serve on the Bill Committee, but I spoke on Second Reading about charging points. Just before Second Reading, I purchased a Nissan Leaf. Three months on, I have a little more experience, and I am afraid that I am slightly less enthused of my Leaf than I was in October. My experience has highlighted some policy issues. If Ministers want people to make the transition to electric vehicles, the issue of charging points and their availability is fundamental. We need more charging points.

New clause 2, tabled by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), is absolutely spot on. Along with all public car parks, I would add to the list in her new clause hospitals, public buildings, local authority buildings. All are places where people park. We do not just go between shops and our homes; we go to schools and libraries. All are places where people park.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have the slightest suspicion that those people who wrote the strategy and who have worked on the Bill may not yet have electric cars themselves. It all seems to be good in theory, but how does it work in practice?

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree with my experience, which is that we need a carrot and a stick?

Helen Goodman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have the slightest suspicion that those people who wrote the strategy and who have worked on the Bill may not yet have electric cars themselves. It all seems to be good in theory, but how does it work in practice?

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am curious as to whether my hon. Friend has, in the three months she has had her Leaf, attempted to drive from her wonderful constituency in Bishop Auckland down to Parliament? If she has, what was it like? If she has not, why not?

Helen Goodman: I certainly would not dream of driving to Westminster because it is far too far—it is way beyond the range. I shall talk about how far I can get in my car when I have finished my remarks on charge points.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady share my disappointment that only five councils in the UK have taken advantage of the Government’s on-street residential charging point scheme, which offers to fund 75% of the cost of creating charging points?

Helen Goodman: That is very interesting. I think local authorities have not taken up that offer in the way people hoped because there are no resources for the upkeep of the charging points.

On Second Reading, I asked whether planning permission for new housing developments should require charging points. I am disappointed that that has not been mentioned by the Minister or in any of the new clauses or amendments. I also sent a rather long letter to the Department, to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) who was handling the Bill extremely well. I am also disappointed that I have not had a reply to my letter, as the then Minister told me that he was going to discuss the planning issues with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It is no good Ministers relying on people charging their car at home, because to do so, people must have off-street parking. A third of this country lives in terraced housing or flats without off-street parking, which is why we need charge points along residential roads everywhere.

Mr Hayes: I do not want to anticipate my long and fascinating speech except to say that I did initiate discussions and I am confident that my successor will perpetuate them.

Helen Goodman: Good. I am very pleased to hear from the right hon. Gentleman, and I look forward to a positive response from the Minister on this issue of planning permission.

To some extent, new clause 3 covers my next point, which is that we need one system not just for paying when we go to the charge point, but for interconnections. When trying to charge up a car at a public point, it is incredibly annoying for a person to find that they have the wrong kind of plug. It is as absurd as if we had an electricity system in which some houses have three-point plugs, some five point plugs, and others two-point plugs. We have gone way beyond that. Although we want to encourage the private sector—when it comes to manufacturing the cars and the great work that Nissan and Toyota do, we are all in favour of it—the infrastructure for charging is a natural monopoly. It is obvious that the Government should be taking control of it. I am also slightly concerned that there has been systematic mis-selling and over-inflation on the range of electric cars.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate the issue associated with the difference in the types of plugs that are required, but is that not going to demand an international standard to be set and agreed not just by this Government but worldwide, to ensure uniformity of connections with each make of vehicle and the grid?

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I had not thought of that point. When I go on holiday, I normally hire another car, rather than driving from the UK, but, of course, many people want to take their own car overseas, so he makes a very fair point. It would be interesting to know whether the Government have initiated any discussion in the European Union, for example, on this point.

Let me come back to the point about range, and what I think is a serious breach of consumer rights and trade descriptions. I bought my Leaf from Bristol Street Motors in Darlington, and I was told that it had a range of 125 miles. As I was about to explain to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), I thought that that was fine because it meant that I could travel from my constituency to Newcastle, when I visit the regional organisations for the north-east, and get back again on one charge, but when I collected the car, it was charged up to only 75 miles. I said, “This is 30% less efficient! It is like buying a box of six eggs, but finding when you open the box that there are only four eggs. This is really not acceptable.”
The garage people tweaked it around a bit, but they still could only charge it up—I have never charged it beyond this—to 85 miles. That is very different from the 125 miles that I was told. Indeed, having looked at the Nissan website, I found that the over-emphasis not only came from the dealer to whom I spoke, but was on the website itself. The guy who came round to fit my pod point and to whom I explained this problem said, “Oh, I hear it all the time. People are constantly disappointed that their cars don’t have the range that they were sold as having.” This is pretty fundamental. People need to know what they are buying and what they are getting. A 30% reduction in the capacity of what the car can do is a significant difference.

Mrs Hodgson: As my hon. Friend knows, Nissan is in my constituency, so I am very interested in her point. When I took a Leaf for a test drive—I do not have one yet; I am not as lucky as she is—I was told that the number of miles that people can get depends on how they drive. Is that the issue to which she is referring, or is it something different?

Helen Goodman: I do not think it can be that, because when I charge up the car, it does not even reach the amount that was shown when I arrived there. It seems to go down much faster than the number of miles that I am actually covering, but I cannot charge it to the level that is claimed.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): A number of people recognise that the first version of the Leaf—my hon. Friend got one of the last ones—did not have a great range. A new model is now out, which at least says that it has a much higher range, and I have no reason to doubt that. What this actually highlights is that the Government need to do more to incentivise plug-in hybrids. Although pure electric is fine for the short journey, it is likely that, for a while yet, the car needs another technology for the longer journey. Getting clear incentives for plug-in hybrids might make a contribution towards that. In fact, the way that grants have been structured, we have gone rather in the other direction.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. It is also related to the issue that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings raised about the importance of having fast charge-up plugs—I am not sure what one calls them—rather than the ordinary slow-speed ones. Last week, for example, I wanted to charge up the car while I went to the supermarket. In the half hour that I was in the supermarket, it had only increased its charging by 8 miles. That is pathetic by anybody’s standards. That is just not what one would expect. If that is the rate at which people are charging up on motorways, it really is not working. The technology needs to be improved with respect to the measurement inside the car. Last Thursday night, I set off to go home with 22 miles on the meter, but at 14 miles the car conked out in the dark. Not only was I extremely inconvenienced by this, but it was extremely dangerous, because somebody else could have driven into the car. It is also a problem for the police, and so on. It is incredibly important that we get this right. I would like the Minister to be far more ambitious. We need a really big strategy. I know that the Minister loves markets, but I am a Keynesian, and I think that this would also be really good for the British economy.

Mr Hayes: I want to contribute briefly to this debate. I have enjoyed the scrutiny of the Bill over what seems most of my recent life. I have spent more time speaking about automated electric vehicles than I care to count, having shared that endeavour with a number of hon. Members in the Chamber.

The amendments introduced by the Minister are a direct consequence of the scrutiny that we enjoyed in Committee. That Committee, like its predecessor—the Committee that considered the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which also considered these matters—was conducted in a positive, constructive, collaborative and wholesome way and I believe that the Bill can genuinely be said to have been improved as a result of the endeavours from Members from all parts of the House.

The infrastructure for electric vehicles is one of the critical elements of their gaining wider acceptance. It is not the only one, but it is salient. As has already been said, that requires us to think broadly about how and where people will want to charge. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) made the very good point that most people will want to do that as close to their home as is conveniently possible and on-street charging is vital. The work with the local authorities, which has been recommended from a number of places in the Chamber, is critical to achieving that. The planning system also needs to recognise it, in respect of new developments. I go further and say that the Government have already taken steps and can take more on local authorities that are laggards—if I can put it that way—about putting into place the necessary measures to bring about on-street charging.

8 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: I happily give way to my former Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Neil Parish: I pay tribute to the great job that my right hon. Friend did as Transport Minister and in his many other ministerial roles.

It is very much the charging points—their accessibility and the ability to charge vehicles quite quickly—that will really encourage people to have electric vehicles. At the moment, only about 1% or 2% of vehicles are electric. We really need the infrastructure if we want that figure to be 25% or 30%. Until we get the infrastructure right, we will not necessarily get everybody to sign up to having an electric car. We have to be absolutely certain to get the infrastructure right.

Mr Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has been not only a student, but a mentor to me as my PPS and as my great friend. He is right, as he often is on this subject. It is right that we build an infrastructure that is accessible. It also needs to be affordable and recognisable. The arguments that have prevailed so far have focused on those points—that the infrastructure must be easily recognised by anyone who wants to charge their vehicle.

Michelle Donelan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that another aspect that could hold back the industry is the skills shortage in the science, technology, engineering and maths sector? That is why schemes such as the Year of Engineering are so vital to companies in my constituency and in Wiltshire, such as Dyson and AB Dynamics, which are leaders in the sector.
Mr Hayes: Yes. When we speak of infrastructure, we often think of physical infrastructure. But it is also a matter of human infrastructure, and skills are critical to the success of this industry. I recommend to my hon. Friend the report by the Institute of the Motor Industry that addresses exactly those points. It highlights the accreditation system that it has put in place and recognises that, so far, only a small proportion of the technicians and people who service cars more widely have achieved the necessary competences to work on electric vehicles—of course, autonomous vehicles are yet to come. It will be vital that that understanding and those competences are widely spread. If I might make a point particularly on that, I am anxious that they are not simply owned by large corporate companies. We do not want to see the disappearance of local garages and start-up businesses. The spread of the ability of those who can repair and service these new types of vehicles needs to be sufficient not only to seed those competences in the way I have described, but to make them available to people in rural areas as well as in urban centres. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that human aspect of this technological challenge.

As well as the charge points being recognisable—and I am delighted that the shadow Minister has confirmed that they are going to bear my name, which I expect the Minister will also confirm—I am delighted that there is a determination to ensure that there is some consistency about the charge points. One needs to be able to drive down a road in an electric vehicle and immediately recognise a charging point, as we recognise a telephone box, a pillar box and many other things. And it should be beautiful, by the way.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of recognisability and that a charging point should be a thing of beauty that adds to the landscape of our towns, cities and rural areas. There has again been mention in the Chamber tonight of the competition for a beautiful design that the Government has again been mention in the Chamber tonight of the charging point should be a thing of beauty that adds to about the importance of recognisability and that a system. We need to ensure that all charge points conform to a single means of payment, or at least a number of means of payment that suit every circumstance. What we cannot have is different charge points with different technologies, different modes of payment, and a different look and feel. That would be preposterous and I know that the Government will not want anything preposterous to happen.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way; he is being very generous with his time. As he got the Bill to its current state, did he consider that perhaps we have started the whole basis of the electrification of cars and batteries at the wrong point? The trouble is we are beyond this point already, as we have a Tesla-style battery, a Lexus-style battery and batteries by other manufacturers. Would it not have been more sensible and better if the current network of petrol stations had been places where we could simply change the battery? That could have been done in an instant, or within a minute or two, rather than waiting for this long charge system. I am concerned that the manufacturers have started us off on the wrong basis. Perhaps it is not too late to get us back on track.

Mr Hayes: Innovation and change often initially result in a multiplicity of systems. One thinks of the industry that I was once in—the IT industry. It took some while before MS-DOS, and subsequently Windows, emerged. Of course, there are still Apple computers with a different system altogether, but at the birth of the personal computer, all kinds of technologies co-existed. It was a while before standards became certain, adapted and adopted, widely recognised and used. I suspect that the same applies in this area of innovation and change. As the technology beds down, I expect that there will be greater consistency, but the Government must play their part too.

Although I am sure that the market will normalise around a set of standards, the Government can—by what they do both legislatively and in terms of the kind of incentives I mentioned earlier that might be provided to those who are developing charge points such as local authorities—help that process along the way and that will build consumer confidence. Recognisability, affordability and accessibility are critical if people are going to buy electric cars without the uncertainty that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland described to us. She was a bold early adopter who entered the marketplace with a degree of optimism and hope. I hope that her hope has not been too tarnished by subsequent experience because the trailblazing spirit that she personifies is important if we are to get the momentum we want for this change in the way we drive and what we drive.

I welcome these amendments. As I said at the outset, they reflect sensible scrutiny of important legislation, although of course there is more to be done. In establishing this national infrastructure, I am confident that the same spirit of conciliation, collaboration and co-operation that has characterised our considerations so far will continue.

I begin the end of my remarks where I started—with Ruskin. Ruskin said:

“The training which makes men happiest in themselves also makes them most serviceable to others.”

Further to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), the change that I recommend will not work unless we have people ready
...to make it work. That requires skills and training that is serviceable to others. It requires building a human infrastructure fit to do the job to make the physical infrastructure as effective as it can be. I know that there will be more consideration of that during the rest of this debate.

In the short time that I have been on the Back Benches, I have learned that one of the virtues is that one does not have to stay for the whole of a debate. To stay longer, in any case, might attract more plaudits, and even I would begin to become embarrassed. In the interests of the whole House, not just my own, I am now going to end this brief contribution, sit a moment longer and then proceed to my dinner, safe in the knowledge that I pass the baton to others still more capable of continuing the debate in the spirit in which it began.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by—

Brian Deegan: Order. I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. In being carried away by listening of course an important contributor to CO₂ that are set out in the Paris accord. Transport is looking to address the targets for reducing carbon just here in this country but globally. Part of that is looking to make this move and why it is happening not change in our mobility. Critical to all this is consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authorities as setting that the Bill is viewed by the public, but particularly by consumers, manufacturers and authors...
It is crucial to ensure not only that we have charging points, but their interoperability for all types of vehicle. By way of parallel, I cite the fantastic thing that is the USB. We all know what it is like when we forget the charging cable for our mobile phones and find we have no means of recharging our phone, because we happen to have a product of a particular brand and a plug does not fit that phone. It is crucial that we not only legislate but work with other countries to ensure there is interoperability. Often when we have these debates, we are thinking about cars, but we also need to think about all the other sectors. That is why it is vital that we have a comprehensive approach to the electrification of all sectors relevant to mobility.

Those of us in London recognise just how much the bus network has improved over recent years. I was amazed to discover that a third of our famous red buses are now hybrid. Something like 73 are electric and about 10 are hydrogen buses. Those hybrid buses are super-quiet and relatively clean, with 30% or 40% less emissions. That has made a noticeable difference to air quality, as I remember how poor that was 30 years ago when I lived in London.

One of the businesses in my constituency is Volvo Buses, which has done a lot of work on electric vehicles and has had all sorts of issues. For example, it has invested heavily in trying to establish a network in Harrogate. The costs of getting the DNO connection have varied considerably, and the project has been extremely difficult. We have to recognise that these businesses are the first adopters. They are the ones trying to get new technologies established, so we need to make the process as easy as possible.

One issue with commercial vehicles and buses is the need for pantograph-type systems to charge vehicles from above. European manufacturers, including Mercedes, Fiat, Renault and Volvo, are looking at how to recharge those vehicles when they are at a bus stand or in a garage. We need to ensure that such infrastructure is generic and standardised across all manufacturers.

Iain Stewart: I absolutely agree that we need to look at the technology for charging buses and other vehicles en route. May I invite the hon. Gentleman to look at the pilot scheme that has been running in Milton Keynes with an induction charging system for a bus route that is wholly electric? That could represent the technology for recharging, rather than expensive overhead line equipment.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his invitation, and I would certainly be delighted to take him up on it. That is one for the future.

Mr John Hayes: I have no desire to prolong the hon. Gentleman’s speech unduly, as the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is waiting for his dinner. However, on the hon. Gentleman’s point about buses and local support for electric vehicles, he will know that the Government have done a great deal to support the provision of low emission vehicles by bus companies. Indeed, workplace charging has also been supported strongly by the Government. Does he agree that perhaps we need just to broadcast that more, so that more people know they can benefit from the support that is available? The Government have done their bit, and I am extremely grateful for the great work that my officials did on that in my time. Does he think it is about more publicity?

Matt Western: It is. It is about motivating and encouraging change through consumers.

I would like to move on finally to electric bikes and mobility vehicles. That might seem like a less glamorous or glossy sector of the market, but we have some terrific bike manufacturers in this country. We have Pashley and Moulton, and Brompton here in London. Brompton’s first e-bike is about to roll off the production line. However, our sales of electric bikes are way behind those of other countries. We are something like seventh in Europe, with 5% of its total sales, way behind Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Germany has 36% of the total sales for Europe.

In 2016, the city of Munich started a subsidy scheme for electro-mobility that includes electric bikes. The subsidy for the purchase price is granted to private companies and non-profit organisations, with a contribution of, say, €500 for electric bikes or €1,000 for electric cargo bikes. In Sweden, there is a 25% Government subsidy for all e-bikes until 2020, which has led to a 50% surge in electric bike adoption in the country. It has been hugely successful in the past 12 months, and that shows what leadership can do to change consumer behaviour, which the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings referred to. The same thing applies to commercial vehicle fleets, whether they be for haulage or local delivery.

I urge the Government to adopt new clause 3, which is simple and straightforward. It puts forward a framework to identify all the vehicle sectors that need to be considered, so that we ensure that they are very much in the front of our minds.

Wera Hobhouse: I shall speak to new clause 2, which I tabled. We have already had a good discussion about making it as easy and quick as possible for consumers who are considering buying electric vehicles to do so. That is why I very much encourage the Minister to reconsider whether new clause 2 should be included in the Bill.

Let me set the scene for this urgency. Air pollution in the UK is a big killer, contributing up to 40,000 deaths a year and costing the NHS £15 billion. As a country, we have been slow for a long time to comply with EU limits on pollution. We have been very slow at tackling high levels of pollution in the past.

These issues are incredibly relevant to my constituency. Bath is officially one of the most polluted areas in the country. Bath and North East Somerset was named among 29 local authority areas with high levels of nitrogen dioxide. According to the council’s own data, 92% of air pollution in Bath is caused by traffic. The swift take-up of electric vehicles is therefore very important.

I welcome the Government’s proposal to create universal charging points, which was also a Liberal Democrat manifesto commitment. However, as we have said several times, the Government should be more ambitious. The Bill must go further to ensure that it is as convenient as possible for people to own electric cars and to help consumers to make decisions that will benefit the environment and, particularly, public health.
New clause 2 would give the Secretary of State the power to make regulations requiring owners and operators of certain public facilities to work with local authorities to provide public charging points and to ensure that public charging points are maintained and easily accessible to the public. Again, a number of points have already been made about why local authorities have not picked up voluntary schemes. I believe that the carrot and the stick is the right approach, and I again say that the Government must consider using a little bit of stick.

The Bill allows the Government to regulate petrol stations and motorway service stations to provide electric charging points. The new clause would ensure that people with electric cars could easily charge their cars on shorter journeys as well as when travelling longer distances. I am considering whether I should buy an electric vehicle, but I do not fancy sitting around for eight hours in a service station on the motorway to charge my car.

Local authorities should have powers to require new commercial and industrial developments to provide electric charging points and, for example, to pilot the use of lamp posts as charging points in residential areas where homes do not have driveways. All this is about encouraging creative ways of making sure that charging our vehicles is as convenient as possible and increasing take-up among people who want to acquire electric cars.

If the Government are serious about reducing transport emissions, far more radical measures will be needed, but this Bill is a step in the right direction. I believe that new clause 2 would improve the Bill even further.

8.30 pm

**Mrs Hodgson:** I am last, but by no means least, I hope. We still have the Minister’s closing remarks to come, so I am not altogether last.

As colleagues will know—if they do not, I am going to tell them now—the Nissan plant is in my constituency of Washington and Sunderland West. [ Interruption. ] Yes, it is. Many will also know that the Nissan Leaf is manufactured there. If I know Nissan, I am confident that it will have been following this debate closely, and I again say that the Government must consider using a little bit of stick.

The Bill makes positive commitments in this area, but it intends to impose requirements on large fuel retailers and service area operators “within a prescribed description” to provide public charging points. However, it is important, for all the reasons we have heard expressed so eloquently tonight, that this prescribed description is as ambitious as possible and is used in such a way as to deploy the electric vehicle charging infrastructure to its maximum potential. I therefore hope the Minister will elaborate further on how the Government plan to make sure that the expansion of this infrastructure is done in a sustainable, sensible and joined-up manner that does not hinder future growth.

Another aspect of ensuring that this important infrastructure works in the right way is ensuring that electric vehicle charging is open access and not restricted to members of charging schemes only or, as we have heard, to people with certain types of plugs. It is important as this infrastructure rolls out that it does not become a patchwork of varying payment methods, membership schemes and plug points, but instead is accessible to all to help encourage more people to make the move or the leap to electric vehicles. Will the Minister assure me that this will be considered as the Bill progresses to the other place?

The last point I want to touch on is smart charging as it is considered in the Bill. Smart charging is a new and exciting innovation and, as the Minister will be aware, Nissan has been pioneering work on vehicle-to-grid technology, where an electric vehicle’s battery can support the grid network at peak times when it is not charging. The Bill makes positive commitments in this area, but it would be welcome if the Minister committed throughout the Bill’s progress to ensuring that the continued development of these new technologies is supported.

Overall, this is a very welcome Bill that I know will have significant effects on Nissan in my constituency and on the wider electric vehicle industry. I hope that as the Bill progresses we will see further strengthening to make sure that, as we go into the future, electric vehicles become more and more accessible to drivers and, as we so desperately need to be doing right now, that this helps to reduce pollution. With those few remarks, I will end, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

**Jesse Norman:** Let me thank all Members present in the Chamber and those who have spoken for their very helpful contributions to this debate on Report. This is another stage in the extremely constructive process of putting the Bill together. It is pretty clear that the House is united in its ambition to ensure that the UK has world-leading infrastructure to support the roll-out of electric vehicles. Many great points have been raised, and I will try to respond to as many of them as I can in the time available.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who is not in his place, mentioned the importance not just of data security, but of prescribed persons in the Bill. I share the concern he raises, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) said, there are provisions in the Bill for anonymised and aggregated data on the model of smart data used elsewhere. It is also worth saying that the Bill has tightened the security for prescribed persons. Such investigations must be done in accordance with the regulations. Those are defined and will be further defined in secondary legislation.

On interoperability, let me reassure the House that there is scope in the Bill to require all new charge points to offer pay-as-you-go services. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who is no longer in his place, raised the question of the design competition—and rightly so,
in this, the Year of Engineering. Let me confirm that it will cover the whole UK, as he and colleagues mentioned.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) pointed out the importance of rural infrastructure. As the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire, I entirely share that view. He will know that we have made significant investments—in the electric vehicle home-charge scheme, the workplace charging scheme and, as I have mentioned, the charging infrastructure investment fund—to support roll-out, but this is an important issue, and the Government will remain vigilant in ensuring that there is no discrimination against rural owners or potential owners of electric cars.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) told us a horrifying story about her own experience. All I can say is that she raises some issues that are related to the particular product she purchased, the Nissan Leaf. I have no doubt that that is being followed very closely in Sunderland as we speak. Whether it is correct or fair to describe the car as having “conked out”, I cannot comment, but as no one would believe the hon. Lady to be a speed demon, there may be a question as to whether there was proper and adequate disclosure. We have seen companies take measures to disclose range, but there may well be scope for greater transparency, of the kind we have seen in other areas. I can also reassure her that the head of the Office for Low Emission Vehicles drives a Nissan Leaf herself.

To answer the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), the updated strategy to promote electric cars, which I have mentioned, will come in March. That strategy will, I hope, do much if not all of everything he described and more, and it will of course do so on a considerably faster timetable than the ones contemplated in his new clause.

Let me pick up another couple of points. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings characteristically forewarned his natural shyness to give us a tour d’horizon of his time in office once again. He was absolutely right to say that, although we have done quite a lot already, local authorities can go further and also to emphasise the importance of human infrastructure. I would simply mention the work of the Institute of the Motor Industry in formatting and creating level 1 to 3 qualifications in electric vehicle maintenance and repair.

Finally, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) asked me whether the Government would consider charging for open access. The answer is absolutely, and that is already being discussed, as I have described. She also asked whether the Government recognise the importance of vehicle-to-grid. Yes, that is absolutely at the centre of what the Bill is trying to achieve.

We have given due consideration to the proposed new clauses in this debate. Although I understand the importance of the issues raised, for the reasons outlined, I do not believe that the new clauses proposed by Opposition Members should be included in the Bill, which I commend to the House as it stands.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 1 read a Second time and added to the Bill.

Clause 13

ENFORCEMENT

Amendment made: 1, page 8, line 12, leave out subsection (3) and insert—

(a) provision authorising a prescribed person to enter any land in accordance with the regulations;
(b) provision for the inspection or testing of any thing by a prescribed person, which may for example include provision about—
(i) the production of documents or other things,
(ii) the provision of information,
(iii) the making of photographs or copies, and
(iv) the removal of any thing for the purpose of inspection or testing and its retention for that purpose for a reasonable period.”—[Jesse Norman]

This amendment removes the requirement that entry on to land must be for the purpose of inspecting a public charging point; and ensures that regulations under Part 2 may make provision, in connection with determining whether there has been a failure to comply with a requirement or prohibition imposed by regulations, about the production, removal and inspection of documents and other items.

Clause 14

EXCEPTIONS

Amendments made: 2, page 8, line 19, leave out “or public charging points” and insert “or devices”.

This amendment, which is consequential on NC1, enables exceptions from requirements or prohibitions imposed by regulations under Part 2 to be made in relation to devices that are not public charging points.

Amendment 3, page 8, line 22, leave out “or public charging point” and insert “or device”.—[Jesse Norman]

This amendment, which is consequential on NC1, enables the Secretary of State to make a determination that a requirement or prohibition imposed by regulations under Part 2 does not apply to a device that is not a public charging point.

Third Reading

8.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third Time.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for all his work and for the dedication he has shown to the Bill, including in his contribution tonight, which he made with customary good cheer. He brings great knowledge to the subject and I commend him for all that he has done. On Second Reading he referenced Henry Ford, who said:

“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”

He has certainly exemplified those sentiments in his work on the Bill.

I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated throughout the passage of the Bill, particularly in Committee. I thank the Committee’s Chairs, the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for guiding the Bill skilfully through its scrutiny.

The Government are committed to maintaining the UK’s position as one of the best places to research and develop modern transport technologies, such as automated and electric vehicles. Despite our differences in this
House. I think we all share that ambition. We have some fantastic automotive centres in this country—the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) referred to one in the north-east, which I have visited and know is a fantastic plant. We all want to see the automotive sector grow and develop, and this is a fantastic opportunity for it to do so. The Bill is designed to help keep the UK ahead of the curve.

Automated vehicles will revolutionise the way we travel and deliver better journeys, making journeys safer and improving mobility for more road users. It is estimated that the market for autonomous vehicles will be worth £28 billion or more each year to the UK. The Government want to see fully self-driving cars, without a human operator, on UK roads by 2021, and I believe that is entirely realistic. The Bill sets the legislative groundwork for automated vehicle insurance. When you drive your car, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is you who is insured, not the vehicle. As a result of the Bill, in future the vehicle will equally be insured. That will give people confidence that they can purchase these vehicles and have the insurance cover they need.

We have plans for further ways in which we can take advantage of this groundbreaking technology, with amendments to existing legislation. For example, we are already holding an open consultation on the safe use of remote control parking systems—a form of advanced driver assistance technology that is becoming very visible and real now. We will be updating our world-leading code of practice for testing automated vehicles to allow developers to apply to test their vehicles in the UK. We will also be working with the Law Commission to set out proposals for a long-term regulatory framework for self-driving vehicles.

Richard Burden: I am sure that Members on both sides of the House share the enthusiasm for these new technologies, but has the Secretary of State seen KPMG’s “Autonomous Vehicles Readiness Index”, which compares the readiness of different countries for taking up these technologies? The UK performs fairly well on technology: “A utonomous V ehicles R eadiness Index”, which compares

investment fund, £100 million of new funding for the plug-in car grant to help consumers purchase these vehicles, and of course we will play our part too by ensuring that 25% of cars in the central Government departmental fleet will be ultra low emission by the end of this Parliament. Through the Bill, we want to make it easier to recharge an electric vehicle, and that will be one of the consequences of what we have all debated today.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The UK Government have committed £200 million towards the roll-out of infrastructure. Previously, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy agreed with me that any allocation to Scotland has to be based on needs, including geography, rather than on population. Can the Transport Secretary confirm that he shares that view?

Chris Grayling: This has to be a United Kingdom-wide effort. Scotland is no different from the rest of the United Kingdom: it has rural areas, remote rural areas and busy urban areas. We will need to make sure that all those who seek to buy these vehicles have access to the appropriate charging points. This legislation will help to do that, as will Government funding. The Barnett consequentials of the Government funding announced in the Budget will enable the Scottish Government to play their part, along with private investment.

Taken together, the measures in the Bill will ensure that the UK is at the forefront of this profound technological shift. It will provide cleaner vehicles, easier travel and safer roads—all part of a transport system that works for everyone in this country, both today and in future. I am grateful to everyone who has been involved in working on the passage of the Bill. I hope that it makes a genuine difference. I am grateful to the whole House for uniting behind the Bill’s principles. Let us go forward and make sure that this country is a real success story in this field.

8.46 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you remember Raymond Baxter and James Burke all those years ago on “Tomorrow’s World”, saying that vehicles would connect and talk to one another—you are too young, I am sure, but seemingly that day is dawning.

I thank the Government Front-Bench team for the spirit of co-operation in which they have handled the Bill. Had the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) been in his place, I would have thanked him and told him that if Mr Carsberg did legislation, they would probably do it this way. However, I cannot say that to him because he has gone for his dinner.

As these clauses were largely included in the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which was dropped following the Prime Minister’s decision to call a snap general election, they have been scrutinised in Committee in the Commons twice. I place on record my thanks to all those who have been involved so far in improving the legislation. The Transport Secretary is correct when he describes the potential for electric and automated vehicles to transform transport in the coming years. It is right that a Bill is brought forward to allow those technologies to be facilitated and encouraged.
It is necessary to address certain issues successfully, including questions of insurance and what powers are necessary for the development of charging networks, for the UK to stay ahead of the curve on transport. It is right to legislate to encourage research and innovation that will shape how we travel in future and create the highly skilled jobs that our economy needs, as well as tackling the environmental and climate change challenges that confront us. Sadly, road deaths are at a five-year high, but there is considerable potential for automated vehicles vastly to improve road safety, not just by avoiding the errors that lead to so many crashes, but by using the information gathered to aid the design of safer roads and infrastructure in future.

The UK is in the midst of an air pollution crisis that the Government have failed to address. Recent studies show that 50,000 deaths in the UK last year were attributable to air pollution. This is a higher proportion than in Germany, France, Spain and many other European countries. For that reason, I welcome the Government’s commitment to an electric charging infrastructure, as announced in the autumn Budget, and the continuation of limited subsidy schemes for ultra-low emission vehicles. The UK is also in a strong position to become a world leader in the production of automated and electric vehicles and to enjoy the greater economic benefits that will flow therefrom, although we may have to cope with the new condition of range anxiety.

The Bill alone does not add up to the wider policy framework that is required for the UK to take advantage of the opportunities presented to us, but it is an important Bill, which we support. Labour wishes to continue to work constructively with the Government in pursuit of these objectives. Creating the insurance frameworks needed to allow automated vehicles on our roads is a necessary step but not itself sufficient. The Transport Secretary has announced that driverless cars will be in operation on UK roads by 2021. Although the Bill is needed if that is to be the case, it is the pace at which the technology develops that will determine whether that target is met.

It is disappointing that the Government chose not to support our amendment in Committee to require a consultation prior to devolving the definition criteria for automated vehicles, which we regard as an unaddressed issue with the Bill. Although road-ready, fully-automated vehicles are still some years away, there has been a significant increase in assistance systems and partial automation over recent years, and those advances are in operation currently. The Bill assumes a clear distinction, but it is not apparent that one exists, and it is important that the Government draw on the available expertise to avoid inaccurate or confusing definitions in the future.

We are also concerned that the Bill does not require the provision of charging points to be distributed across the country more evenly, but I welcome the Minister’s commitment to publishing the Government’s strategy by the end of March—I just hope that that is March of 2018, not of some future year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) stated earlier, however, the Government have acknowledged the need to monitor closely how charge points are rolled out and the need to get a clear view of where the concentrations of charge points are and what needs to be done to fill in gaps that emerge.

To conclude, when the Bill is debated further in the other place, the noble Lords will in all likelihood look for greater clarity from the Government on their strategy for electric charging infrastructure and how they will ensure a fair geographical spread, so that the benefits of these technological developments can be felt across the country. If we are to secure the opportunities that these exciting technologies present, this is a necessary Bill, and we are happy to support it.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I would like to make a brief contribution to the Third Reading debate of a Bill that I was pleased to be involved with in Committee. Given that quite a lot has already been said, my contribution has been getting briefer by the minute.

It is fair to say that the Bill has widespread support from manufacturers, enthusiasts and insurers alike. Interestingly from my perspective, it has also captured the imagination of my constituents, particularly the young people, as it has recently become the most talked about topic at my regular school visits, which is great news as we look to inspire the engineers of the future. On top of that, official research indicates that the market for automated vehicles will be worth around £28 billion by 2035—so it is set to become a key part of our future economy.

I want to focus on part 1 of the Bill, which covers insurance and liability. As such, I need to declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on insurance and financial services and having previously run my own insurance brokerage for 20 years before being elected. The Bill extends compulsory motor vehicle insurance to cover the use of automated vehicles in automated mode. In view of this, I would like to raise two points with the Secretary of State that I think still need clarification and which do not seem to have been addressed in the amendments. First, given that the users of automated vehicles have to be able to demonstrate that their vehicle was in fully automated mode to exercise their rights under the Bill, what commitments can he give that data confirming the status of the vehicle at the time of the crash will be made available to the insurer? It will be needed not only to establish liability but to prevent delays in paying claims.

Secondly, as I pointed out in Committee, there are concerns in the industry about the software updates. I believe that there is a strong case for making these the manufacturers’ responsibility, particularly where they are of a safety critical nature. Under the Bill, the onus still falls significantly on the insured to carry out software updates, which could be unfair in a number of scenarios. The simple solution—and one that I understand the technology is available for—would be to not allow a vehicle to enter automated mode unless the required software is up to date. I ask the Secretary of State for reinsurance on this particular point.

The Bill provides a stepping stone for the future of travel in this country. Automated vehicles will help to reduce the number of accidents and will possibly reduce congestion, while electric vehicles will provide a cleaner environment for the next generation. We know that the environment is a major topical issue for many Members, and for the wider public. We must provide the infrastructure to support electric vehicle owners and to encourage more and more people to join them by removing the
barriers that currently exist—particularly in respect of charging, an issue that is raised regularly by my constituents. The challenges that the Bill seeks to address are not just for the future; they are right here and right now.

As I have said, I am very supportive of the Bill, but I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the points that I have raised.

8.55 pm

Caroline Monaghan: The Scottish National party broadly supports the Bill and the opportunities that it presents. Autonomous and electric vehicles have the potential to spark technological innovation in the United Kingdom.

Let me begin by being self-indulgent, and—as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on photonics—highlight the role of photonics in autonomous vehicles. Autonomous vehicles require high-quality optical sensors which can cope with all the weather conditions that we experience in the UK, including snow, rain, driving winds and hail. The sensors must be able to “see” the road, and vehicles, in all those conditions. They currently cost about £150,000 a go, which is 10 times the price of a car that someone might wish to buy, and we need to think about how we could lower the cost.

The UK is the world leader in optical sensor technology. A company called Barr and Stroud, which was established close to my constituency, in Byres Road in the west end of Glasgow, evolved into Thales, which is now based in Govan. We also have Leonardo, based in Edinburgh. Those defence companies are looking at optical sensor systems, but proper investment in photonics companies would allow optical sensors produced by them to be at the forefront of autonomous vehicle technology.

Annually, 1.7 million cars are made in the UK. If the cost of an optical sensor system for a driverless car could be brought to a reasonable cost—£1,000, say—that would produce a UK market of £1.7 billion. Let us expand that, and look at the worldwide annual requirement for cars. Given that 95 million cars are made annually, there is a real opportunity for UK optical sensors to compete in a £100 billion market. I hope that the Government will be able to support that, both through the Bill and through the industrial strategy.

Electric vehicles, which have been discussed extensively this evening, have great potential to clean up city centres and improve air quality, but that should not be done in isolation. It is erroneous to say that electric vehicles are clean, given that the method of generating electricity in the first place is dirty. We are simply moving the pollution from one location to another. I urge the Government to consider supporting the renewable sector, so that electric vehicles truly can be clean. We also need to recognise the wider economic and social benefits—jobs and air quality, and associated health benefits. In Scotland alone, a low-carbon economy supports 58,000 jobs and is estimated to be worth £10 billion.

A number of Members have mentioned charging points. Scotland has one of the most comprehensive charging networks in Europe, involving domestic properties, urban and rural settings, and, of course, the vast road network. I call on the United Kingdom Government to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that the whole UK benefits. The funding must be needs-based: it must not simply be about population share and sector share.

In Committee, we had assurances on consultation regarding working with the Scottish Government on grid management, a charging point strategy, locations of charging points and ensuring that rural locations were not left out. It would be useful to hear a little more about that. Management of the grid has been talked about, and Government new clause 1 on monitoring data makes perfect sense to avoid spikes. Grid management, where data captures can be considered, already allows buildings to operate in a smart manner, and hopefully charging points can operate similarly. But losses from the grid have not been mentioned. The grid operates with ancient copper cables at some points, and the resistance in the copper cabling leads to great energy losses. There is developing technology in superconductors, which would reduce the losses greatly, but again that would need Government investment. I hope as part of this Bill, and in the next few years, the Government look seriously at supporting not just renewables for electric cars, and not just the photonics industry, but the superconductor industry to allow efficient charging and energy transfer.

9.1 pm

Iain Stewart: It has been a pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee and the predecessor Bill Committee and I agree with the comments made: this is an exemplar of how Committees should work. I thank the shadow Front-Bench team and all my colleagues in the Committee for what was a very constructive session.

As we prepare to send the Bill to the other place, I would like to say that the Government approach on the Bill is right in setting the general frameworks on issues such as insurance and the charging network. We do not yet know the full details of where the new technology will take us, so having the broad outline—we can fill in the details later—is the correct approach.

Although important in itself, the Bill and the role of the Department for Transport are only one part of the broader picture. This issue covers many different Departments. It involves the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: we must make sure that the grid has the capacity and that we have the skills base in the country to make the most of this technology. It covers the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: we must make sure that local government involvement is correct and that when we plan our smart cities the Bill is part of a much broader framework. We also have to pick up some of the more detailed issues, such as the one my constituent Mark Nicholas raised. At present in Milton Keynes, there is an abuse of the parking spaces with charging points. He wants to see a higher penalty for drivers of combustion engines who use those spaces.

The issue involves the Home Office and the security services as they must consider data privacy issues and cyber-security. These automated networks will only be as secure as their weakest link. It also involves the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its broader clean air strategy and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport: we must make sure that we have the digital framework that will support the connectivity of all these vehicles.

This is a good Bill. I am proud to have been a part of its passage through this place and I wish it every success in the other place.
9.3 pm

Alan Brown: Like many other Members, I pay tribute to the work done by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) and the way he conducted himself in the Bill Committee; he worked with everyone in a consensual manner.

I welcome the Bill as far as it goes. Sometimes people say that electric vehicles, particularly electric cars, will be the panacea for the UK’s current air quality issues, but electric cars themselves are not going to make that huge change to air quality, which is contributing to 40,000 premature deaths a year. We are going to need to look at tackling heavy goods vehicles, including the transport refrigeration units that many HGVs use, as they are powered by secondary diesel generators, which are more polluting than the lorry’s main diesel engine. That is the crazy position that we are in. We also need to look at construction vehicles, which also contribute greatly to diesel pollution in city centres, as well as at buses and taxis. The UK Government’s 2040 target for the elimination of carbon-based vehicles needs to be more ambitious. The Scottish Government have set a target of 2032 and I suggest that the UK Government should at least be able to match that.

Many hon. Members have agreed that there needs to be uniformity in the roll-out and type of infrastructure, as well as clarity on the costs. People will need clear information on the availability and type of chargers throughout the UK. If we are going to address range anxiety, that information will need to be clearly available and understood. The previous Minister committed to ensuring that there would be a rural roll-out strategy and that rural areas would not be left behind. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State also seemed to indicate that that would be the case. It is really important that we start work on that rural roll-out strategy and that rural areas are not left behind in the way that they have been with 4G and 5G network coverage. As I said earlier, the Business Secretary has agreed that funds must be allocated on the basis of need. I reiterate that point to the Transport Secretary. The allocations must be needs-based, not population-based. This is not about Barnett consequentials.

Another issue that will need to be addressed involves the competence, skills and qualifications required for technicians to be able to service and work on electric vehicles. Given the high voltage of the batteries installed in them, those people will need to understand what they are doing when they open the bonnet and start work on them. As we look towards the smart grid set-up that everyone keeps talking about, it is clear that Government energy policies will need to be more coherent. The UK Government will need to review their funding of renewables. They should not continue to throw money at nuclear energy. They also need to review transmission charging, so that electricity generation can be located in the most suitable areas.

We look forward to the roll-out of automated vehicles, but trials need to be undertaken in Scotland. The Government have funded four trials so far, but none of them has been in Scotland. I suggest that they need to address that point quite quickly. We look forward to an increased uptake in electric vehicles and to seeing autonomous vehicles on the roads. It was suggested in Committee that the roll-out of autonomous vehicles will open up opportunities for disabled and elderly people and for others who might be housebound and trapped or who rely on other people to provide their transport. The vehicles could therefore provide opportunities to address equality issues, and I welcome the innovation as the vehicles are rolled out.

9.8 pm

Craig Mackinlay: It looks as though I am bringing up the last of the Back Benchers, Mr Deputy Speaker, and it is a great pleasure to do so. I shall limit my observations to the part of the Bill that deals with autonomous vehicles. To my mind, what gets discussed in the corridors and the Tea Room should probably stay there, but this is an important Bill so I shall break my own rules of discretion to relate to the House an important discussion that took place with the then Minister of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). The subject turned to the personal private transport of the future. The Bill encompasses that brave new world. The basic automation technology is already with us and it is rapidly evolving.

Among other things, the Bill attempts to resolve issues relating to software and insurance, and it is the software part that I would like, perhaps wryly, to comment on this evening. If other Members’ computers are anything like mine, they will know that the “not responding” message features all too commonly. It is followed by frustration on my part as I press ctrl+alt+delete to try to stop the offending application. Just imagine that at 70 mph in a 1 tonne vehicle of the future. Will software updates be regular, perhaps hourly, via an in-built mobile SIM card? The interpretation of the never-seen-before accident involving perhaps an errant sheep, a drunken cyclist and tin of paint falling from a white Transit van on the Thanet Way would need to be fed into the artificial intelligence algorithm that is doing the clever stuff and running the software.

Two Arnold Schwarzenegger films come to mind: “Total Recall” and the “Terminator” series. “Total Recall” featured the automated JohnnyCab and, while some Members scratch their head and try to remember it, I want to compare it with the current flexibility of Uber and the other similar apps that we live with today. As we take the inherently illogical human being behind the wheel out of the equation, I wonder what the point will be in the future of maintaining one’s own vehicle—a vehicle that spends 95% of its time completely unused. I use a free GPS navigation software called Navmi—Google Maps does the same thing—and people who use it will have noticed the red and amber on the screen telling the driver that there is traffic ahead, information which is based on the shared GPS speeds of the software’s myriad users. As a human, I can probably then make a rather sub-optimal decision as to whether to press on or to find an alternative route, and some navigation systems will already suggest an alternative route.

I ask Members to extrapolate things forward a few years to where the potential use of even more refined and extensive data will get us. Assessment could be made of car usage and times of travel, and hold-ups could be minimised through clever routing. With appropriate computer-generated tweaking of travel times, it could be determined for any particular town that X number of vehicles are required, with a bit to spare. That pool of autonomous vehicles could be available 24/7 either on a
pay-as-you-go or fixed-price basis via an app, and personal car ownership could become a quaint memory of a bygone era. The physical number of cars would obviously be massively reduced, leading to implications for the car industry. Might the new JohnnyCab—the autonomous private vehicle of the future—be given a new name? Perhaps it could be called the Hayes or Norman after its ministerial fathers. Will domestic conversations of the future involve something like, “I will just finish the vacuuming, then let’s call our personal autonomous vehicle so we can go out.”? I would rather that they go something like this: “I’ll just finish the Hoovering, then let’s call a Hayes so we can go out.”

I will finish with Arnie’s “Terminator” films. Perhaps the end of the human race will come not at the hands of robots connected to Skynet looking to terminate us all in an orgy of violence, nor from a yet-to-be-mutated bacterium or an asteroid strike, but from future JohnnyCabs or Hayes or Norman vehicles, controlled in the cloud by “Taxinet”, deciding that we do not deserve what they do for us and crashing simultaneously into walls and trees. However, it is more likely—this is the serious part—that the crashes could be caused by an aggressive computer virus from a hostile nation. In future, beware those countries where the people simply prefer to drive themselves.

This is a great Bill, and I fully support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 5 to 8 together.

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

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the draft Investigatory Powers (Review of Notices and Technical Advisory Board) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2017, be approved.

That the draft Investigatory Powers (Technical Capability) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2017, be approved.—(Nigel Adams.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

National Admission Policy for Faith Schools

9.14 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I present this petition on behalf of 155 residents of my Telford constituency.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Telford, Declares that the national admissions policy for faith schools is discriminatory; further that the Department for Education should abolish its current policy of a 50 per cent cap on faith-based school admissions; and, further, that a petition on this matter has gathered 155 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Department for Education to remove the 50 per cent cap on faith-based admissions, so that every child of faith can have access to faith school education.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Cross-border Contracting of Taxis

9.15 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 124 taxi drivers in Charnwood borough, five of whom I met on 5 January.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Charnwood Borough, Declares that the taxi drivers in Charnwood Borough Council seek an end to the practice of cross border contracting; further that taxi drivers in the area believe that this practice has affected the industry in a negative manner; further that cross border contracting poses a risk to public safety, takes work away from local drivers, is a crime that is difficult to prosecute and is the reason for a decline in the standard of service that the public expects.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review its policies relating to cross border contracting.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002101]

[P002102]
The politicians failed, the referendum failed, so I will step in and protect the rights of a minority’.

Many people in Bermuda, and in many other overseas territories and countries around the world, rejoiced at that moment.

There were two sensible, non-confrontational courses that the Bermudian Government could have taken: abide by the ruling of the Court; or appeal to the Privy Council in this country—that is the standard process for appealing a decision. In fact, the Minister of Home Affairs announced on 9 May that the Government would not appeal, and on 31 May, the first same-sex marriage took place in Bermuda. There have now been eight such marriages in total and four further publications of banns of marriage.

Then came a new Government, after an election, who decided to draft a law to abolish same-sex marriage and replace it with “domestic partnerships”, albeit allowing those same-sex marriages that had already been celebrated to stand, rather in a position of limbo. It is a deeply unpleasant and very cynical piece of legislation. It sounds quite nice on the face of it, as if it is just the same as civil partnerships in this country, but it is not. It seeks to keep marriage officers separate from domestic partnerships officers, as if to protect them from some kind of infection. It allows a domestic partnership to be voided on the sole grounds of “venereal disease”. It was introduced by a Government whose members have openly declared that they are opposed to civil unions of any kind whatsoever and pretended not even to know that same-sex couples have regularly been denied the right to make important medical decisions on behalf of their sick and dying partners in Bermuda.

Section 53 of the law states: “Notwithstanding anything in the Human Rights Act 1981, any other provision of law or the judgment of the Supreme Court in Godwin and DeRoche v The Registrar General and others delivered on 5 May 2017, a marriage is void unless the parties are respectively male and female.”

In all the history of legislation, I have never seen a measure that so clearly declares from the outset that it is inconsistent with all the other laws in the land, including the Human Rights Act, the constitution and the judgment of the Supreme Court. It is almost begging the Supreme Court to come to exactly the same decision as it did last year. Unfortunately, this Bill was agreed by both Houses in Bermuda on 8 December, but it cannot become law unless and until the UK-appointed Governor, John Rankin, signifies Royal Assent on behalf of the Government, which so far he has not done.

I believe that the Governor is entirely within his rights to delay a final decision or, if he chooses, to refuse Royal Assent, as the Bermudian constitution states at section 35: “unless he has been authorised by a Secretary of State to assent thereto, the Governor shall reserve for the signature of Her Majesty’s pleasure any bill which appears to him, acting in his discretion—

(a) to be inconsistent with any obligation of Her Majesty or of Her Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom towards any other state or power or any international organisation;
(b) to be likely to prejudice the Royal prerogative;
(c) to be in any way repugnant to or inconsistent with the provisions of this Constitution;
(d) to affect any matter for which he is responsible under section 62 of this Constitution; or
(e) to relate to currency or banking.”

On the basis of least two of those limbs, the Governor has very good cause not to grant Royal Assent.
As section 12 of the constitution expressly guarantees freedom from discrimination and the Bermudian Human Rights Act 1981 also expressly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation on at least seven different points, it is difficult to disagree with the Supreme Court, and therefore equally difficult to see how the Governor could agree Royal Assent. There are other reasons why the Governor should withhold assent. It would have been one thing if the Bermudian Government had introduced civil partnerships as a forward step when there was no such provision in law in Bermuda, but this is a retrograde step—it is taking a step backwards—that deliberately limits the rights currently enjoyed by many Bermudians.

Incidentally, this is not just a matter of marriages contracted in Bermuda. The law also applies to Bermuda-registered ships, including many cruise liners that used to be registered out of the United Kingdom, so the service of marriage at sea that Cunard and P&O offer, such as on the Queen Mary 2, the Queen Victoria and the Queen Elizabeth—there is some irony in this—is currently available to same-sex couples. I understand that there was a great big party on one P&O liner when the Supreme Court decision was announced—considerable amounts of champagne were drunk—and there have since been three same-sex marriages on board P&O cruise liners. If the proposed law goes ahead, those marriages will cease. Cunard believes it is likely that Bermudian law will not permit a same-sex wedding ceremony on board its ships after the end of this month, adding:

“We are very unhappy about this decision and we do not underestimate the disappointment this will cause those guests who have planned their weddings.”

I am certain that those people will be taking new cases to the Supreme Court in Bermuda.

I have received a great number of emails, tweets and messages about this issue. Some of them have been quite pleasant, but others have not. Some have told me in very robust terms to butt out, saying this should just be up to Bermuda, but I disagree. This matter impinges on how Britain is viewed around the world, and I take just as active an interest in the human rights of LGBT people in Moscow, Tehran and Beijing as I do in the United Kingdom. The public declaration of love between two people—from this day forward, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part—binds people and families together. It gives a safe home to thousands of children and elderly parents as well. It enriches life and gives hope, and often it banishes the loneliness that for generations has been the lot of those who grew up with, thanks to the hateful judgmentalism of others. Why on earth would we deny that to anyone else? Why on earth would a Christian want to deny that to anyone else? Why on earth would we perpetuate the homophobia that has left youngsters emotionally bruised by hateful taunts in the playground, or physically battered almost to death outside gay bars because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Of course I would much prefer it if the Governor did not sign the Domestic Partnership Bill into law—if he did not grant assent. I hope he does not, and I hope that the Foreign Secretary does not instruct him to do so. If necessary, I hope he just lets it lie on the table until the Supreme Court has another go, as it almost certainly will. What would be even better, if I am honest, would be if the Bermudian Government thought again, respected all their fellow citizens, embraced the principle that the first rule of equality is to protect minorities and withdrew the Domestic Partnership Bill. I say to the Minister for Home Affairs in Bermuda, the Hon. Walton Brown, “If you withdraw the Bill, it will one day be the single action in your political career of which you will be most proud. One day it will be, and your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will say, ‘That is what he did.’”

To the Premier, the Hon. David Burt, I would add, “You are a very clever man. You graduated cum laude from George Washington University and you led the
Progressive Labour Party very successfully to power in the elections last year. You have said publicly that homosexuality is not a lifestyle choice, and that this is not really about your religious beliefs, and yet you hold that same-sex marriage is just not culturally acceptable. Those are your words.” I am sorry, but that is just cruel. If this is an innate part of some people's personality—some would say that God created them that way—it is simply cruel to deny an opportunity that everybody else would want for themselves. It is not rational and it is not progressive—it is just naked prejudice.

The Labour party of which I am a member has always supported LGBT rights, even in the dark days of the Victorians, the Edwardians and the Georgians, right up to legislating to get rid of the horrible legislation in the 1960s. I say to Bermuda and to the Premier of Bermuda, “I hope you change your mind.” I hope Bermuda changes its mind, and I hope the Government do not sign this legislation into law.

9.32 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): May I start by personally welcoming you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, after a difficult period over Christmas. We offer the congratulations of the House on your knighthood.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for securing this debate. I appreciate that he raised this issue in business questions on 11 January, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss it now at greater length.

The United Nations declaration of human rights makes it clear that human rights and freedoms are “interrelated, interdependent and indivisible”. They are the guarantors of freedom, non-discrimination and the innate dignity of every human being. They apply equally to all humankind. When lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people demand their rights, they are not asking for anything unique to them; they are simply asking to be accorded the same rights, dignity and respect that really should be given to everybody as a citizen in the world.

This Government are committed to promoting and protecting the rights of LGBT people, not only because it is the right and just thing to do, but because we believe that the strongest, safest and most prosperous societies are those that are the most open and inclusive. They are societies in which all citizens can live freely without fear of discrimination and can play a full and active part in national life.

Last year marked 50 years since the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. Since then, the hon. Gentleman and I have shared and championed this cause over many years, from the equalisation of the age of consent through to the introduction of civil partnerships—from which both of us have benefited—to the introduction of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and the recognition, here at least, of gay marriage. In our lifetimes and, indeed, in our parliamentary lifetime, attitudes to homosexuality have been transformed, barriers to opportunity have been broken down, and this country now has one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world for preventing and tackling discrimination.

This Government, like the Government who preceded us, are committed to promoting LGBT equality globally through projects, partnerships and persuasion. Today, we are spending more than £1.5 million more than ever before through the Magna Carta fund to promote and protect the rights of LGBT people where they are under threat. We are working with like-minded countries to promote our expertise through international organisations and through bodies such as the Equal Rights Coalition. Where we find discrimination, we work publicly and privately with Governments and civil society to change attitudes and improve legal protection.

However, it is important to recognise that, even in our own society, the transformation in attitudes did not happen overnight. Indeed, our Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 passed into law four only years ago. This knowledge influences how we handle progress in other countries. It is not reasonable to expect or demand sudden change in other countries when it took so long to happen in our own. We must also recognise that this kind of change of attitude cannot be imposed from the outside. It must emerge from within as old prejudices are exposed, argued against and set aside.

We can of course help to encourage change, but in doing so we must be aware of the local situation and be respectful of individual democracies. This is also the case in relation to our overseas territories. The British overseas territories are separate, self-governing jurisdictions with their own democratically elected representatives. I am pleased—as, I am sure, are the hon. Gentleman—that the British Antarctic Territory, the British Indian Ocean Territory, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, the Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands have all taken steps to recognise and legally authorise same-sex marriage.

In places where that progress has not been mirrored, we believe our best approach is to encourage, persuade and, if necessary, cajole through engagement with both Governments and civil society. Our relationships with the territories are best served if they are based on partnership and consensus. That is why this Government have no plans to impose same-sex marriage in the overseas territories. However, Ministers have been clear with overseas territory Governments that they must respect applicable international obligations.

In Bermuda, public opinion on same-sex marriage and civil unions is split. Bermuda’s non-binding referendum in 2016 on this very issue failed to attract the 50% turnout required by legislation to answer the question definitively. The majority of those who did respond were actually opposed to both same-sex marriage and civil unions; 69% opposed same-sex marriage and 63% opposed civil unions. In May last year, the Bermuda Supreme Court found that the established definition of marriage, as only being between a man and a woman, was inconsistent with Bermuda’s Human Rights Act 1981. The Court therefore declared that same-sex couples should also be entitled to be married. As a result, the first same-sex marriage in Bermuda took place that same month.

Following Bermuda’s election last year, the governing party introduced the Domestic Partnership Bill. This would withdraw the entitlement for same-sex couples to marry and replace it with a provision for domestic partnerships for all couples, regardless of gender. The intent of the Bill is to provide those who are described
in Bermuda’s law as “domestic partners” with the same benefits as married couples, including provision for pensions, inheritance, healthcare, tax, and immigration. We are obviously disappointed about the removal of same-sex marriage rights, but any intervention in the legislative process in any British overseas territory without its consent would be an exceptional step. Therefore, the Secretary of State is considering the implications of the Bill very carefully.

There are three important points that I urge the House and the hon. Gentleman to bear in mind. First, if the Bill receives assent, it ensures that Bermudians who have been legally married in Bermuda since the Supreme Court decision will retain their married status and enjoy the same legal rights as those in domestic partnerships, putting this on a clear statutory footing.

**Chris Bryant:** I am aware of that fact; indeed, I referred to it in my own comments. However, the problem is this. Just imagine living in a society where at one point to be same-sex married was allowed and the marriage was allowed to stand but nobody else’s in society was allowed to do so. That is a pretty effective way of demeaning that relationship and that marriage contract. I see why it has been done, but I do not think it is a saving grace.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** There is no doubt, in terms of the hon. Gentleman’s argument, that that does create a slightly unusual anomaly for what I understand to be eight couples. In that sense, he has a point. Whether it is demeaning depends on how one regards the alternative that is being offered.

The second point is that the European Court of Human Rights has consistently held that there is not yet a right to same-sex marriage, but there is a requirement to provide some legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

The final point worth bearing in mind is that less than a year ago same-sex couples had no legal recognition at all under Bermudian law. Now they have the equivalent of recognition through civil partnership, if the Domestic Partnership Bill goes through. While I would not wish to do anything but express regret over the backward step following the Supreme Court ruling, we should acknowledge that the Bill does represent progress by comparison with the situation just a year ago and does extend—albeit a step short of marriage—equal rights and recognition to a legal partnership between same-sex couples.

**Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): Does the Minister not accept that the UK itself is open to international judgment as a result of the policies of its overseas territories, and that given that Britain has a Governor in Bermuda and retains responsibility to ensure good government, we should use our powers and influence to secure human rights, which involve equal treatment—indeed, equal treatment for LGBT people as well as everyone else?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation of our liability in the sense that he has expressed it. As I explained, the human rights legislation, as we understand it, does not involve, as he would have it, the right to recognition in quite the terms that he suggests. There will be, if the law goes through, civil partnership, which is what we had just a few years ago. It is a law that extends rights that the mere recognition of marriage did not extend in terms of pensions, inheritance, tax, and other such equalities. The Government are giving careful consideration to Bermuda’s Domestic Partnership Bill to assess its implications in relation to our collective international obligations and our constitutional relationship with Bermuda. I will update the House when the Government have had time to finalise their position on that.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend finishes, will he say what his assessment is of the likelihood that the Supreme Court in Bermuda will revisit this position? As he has suggested, a very anomalous position is being created between the rights of some gay couples who were married under the existing provision and those who will not be allowed to do so in future. Did not the Supreme Court itself say that this historic and insular perspective on marriage was “out of step with the reality of Bermuda in the 21st century”?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am not in a position to know what the Supreme Court is likely to be asked to do or will do. All we know at the moment is what lies on the table—the passage of the Bill.

I will end by reiterating this Government’s absolute commitment to promoting equal rights and fighting discrimination across the globe. We are fully committed to striving for a safer, fairer, more tolerant world where everyone has the opportunity to achieve their potential and live the life they choose.

Question put and agreed to.

9.46 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 30 January 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Carillion

1. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the liquidation of Carillion on the viability of small businesses. [903611]

10. Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): What steps he is taking to support businesses affected by the liquidation of Carillion. [903621]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I have set up a taskforce bringing together small and medium-sized businesses, the Government, local government and trade unions to assist with the impact on small and medium-sized enterprises and the supply chain. The taskforce has delivered a range of supportive measures, including assistance from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for those experiencing difficulties and more than £900 million of support from UK lenders.

Diana Johnson: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but, with 30,000 small firms thought to be owed money by Carillion due to late payments and fees, will he look at the idea of project bank accounts that hold money in trust in ring-fenced bank accounts to make sure this situation does not arise again? The Specialist Engineering Contractors Group wants Britain to follow what is already happening in Australia, where such project bank accounts are used in all large public and private building contracts.

Greg Clark: I will indeed look at that, and it has been one of the recommendations of the taskforce. It is important that we learn all the lessons and apply them quickly, and this is one such suggestion.

Mr Speaker: Sir Robert Syms—where is the fellow? I call Antoinette Sandbach.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The local authority pension fund forum has called for a review of accounting standards, having received opinion that there are substantial legal flaws in international reporting standards. The opinion states that the standards do not enable anyone to make a meaningful assessment of a going concern, which is a highly relevant issue for Carillion. Will the Secretary of State support such a review?

Greg Clark: The day that Carillion went into insolvency I wrote to the Financial Reporting Council, and I spoke to its chairman, to ask it to investigate the auditors and those who are regulated as accountants. The FRC has agreed to do that, and it announced yesterday that the investigation is under way. I would expect it to learn the lessons for any changes to the regulations that it applies.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm whether the advice to firms that have lost money as subcontractors of Carillion is that they take out a loan? Does he think it is acceptable that those firms should be charged interest on taking out a loan, rather than getting the money they are owed for jobs they completed as supply chain businesses of Carillion?

Greg Clark: On the first day of the insolvency, I had in the representatives of all the supply chain organisations. The first request they made was that we get the banks in to make sure that they treat leniently their customers who were caught up in the insolvency. The banks agreed to do that, and they put funds aside to support and assist those customers. Each bank has made commitments that it will apply leniency to any terms and conditions faced by those businesses.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has almost answered my question, because I was going to say that cash flow is as important as profitability. The problem with lack of cash flow is when the banks become too heavy and foreclose on smaller firms.

Greg Clark: That is exactly the point that the businesses made. That is why I asked the banks to attend in person to meet those businesses, and it is why the banks gave those commitments and guarantees. It is important for Members with constituents who may be affected that the banks have made that commitment and have made a promise that they will deal individually with anyone who is so affected. The measures are on each bank’s website, but any colleague should come back to me if they experience a problem.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): This morning, at a joint Select Committee hearing on Carillion, we were told by the chief executive of the Financial Reporting Council that, before and after the collapse of BHS, he had asked for greater powers to regulate companies and take action before things go badly wrong. He told us that there was a lack of Government interest in making the necessary changes. In the light of the collapse of Carillion and the threat to thousands of jobs and suppliers in the supply chain, are the Government interested in taking action now?

Greg Clark: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. I engaged the FRC immediately, and it is very important that we and the FRC learn the lessons. We will apply whatever is appropriate that comes from those inquiries.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) says that he was not told of the grouping. If that is so, it is a discourtesy—I hope it is not so. Maybe it got lost in the post. Let us hear from the fellow.
Sir Robert Syms: The collapse is really bad news for many smaller businesses, many of which will have their capital wiped out. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with banks about forbearance in keeping those businesses going so that there is proper competition in this market for the future?

Greg Clark: I apologise to my hon. Friend if he did not receive notice of the grouping—I am sure that is my error.

On engagement with the banks, each of them has responsibilities to its customers to help them through difficult times. The banks have explicitly committed to help them with any cash flow difficulties that they experience, and I expect the banks to deliver on it.

18. [903630] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Scottish training firm TIGERS—Training Initiatives Generating Effective Results Scotland—is working hard with the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland and the Construction Industry Training Board to place 126 apprentices who used to be placed in partnership with Carillion. What is the Secretary of State doing to encourage small businesses to step forward to fill that gap and ensure that all apprentices can complete their training?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady raises an excellent question, and I want to pay tribute to the CITB, which has been working closely with its Scottish colleagues, for a magnificent response. It has been able to not only contact but offer continuity to all the apprentices—I think I am right in saying that—to give them the ability to continue their training. That was a formidable, agile response to an urgent situation, and it deserves the praise of the House.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): In July last year, the Government were warned by the Federation of Small Businesses and the Specialist Engineering Contractors Group that Carillion was transferring risk to its subcontractors. They highlighted that Carillion’s payment period was doubled from 65 to 120 days, that Carillion made money on the back of 30-day payment, was not being enforced. Will the Secretary of State outline what actions, if any, he took on receipt of that information?

Greg Clark: The lessons and the scrutiny of what went wrong in Carillion, both on the part of its directors and its scrutineers, and in the oversight that took place. But that is not all: the FSB and SEC Group also highlighted how retention moneys and project bank accounts were recommended to the Government by the independent Low Pay Commission. To ensure that workers are paid fairly and that non-compliant employers are caught, the Government provide £25.3 million to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for minimum wage enforcement—that is an increase from £13 million in 2015-16. Last year, HMRC secured arrears of wages for 98,000 workers, totalling £10.9 million.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that low-paid workers are remunerated appropriately.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The national minimum wage and national living wage rates are recommended to the Government by the independent Low Pay Commission. To ensure that workers are paid fairly and that non-compliant employers are caught, the Government provide £25.3 million to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for minimum wage enforcement—that is an increase from £13 million in 2015-16. Last year, HMRC secured arrears of wages for 98,000 workers, totalling £10.9 million.

James Cartlidge: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and welcome him to his deserved new position. I very much welcome the national living wage as a way of boosting the wages of our lowest-paid workers. Does he share my surprise that there are those who criticise its generosity, given that the only international comparator is The Economist’s Big Mac index, under which we have the most generous minimum wage in Europe aside from that of its richest country, Luxembourg?

Andrew Griffiths: I completely agree with my hon. Friend on that. The next increase to the national living wage is to be a whopping 4.7%. The introduction of the national living wage was the biggest pay rise for low-paid workers in nearly 20 years. The latest increase will benefit more than 2 million people and is set to cover 3 million by 2020. The average earnings of a 25-plus, full-time worker have increased by £2,000 since 2016.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): When will the Government accept the need to actually prosecute more firms that fail to pay the national minimum wage? Only when people are prosecuted for breaking the law, rather than being issued with warning notices, are they going to take it seriously.

Andrew Griffiths: I gently point out to the hon. Lady that the Government take robust enforcement action against employers who do not pay their staff correctly. We have increased enforcement funding to £25.3 million this year. The total value of penalties has more than quadrupled since 2014-15, and in 2016-17 a record £3.9 million was recovered in penalties, with one penalty of more than £1 million being issued.
**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Along with the steps the Minister has outlined, does he agree that increasing the tax-free threshold and taking the lowest paid out of tax altogether has made an enormous difference to many workers in this country?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend: 4 million people have been taken out of paying tax as a result of decisions taken by this Government. The employment rate is 75.3%, which is the joint highest rate since comparable records began in 1971. We have record numbers of people in work, and unemployment is at its lowest for 40 years. This Government are on the side of the worker and the lowest paid.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Low pay stifles investment and holds back productivity. We in the Scottish National party believe that the economy is stronger when a real living wage is paid. The Minister’s own Department has rightly named and shamed 350 companies for failing to pay even the minimum wage. Does he therefore agree that the practice of companies paying no wages at all through unpaid work trials is morally repugnant? Will his Department support the ending of that shameful practice?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that more than 160,000 people in Scotland benefit directly from the national living wage. The Government are looking closely at employment practices. We engaged Matthew Taylor to look into employment practices and to come up with new ways to support people, particularly those in the gig economy. We very much value that work and will be coming forward with recommendations in the very near future.

**Executive Pay**

3. **Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): If he will take steps to regulate executive pay. [903613]

19. **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): If he will take steps to regulate executive pay. [903631]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Andrew Griffiths): The Government will legislate to require quoted companies to publish and explain the ratio of their chief executive officer’s pay to the average pay of their UK employees. Companies will also have to provide a better explanation of how share price increases affect the value of complex, long-term incentive plans.

**Laura Smith**: Does the Minister acknowledge that there is sufficient compelling evidence to conclude safely and beyond any reasonable doubt that collective bargaining significantly reduces income inequality?

**Andrew Griffiths**: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue of collective bargaining and how that affects employee pay and the wider pay of executives. I should point out to her one interesting fact: the average FTSE 100 CEO’s pay leapt from £1 million to £4.3 million between 1998 and 2010, but CEOs’ pay fell by 17% in 2016. Interesting.

**Stephanie Peacock**: It would take the average person in Barnsley East more than 176 years to earn what the average FTSE CEO earns in 12 months. Does the Minister agree that that is a sign of grotesque inequality in the UK? What is he going to do about it?

**Andrew Griffiths**: What private companies pay their directors is ultimately a matter for their shareholders, but the new pay ratio disclosure requirements mean that we will give shareholders and other stakeholders important new information on how pay at the top of companies fits with wider workforce pay. Companies will be forced to explain and defend their pay ratios and account for changes to the ratio over time.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Does the Minister agree that Britain’s biggest broadcaster, the BBC, is setting an appalling example to the nation over executive pay in failing to ensure gender parity?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I assure my hon. Friend that we absolutely and completely agree with fair pay. It is unacceptable that women who are doing the same job as men receive less pay. That must change. The BBC must act.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Hardworking people on ordinary incomes are understandably angry at the way executive pay has skyrocketed at a time when ordinary wages have remained flat. When can we expect to see these regulations that the Minister is talking about on publication of pay ratios, and can he confirm that this requirement will be in place for companies by June, as promised?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I have to point out to the hon. Lady that any payments due to directors and executives fits with wider workforce pay. The Minister has outlined, does he agree that increasing the tax-free threshold and taking the lowest paid out of tax altogether has made an enormous difference to many workers in this country?

**Stephanie Peacock**: It would take the average person in Barnsley East more than 176 years to earn what the average FTSE CEO earns in 12 months. Does the Minister agree that that is a sign of grotesque inequality in the UK? What is he going to do about it?

**Andrew Griffiths**: What private companies pay their directors is ultimately a matter for their shareholders, but the new pay ratio disclosure requirements mean that we will give shareholders and other stakeholders important new information on how pay at the top of companies fits with wider workforce pay. Companies will be forced to explain and defend their pay ratios and account for changes to the ratio over time.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Does the Minister agree that Britain’s biggest broadcaster, the BBC, is setting an appalling example to the nation over executive pay in failing to ensure gender parity?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I assure my hon. Friend that we absolutely and completely agree with fair pay. It is unacceptable that women who are doing the same job as men receive less pay. That must change. The BBC must act.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Hardworking people on ordinary incomes are understandably angry at the way executive pay has skyrocketed at a time when ordinary wages have remained flat. When can we expect to see these regulations that the Minister is talking about on publication of pay ratios, and can he confirm that this requirement will be in place for companies by June, as promised?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I have to point out to the hon. Lady that any payments due to directors and executives fits with wider workforce pay. The Minister has outlined, does he agree that increasing the tax-free threshold and taking the lowest paid out of tax altogether has made an enormous difference to many workers in this country?

**Stephanie Peacock**: It would take the average person in Barnsley East more than 176 years to earn what the average FTSE CEO earns in 12 months. Does the Minister agree that that is a sign of grotesque inequality in the UK? What is he going to do about it?

**Andrew Griffiths**: What private companies pay their directors is ultimately a matter for their shareholders, but the new pay ratio disclosure requirements mean that we will give shareholders and other stakeholders important new information on how pay at the top of companies fits with wider workforce pay. Companies will be forced to explain and defend their pay ratios and account for changes to the ratio over time.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Does the Minister agree that Britain’s biggest broadcaster, the BBC, is setting an appalling example to the nation over executive pay in failing to ensure gender parity?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I assure my hon. Friend that we absolutely and completely agree with fair pay. It is unacceptable that women who are doing the same job as men receive less pay. That must change. The BBC must act.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Hardworking people on ordinary incomes are understandably angry at the way executive pay has skyrocketed at a time when ordinary wages have remained flat. When can we expect to see these regulations that the Minister is talking about on publication of pay ratios, and can he confirm that this requirement will be in place for companies by June, as promised?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I have to point out to the hon. Lady that any payments due to directors and executives fits with wider workforce pay. The Minister has outlined, does he agree that increasing the tax-free threshold and taking the lowest paid out of tax altogether has made an enormous difference to many workers in this country?

**Stephanie Peacock**: It would take the average person in Barnsley East more than 176 years to earn what the average FTSE CEO earns in 12 months. Does the Minister agree that that is a sign of grotesque inequality in the UK? What is he going to do about it?
learning the lessons from the Carillion insolvency and ensuring that we do all we can to support businesses going forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a lot of questions to get through, so we do need to speed up a little bit.

Seafarers: National Minimum Wage

4. Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the work of the legal working group on seafarers and the national minimum wage.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The Government believe that seafarers should be paid fairly for the work that they do. My Department and the Department for Transport worked with trade unions and employers to publish new guidance that explains the responsibilities of employers to pay the national minimum wage. We are crystal clear that if someone works in UK waters, they are entitled to at least the minimum wage and that all employers—no matter where they are from—must pay it.

Chris Williamson: I am pleased to hear that, but is the Minister aware that UK seafarers are being undercut by rates of pay as low as £1.75 an hour? That is happening even though the legal working group on seafarers and the national minimum wage, which includes his Department, agrees that legislative change is needed to provide more protection. Will the Minister give a commitment to work with the RMT and Nautilus to end this brazen exploitation, starting with the application and enforcement of the national minimum wage for seafarers working between UK ports and offshore installations?

Andrew Griffiths: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the guidance is clear that the national minimum wage applies on foreign registered ships when they are in UK territory. The new guidance is the first of its kind on the application of the national minimum wage specifically to seafarers, which shows that this is a priority for the Government. UK national minimum wage law must naturally have a limit, but if a person is employed as a seafarer in British waters, they will be entitled to the national minimum wage.

Apprenticeship Levy: SMEs

Q5. Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises to take advantage of the apprenticeship levy.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I welcome the characteristic passion with which the hon. Gentleman delivers his question, and I share his objective in that we both want the best future for young people. As he knows, the apprenticeship system is going through a change. It will now be employer-led with a focus on quality. We are in the first year of the levy operating and we did expect a bit of a dip, but this situation will recover to deliver the future for our young people.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Further education colleges such as Newcastle-under-Lyme College and Stafford College are vital to the provision of apprenticeships, both under the levy and non-levy. But just having the levy on its own is not necessarily sustainable. Will the Minister ensure that all further education colleges have access to funding for non-levy apprenticeships?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but the levy is very much in its infancy. It is going to raise £2.6 billion to fund apprenticeships for young people. We have to give it time to work, but I take his point on board.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Businesses still tell me that there is a skills shortage in my area. FE colleges have continually faced cuts by this Government. Given the introduction of the levy and the other policies that the Government have been talking about, at what point
in time does the Minister believe the skills gap will be filled, to meet the needs of business and the wider community?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman mentions a skills gap in his local area. This Government are committed to delivering 3 million apprenticeships to plug that gap. Some 1.2 million are now being created, and I am determined that we will deliver on our target.

**Aerospace Sector**

Q6. Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): What steps he is taking to support the aerospace sector. [903616]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government enjoy a strong partnership with the aerospace sector through the Aerospace Growth Partnership. Since 2010, the sector’s turnover has grown from £24 billion to £34 billion, and exports have almost doubled. Following the excellent and wholly justified ruling of the United States International Trade Commission on Friday night, I am delighted that Bombardier in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency will be able to look forward to a bright future.

Gavin Robinson: Hear, hear! I was overjoyed on Friday night when Bombardier unanimously won its case with the United States International Trade Commission. In paying tribute to the Secretary of State and to the Minister responsible for the aerospace industry, I ask that they stand resolute against any appeal that may be lodged and ensure that the C Series, now that it is finally ready for take-off, is the true success we know it can be.

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the stalwart way in which he and his colleagues stood up for their constituents and, indeed, the supply chain that covers the whole United Kingdom. Right from the beginning, this has been a joint endeavour between us, the Canadian Government, the company and everyone with an interest in the success of Bombardier.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the future of our space and aerospace industries is key to our economic future and that practical measures like the new Space Industry Bill will open up new opportunities?

Greg Clark: I do indeed. Space is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy, and we are world leaders in it. Through the Bill, we will ensure that we have the right regulatory regime to underpin that.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Since the aerospace sector requires long-term planning and investment, does the Secretary of State not share my alarm at the threatened takeover of the leading tier 1 supplier GKN by a turnaround company specialising in maximising shareholder returns over five years maximum? Is this not a national security issue?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman is a previous occupant of my post, so he knows that the powers that the Secretary of State has over these things have to be exercised in a quasi-judicial way. Therefore, I should not, and cannot, comment on that case. However, he will know, because he has written to me, that I have spoken to both chief executives, and I am keeping it under close review.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is good to hear my right hon. Friend talk about the importance of aerospace. Will he consider the aerospace initiative that is being proposed in Kinross-shire in my constituency as part of the Tay cities deal, and will he or other colleagues meet me to discuss it?

Greg Clark: My colleagues and I will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. Friend to develop the full potential of aerospace in his constituency.

**Keep Me Posted Campaign**

7. Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Whether he has met representatives of the Keep Me Posted campaign. [903618]

The Minister for Higher Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): Representatives of the Keep Me Posted campaign are dedicated advocates for consumer choice on billing. Neither I nor current BEIS Ministers have met them, but my officials have done so in the past and are familiar with their campaign and the valuable work they do.

Martin Whitfield: Considering the levels of digital exclusion, including in broadband coverage in my constituency, will the Minister agree to meet me and Keep Me Posted to discuss the implications for our constituents?

Mr Gyimah: In response to the hon. Gentleman’s point about exclusion, I think the House can celebrate the fact that, under this Government, 95% of the country will be covered by our superfast broadband roll-out. However, I take his point on board and will be delighted to meet him.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister work with banks and utilities to ensure that charges for paper billing are restricted to the actual cost of providing that service and are not allowed to become a cumulative fee for those who need or choose paper bills?

Mr Gyimah: Yes, I am happy to work with them.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the Minister’s commitment to meet the Keep Me Posted campaign. That is a very welcome development, particularly because older people in my constituency have made representations to say that they find it intolerable that they are not able to get paper bills. Will he assure me that he will take this on board for the whole United Kingdom?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. I do agree that consumer choice is important. Many suppliers offer paper bills, but they are not cost-free. It is important to recognise that at a time when we are seeking to boost productivity, it is not unreasonable for businesses to incentivise more efficient billing processes. The regulatory framework
varies by sector. Where charging differentials exist, we would look at that. I am happy to look at it across the whole United Kingdom.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): While recognising the gradual shift away from paper statements and bills as they go online, it must be acknowledged that 16 million people over 15 years old still do not have basic online skills and 5.2 million households still do not have access to the internet at home, and they may face penalisation for requesting a paper bill or statement. What action, exactly, will the Minister take to ensure that people are not penalised for making what should be a legitimate consumer choice? What strategy will he put in place to make sure that people who do not have these skills at the moment can develop them in future?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady makes the very important point that we should make sure that those who need paper bills do receive them and are not unfairly penalised. Any discount made for paperless bills, or charge for paper bills, in sectors where this is allowed must be justified in relation to the relevant administration costs. We do not believe that the Government should intervene to make other customers for whom online billing and payment is perfectly acceptable bear the costs of providing a paper billing service.

Small Business Sector

8. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What steps he is taking to support growth in the small business sector.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the Minister and welcome him to his new position. Sellafield in my Copeland constituency is one of Britain’s biggest single-site employers. It is about to award its multimillion PPP contract. What is he doing to promote the role of SMEs, rather than just large companies, when awarding those contracts?

Andrew Griffiths: We are actively supporting small businesses by enhancing the business support helpline and funding growth hubs in every local enterprise partnership area in England. The new Small Business Commissioner will help with payment issues, and British Business Bank programmes support nearly £4 billion of finance to more than 60,000 small and medium-sized enterprises.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the Minister and welcome him to his new position. Sellafield in my Copeland constituency is one of Britain’s biggest single-site employers. It is about to award its multimillion PPP contract. What is he doing to promote the role of SMEs, rather than just large companies, when awarding those contracts?

Andrew Griffiths: I clarify to the House that PPP stands for “programme and project partners” and not, as many might have assumed, “public-private partnership”. The programme that my hon. Friend talks about will support Sellafield in decommissioning and contains provisions designed to support small businesses. In November 2015, the Cabinet Office agreed to a target of 31% of spend with SMEs for the Government’s Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. Moreover, as the Small Business Minister, I will look at what I can do to ensure that more is done to help small businesses to win Government contracts.

Maggie Throup: Will the Minister join me in commending the work of the Erewash Partnership, which helps entrepreneurs in my constituency to start up and grow their own small businesses? Will he consider what more Government can do to help such organisations expand their support services?

Andrew Griffiths: We are always sensitive and aware of the impacts on the supply chain. We need a strong supply chain, but I point the hon. Gentleman to the Secretary of State’s previous answer on that issue.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Stability among larger tier 1 suppliers is really important to SMEs in the automotive and aerospace supply chains. Given that, does the Minister agree that if the Melrose bid for GKN splits up and sells off that company, as is anticipated, that cannot be in the interests of either sector or SMEs in this country?

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman will know that that issue is the subject of an urgent question later on in the House. I would hate to spoil his fun, so I will leave it to others.
Helen Hayes: I thank the Minister for her tribute to my predecessor, Baroness Jowell, who is much loved in Dulwich and West Norwood.

Southwark Council confirmed last week that it has invested its £150 million pension fund in a low-carbon investment, concluding that continuing to hold significant investments in fossil fuels in the context of climate change would present a long-term financial risk to the fund. Will the Minister tell me what conversations she is having with private firms with large pension funds to encourage and facilitate divestment from fossil fuels, which is now clearly the most responsible decision for pension fund members and the future of our planet?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady points out the very powerful fact that the Government can set policy and bring forward achievable targets, such as our renewables ambition, but we also need the private sector and private capital to be involved in financing this transition. I have numerous conversations with companies about what they are doing with their own investments and, equally, about what they will be doing to help other companies to invest in a more sustainable future. I refer her to the Powering Past Coal Alliance, which I launched with my Canadian counterpart last year and which is helping the world to get off the dirtiest form of fossil fuel heating.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Given that more than a year has now passed since the Hendry review reported on the potential contribution of tidal lagoon technology, when does my right hon. Friend think that Ministers will be able to respond positively to that report and give a green light to this important environmental technology?

Claire Perry: I am left in no doubt by my right hon. Friend and others about how anxious people are to see this review go forward. We want to get our future investment in renewable energies right. We continue to look very closely at this, and I hope that we will be able to inform the House shortly.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Minister will have seen the recent report by the Committee on Climate Change about the Government’s clean growth strategy in relation to the fifth carbon budget. Indeed, I know that she has seen it, because she wrote the committee a nice letter thanking it for its report. What plans does she have in place to rectify the shortcomings and omissions in that strategy, as identified by the Committee on Climate Change in its report?

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman and I both know, the report basically said there had been a sea change in our ambition for future climate reduction actions. I was extremely grateful to the committee, as I always am, for its scrutiny and information. We were the first country in the world both to pass a climate change Act and to set up an independent scrutinier. As we all know, we have to do more, particularly on business energy efficiency and new homes standards. I am looking forward to working in a consensual way, cross-party, to bring forward those measures.

Pilot Town Deal

11. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What progress his Department is making on developing a pilot town deal as outlined in the industrial strategy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I am delighted that the industrial strategy White Paper commits to considering a town deal for Grimsby, which I know has been warmly received by my hon. Friend. I welcome the strong public-private approach to driving forward ambitious plans for the regeneration of Grimsby. The Department and the project board are in close contact on the detail of this deal, and I hope that we will have a proposal for consideration in the very near future.

Richard Harrington: I am delighted to meet my hon. Friend and members of the Greater Grimsby— including Cleethorpes—project board either as soon as I am able to leave Westminster or in Westminster. I encourage my hon. Friend to organise a meeting here so as not to lose any time in holding this important engagement—and if he wants to bring some local fish and chips, that would be fine.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab) rose—

Richard Harrington: I assure the hon. Lady that I am not a ping-ponger, and this shows the Government working together. We will continue to work together, and I will take responsibility for making sure this happens as soon as is possible.

Carillion

12. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential effect of the liquidation of Carillion on workers’ pensions.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The taskforce established to tackle the impact of Carillion’s liquidation includes the Department for Work and Pensions, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is in regular contact with my right hon. Friend the Pensions Secretary. Those already receiving their pensions will continue to receive payment at 100% of the usual rate. Anyone worried about their pension situation can contact the Pensions Advisory Service; its dedicated helpline has now responded to over 800 calls since Carillion’s insolvency.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I think it will be of very little comfort to many Carillion staff, past and present, when they hear that the deficit in their pension fund is approaching £1 billion. Public sector contracts have made some at the top of Carillion very rich indeed, so what action is the Minister taking to ensure that current and future pensioners do not lose out?

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman will understand that issues in relation to pension schemes are a matter for the independent Pensions Regulator. However, the Pensions Regulator has been in contact with Carillion and the pension scheme trustees for a number of years about the funding of the pension scheme. I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that the work of the taskforce is to look at what happened in relation to the Carillion insolvency, and to ensure that if lessons are to be learned, we will learn them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The global headquarters of GKN is in my Redditch constituency. It employs 200 people, and concerns have been raised about the pension scheme there as well. The Pensions Regulator is warning that in the event of a takeover, there may be something to look at. What lessons is the Minister learning from Carillion in this case, and what further action does he need to take?

Andrew Griffiths: The Secretary of State, I think, has already outlined the approach with which the Government are handling the takeover of GKN, but I can assure my hon. Friend that the implications of business actions, and particularly takeovers, in relation to pension schemes are a priority for the Government. We will continue to proceed with care and caution to protect the interests of all members of pension schemes.

Agency Workers

14. Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he plans to review the rules governing the use of agency workers.

Andrew Griffiths: The review is comprehensive and detailed, and we have been giving the report the careful consideration it deserves. We will respond shortly.

Gareth Thomas: Two thousand workers in BT call centres, some of whom handle 999 calls, are paid up to £500 less per month than permanent staff because BT uses the loophole known as the Swedish derogation under agency workers regulations. Taylor recommended its abolition; when will the Minister get on with it?

Andrew Griffiths: As I have outlined, the Matthew Taylor report does, in some depth, look at the Swedish issue. I am meeting Matthew Taylor this afternoon, and that issue will be one of those that we shall discuss. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that in 2017, the employment agency standards inspectorate dealt with more than 800 complaints from agency workers. EAS investigations have protected an estimated 303,000 agency workers, and we will continue to defend their interests.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): How many of those complaints under the agency workers directive led to successful prosecutions?

Andrew Griffiths: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the answer.

Renewable Energy

15. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to support the development of renewable energy sources.

Claire Perry: I am always happy to engage with anyone who would like to further the cause of renewable energy in the UK, so I would be happy to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call Mary Creagh. Not here—where is she?

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): More than half of Scottish energy consumption is met by renewable sources, including the Whitelee wind farm, based near Eaglesham in East Renfrewshire, which is the largest onshore wind farm in the UK, but can the Minister confirm that less-established renewable energy
projects in Scotland will be able to compete for the £557 million of funding that is available as part of the clean growth strategies?

Claire Perry: As my hon. Friend knows, because we have discussed it several times, we are looking hard at how we use that committed £557 million of support for renewable energy in a way that brings forward projects when there is significant local support. I look forward to continuing the discussion with him.

22. [903634] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): For the first three quarters of 2017, renewable electricity generation in Scotland was 19% greater than in the same period in the previous year. Scotland is on track for a record year of renewable generation in 2017. Will the Secretary of State commend the efforts of the Scottish Government in this area, and, in particular, the new target to have 50% of Scottish energy needs covered by renewables from 2030?

Claire Perry: Scotland benefits from some fantastic geographical advantages that mean that it is a world leader in many of these things, but it is, of course, UK bill payers across the nation who are investing in the introduction of renewable energy, whether that is in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Electric Vehicle Charge Points

16. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to improve electric vehicle charge point infrastructure.

[903628]

17. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to improve electric vehicle charge point infrastructure.

[903629]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): We have a range of grant schemes to support the installation of charging infrastructure—on-street, off-street and at workplaces. At the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced a £400 million joint public and private charging infrastructure investment fund.

Mark Pawsey: My constituency is already home to the new electric London taxi, and we have recently heard the announcement of £80 million of investment in a new electric battery development facility in Coventry. Does the Minister agree that this presents opportunities for my constituency and the wider area to establish leadership in the electric vehicles sector?

Richard Harrington: It certainly does, and I have had the honour of visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency. On the day we announced the battery facility he mentions, the CEO of Jaguar Land Rover declared:

“We also intend to produce battery electric vehicles in the region, bringing the West Midlands to the forefront of modern mobility in the UK.”

That is the industrial strategy in action.

Gillian Keegan: Chichester District Council has invested in 20 new electric vehicle charging points in car parks throughout the district. However, a constituent recently told me that it took him six and a half hours to get from Chichester to Oxford in his electric car because there were insufficient charging points during the journey. What is the Minister doing to join up individual council initiatives to ensure that there is a comprehensive network of charging points nationwide?

Richard Harrington: We are pressing hard on this. The Government are taking powers under the Automated and Electric Vehicle Bill to ensure that the infrastructure is rolled out. Government leadership, along with local authority engagement and a growing private sector, means that the UK now has more than 11,500 publicly accessible charge points. The Government have committed £15 million to ensuring that there will be one every 20 miles on the strategic road network. That is coming, and it will be coming soon.

Topical Questions

T1. [903636] John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Since our last Question Time, it has been my pleasure to introduce my new colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) and for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), to the Department and to see our agenda progressing. We announced the automotive sector deal, supporting British innovators and manufacturers with a joint commitment of millions of pounds of investment from industry and Government. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders said that the deal would place the UK at the forefront of electric, connected and autonomous vehicles. I am delighted to announce that Lotus Cars has announced its intention to invest significantly to expand its production, creating 300 new jobs at its plant in Norfolk. Production will increase fivefold in the years ahead.

John Penrose: Energy distribution network operators charge obscenely high prices on our energy bills and make absurdly large profits for running safe, low-risk monopoly businesses that get energy to our homes. Does the Secretary of State agree that Ofgem has been far too soft on these firms for ages, allowing them to get fat and lazy at customers’ expense? Will he join me in urging Ofgem to get a great deal tougher in future?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend and welcome the decision by SGN, SSE and National Grid to refund excess returns to consumers—the others should follow suit. He is absolutely right, and in the next price control period, Ofgem should have a much tougher regime.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently remind colleagues that at topical questions progress is expected to be much quicker? We need short, sharp inquiries; people should not simply seek to bring into topicals what they would have asked had they been called—which they were not—in substantive questions. Pithy questions; pithy answers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I shall try to be pithy, Mr Speaker.
GKN is a great British engineering company, forged in the first industrial revolution with strengths in defence, aerospace, automotive, batteries and the internet of things, which should place it at the heart of our future economy—high skills, high productivity and high wage—but the debt-driven hostile takeover threatens 6,000 UK workers, pension funds and the supply chain. The Secretary of State has said that he will not comment on individual cases, so may I ask him a general question? Does he believe that it is in the national interest for City investment houses to use debt to dismantle our industrial base?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady understands the constraints that I have in any particular takeover. As a feature of our economy, it is very important that we have investment into our companies from those with the capital to do so. That is why we have a regime that limits the grounds for intervention, but there are certain grounds that I will have to consider during the time ahead.

T2. [903637] Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the news announced by the aerospace trade association—ADS—of record new aircraft delivery figures worth £29 billion to the UK in 2017, as well as the further announcement of an order by Emirates for an additional 36 Airbus A380s? How will the Government help to ensure that the UK aerospace supply chain is in a position to take advantage of those excellent opportunities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The sector has huge growth potential. The Government support the industry through the aerospace growth partnership and have committed £3.95 billion for it, which already supports 200 companies, including Safran and GE Aviation in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

T3. [903638] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): By last Friday, just 526 of the 9,000 companies that need to report their gender pay gap had done so. What powers do the Government have to compel companies to publish these numbers ahead of the April deadline, as there are no civil or criminal sanctions in the regulations?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Having just taken over the diversity portfolio in the Department, I share the hon. Lady’s extreme disappointment at companies failing to report. I will take this matter forward and perhaps work with her as a matter of urgency.

T4. [903640] Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Bearing in mind the world-leading reputation of Rothamsted Research in Harpenden, will the Secretary of State explain what plans the Department has to work with Rothamsted, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other bodies to further improve Britain’s world-class position in agricultural science?

The Minister for Higher Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): I will make three quick points: the Government are investing £70 million in the agri-tech catalyst and £80 million in four centres for agricultural innovation through the 2013 agri-tech strategy; and I pay tribute to Rothamsted Research as a key partner in agrimetrics. We are working together to deliver integrated solutions for the agricultural community.

T5. [903641] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On 10 January, the First Minister of Wales sent a letter to the Prime Minister offering substantive funds for the tidal lagoon. When will he get a response and when will we have the tidal lagoon decision for investment across Wales?

Greg Clark: Officials are meeting their counterparts in the Welsh Government so that they can understand and explore the proposal that has been made.

T7. [903643] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): As banks are closing on our high streets, two of my towns, Newhaven and Polegate, are not having any banking facilities left. Will the Minister consider expanding the facilities that post offices offer? Postmasters such as the one in East Dean in my constituency are keen to do more, but Post Office Ltd refuses to allow them to do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): I take on board the very important question that my hon. Friend asks. The Government have invested over £2 billion to ensure that the Post Office is able to meet the needs of our constituents and the small businesses that rely on it. That means that 99% of UK personal bank accounts and 95% of small business accounts can be accessed to withdraw cash, and that customers can deposit cash over the counter or cheques in any one of the 11,600 post offices across the UK.

T6. [903642] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Investment in solar energy has fallen by 85% over the last year. Will the Minister explain why her Department believes that solar energy no longer requires public subsidy?

Claire Perry: I am sure that the hon. Lady will be delighted to know that I opened Britain’s first subsidy-free solar farm last year. The great success of the policy framework and the investments that we have all made through our bills means that we are able to bring forward renewable energy without substantial subsidies. I would have thought that she would welcome the idea of getting more renewable energy for less investment.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Given that the Keep Me Posted campaign has pointed out that those who cannot or do not use the internet pay £440 a year more in household bills, will the Minister consider extending the provisions that already exist in banking to energy and telecommunications bills?

Mr Gyimah: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which is why I agreed in a previous response to meet the campaign’s officials to see how we can work on this.

T9. [903645] Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The loss of over 200 jobs at Cleveland Potash is a heavy blow for people living in Loftus and east Cleveland. I am grateful to the Small Business Minister for negotiating an agreement across Government to extend the same flexibilities around training granted to workers at SSI to those at
Boulby. The chief executive of the taskforce has described that as critical. Will he commit that this will all be finalised before redundancies are announced in the spring, so that people leaving Cleveland Potash can have certainty?

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues of the merits of the blue pencil. If you have a prepared question and it is a bit on the long side, just scratch a bit out—very useful, and the question never suffers.

Andrew Griffiths: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his tenacity in campaigning on behalf of his residents. Following his representations on the impact of the proposed redundancies, I am happy to confirm that there will be additional flexibility in how the rapid response service can be used. That means that, while there is no additional funding, all workers made redundant from Cleveland Potash will benefit from the same flexibilities for job-focused training as have been made available to ex-SSI and supply chain workers.

T8. [93644] Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the light of the possible barriers to resolving cross-border insolvencies in the UK post Brexit, what assessment has the Minister made of the need to reform the UK’s corporate insolvency framework to ensure that it is fit for purpose?

Greg Clark: I have explained to other Members the importance of exercising these powers in the required way and of not giving a running commentary in this House.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that competitive rates of interest should be offered to businesses and subcontractors that are affected by LARC’s failure? Will he intervene to block this hostile takeover, which is not in the national interest?

Andrew Griffiths: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that access to competitive finance is essential, not just for businesses affected by LARC, but more widely, and particularly for small businesses. I am happy to meet him to discuss the issues if he would like me to.

Mr Speaker: It is a great pleasure to welcome back to the House the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). I know that the House will join me in congratulating the Secretary of State for Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which calls for a 50% increase in regional infrastructure spending across the north of England?

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Minister support Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which calls for a 50% increase in regional infrastructure spending across the north of England?

Richard Harrington: Infrastructure is a major pillar of the Government’s industrial strategy White Paper, and local input is essential. I welcome Transport for the North’s input, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will welcome this, too.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hostile takeover of GKN by Melrose threatens break-up, sale and closures. The Secretary of State has powers under section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002 to intervene. Will he intervene to block this hostile takeover, which is not in the national interest?

Greg Clark: I have explained to other Members the importance of exercising these powers in the required way and of not giving a running commentary in this House.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that competitive rates of interest should be offered to businesses and subcontractors that are affected by LARC’s failure? Will he intervene to block this hostile takeover, which is not in the national interest?

Andrew Griffiths: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that access to competitive finance is essential, not just for businesses affected by LARC, but more widely, and particularly for small businesses. I am happy to meet him to discuss the issues if he would like me to.

Mr Speaker: It is a great pleasure to welcome back to the House the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). I know that the House will join me in doing so.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Cop): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is great to be back.

We have ambitious plans on Teesside to create 20,000 jobs on the former SSI steel site. The biggest issue holding us back is, obviously, the ownership of the site. Can the Secretary of State update us on what conversations he is having with the official receiver and the Thai banks to enable us to fulfil our potential, create jobs, and bring investment back to the site?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady back to the House and commend her for her commitment to ensuring that we secure the best possible future for that site. I shall visit Teesside shortly to continue our discussions. There is great commitment on the part of both the Government and the local development corporation to finding the right solution. The ownership is not in the Government’s hands, but everything that can be done is being done.
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): A constituent of mine is a director of Tower Supplies, one of the leading small and medium-sized enterprises in the personal protective equipment sector, whose bid was recently rejected by Transport for London in the first round of the process with no explanation. The practice is for feedback to be given, but that does not always happen. Will the Minister work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and other Departments to ensure that the system does not hinder SME growth?

Andrew Griffiths: The Government are committed to ensuring that more small businesses are able to bid for such contracts. We want to support SMEs through the procurement process, and to ensure that they can be competitive and win such contracts. I shall be happy to meet my hon. Friend and representatives of the company that she mentioned in order to find a solution.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): When I met the Minister last week, I was told that the Carillion headquarters would continue to operate in the interim. What steps are the Government taking to safeguard jobs for the employees who work in my constituency?

Andrew Griffiths: I think that the hon. Lady and I spoke on the telephone on the day of the insolvency, and I think I have met her twice since then, along with other Wolverhampton colleagues, to ensure that she is kept fully updated. We are working closely with PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Insolvency Service in the best interests of not just the creditors but all those employed in the Carillion network. To date, things have been positive, but I will seek to update the hon. Lady further as more information becomes available.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think that this point of order flows from the exchanges that we have just had. Although ordinarily points of order are made later, I will—as I sometimes do—take this one immediately after questions.

Gillian Keegan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. When I asked a question earlier, I neglected to say that I am a serving member of Chichester District Council.

Mr Speaker: That is a very belt-and-braces approach, for which the hon. Lady certainly cannot be criticised in any way. I thank her, as the House will, for what she has said.
Leaving the EU: Economic Analysis

12.37 pm
Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to make a statement on the Government’s analysis of the long-term economic impact of Brexit on the economy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I will begin by setting out our approach to publishing economic analysis, I hope once and for all.

I can confirm that—I think the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will want to listen to this. I can confirm that when we bring forward the vote on the final deal that we agree with the European Union, we will ensure that the analysis is presented with the appropriate analysis that the Government have carried out, so that the House can make an informed decision. All Members must surely agree, however, that the Government cannot be expected to put such an analysis into the public domain before it has been completed. That would misrepresent our views. Furthermore, the Government cannot be expected to publish the analysis while the negotiations continue, which would surely harm the national interest. Parliament has rightfully agreed that Ministers have a duty not to publish anything that could risk exposing our negotiating position.

Let me now turn to the article that prompted the urgent question. It is a selective interpretation of a preliminary analysis. It is an attempt to undermine our exit from the European Union. As I have told the House before, the Government are undertaking a wide range of analysis on our exit from the EU. The next stage of that analysis, summarised in a draft paper presented to Ministers this month, has been a cross-Whitehall effort to transport our negotiating priorities. It has not been led by my Department, and it is not anywhere near being approved by Ministers. Even the ministerial team in my Department has only just been consulted on the paper, in recent days, and we have made it clear that it requires significant further work. In fact, I saw this report myself only this morning. The analysis to which I believe this article refers is a preliminary attempt to improve on the flawed analysis around the EU referendum. It is there to test ideas and to design a viable framework for the analysis of our exit from the EU. At this early stage, it only considers off-the-shelf trade arrangements that currently exist; we have been clear that these are not what we are seeking in the negotiations. It does not yet consider our desired outcome: the most ambitious relationship possible with the EU, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech.

Such an agreement is in the interests of both the UK and the EU. Therefore, the scenarios in this analysis continue to suffer from the flaws we have seen in previous analyses of this type. Such analyses have been proved to be wrong in the wake of the referendum, not least because there is huge uncertainty around any forecast, especially in the long run and especially in the context of a major strategic choice.

It is the Government’s job to improve on this analysis, but to do so we first have to understand where it went wrong previously. That is what the analysis to which this article refers is: it is not a forecast for our preferred outcome of the negotiations; it does not yet properly take account of the opportunities of leaving the EU.

Finally, on 23 June 2016 the people of this country took a decision to leave the EU in the context of a wide range of economic information. The purpose of this analysis is not to question that decision, which this House voted overwhelmingly to uphold. I hope all Members of this House will agree that we should continue to respect the result of the referendum.

Keir Starmer: Not good enough.

Here we go again: Brexit impact assessments, take two. For the past year, we have called on the Government to publish Brexit impact assessments. It is a simple argument: on decisions of this significance, Parliament is entitled to know the likely impact of the Government’s approach to Brexit and thus to hold the Government to account. The Government have repeatedly refused our requests.

Last year the Secretary of State initially insisted that these reports existed in “excruciating detail”, but were so sensitive that nobody else could see them. After this House passed a binding Humble Address, the Secretary of State changed tack, telling the Brexit Select Committee just last month that no “economic forecast of outcome” had ever existed. Yet last night we learn that an analysis has been produced after all.

This is now piling absurdity upon absurdity, and there are some pretty obvious questions. When was this new analysis commissioned? In particular, was it before or after the Secretary of State gave evidence to the Brexit Select Committee last month on this issue? Is the only report that has been prepared on the Brexit scenarios? If not, what other analysis has been done? Does this new analysis model the Government’s Brexit approach? If not, why not? If so, will it lead to changes in Government policy? Finally, and most importantly, will the Secretary of State publish this now—not in nine months, but now, so that we can hold the Government properly to account?

We have been here before. It took a great deal of time last year and the use of a Humble Address to force the Government to release documents relating to Brexit. The Secretary of State has the chance today to avoid a repeat of that exercise if he commits to publishing this new analysis in full; will he do so?

Mr Baker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman raises the question of impact assessments, and what I can say to the House is that we have always been absolutely clear that we have a wide-ranging programme of analysis, which is evolving continually, but this economic analysis is not what is formally known as an impact assessment. [Interruption.] What I would say to the House—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is excessive gesticulation from a number of hon. Members, which is unseemly and certainly unstatesmanlike.

Mr Baker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman and the Labour party are completely neglecting our duty to safeguard the national interest in the course of these negotiations. I can understand why he and those behind him would want the reports in the press to be
accurate. Fundamentally, they do not wish to leave the European Union. For them, good news is a disaster and bad news is a welcome confirmation of their world view. They await each set of employment figures with eager anticipation, only to have their hopes dashed when every set shows an ever-increasing number of people in work. They gleefully celebrate warnings from banks about the possibility of jobs moving to the continent, then they have to retreat when, a few months later, the banks assert the supremacy of the City of London. I do not blame them. They care passionately about remaining in the European Union and they want to overturn the result, but their strategy is becoming clear: demoralisation, delay and revocation. However, that is not what our parties stood for at the last election. Our parties were clear that we would respect the result of the referendum, and that requires the Government to deliver the best possible Brexit. That is what we are trying to do.

As I said in the opening words of my reply, when the time comes for a meaningful vote, the Government will ensure that the House is appropriately informed. However, we can see what some of this economic analysis could be worth. Let us take as an example the respected Bank of England. What institution could be more respected than the Bank of England. What institution could be more respected for its analysis? In August 2016, it made a quantitative forecast of the impact of Brexit, saying that exports would go down by 0.5%, but they went up 8.3%. It said that business investment would go down by 2%, but it went up by 1.7%. It said that housing investment would go down by 4.75%, but it went up by 5%. It said that employment growth would be zero—but it went up to a new all-time high. The public deserve to see the national interest protected in these negotiations and to have a House of Commons of representatives who exhibit a healthy scepticism about economic forecasting.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It is perfectly obvious to everyone on both sides of the channel that if the United Kingdom leaves the largest and richest multinational free-trade area in the world and constructs new barriers by way of tariffs, customs or regulatory barriers between ourselves and that market, future generations will to some degree be poorer than they would otherwise have been. Does the Minister not accept that the Government should feel themselves under a duty to have the best-informed debate in this House and in the country on the possible consequences of likely scenarios now, when the Government are deciding what their ultimate policy is going to be, and continuously throughout the vital next 12 months when the final picture will start to emerge? Will the Minister stop pretending that this is something to do with defending our negotiating position or that it is some kind of perverse attempt to reverse the referendum decision, and accept that he has failed, actually, to protect the Government from political embarrassment?

Mr Baker: The public have made a profoundly important strategic choice, which is to leave the European Union. That means that the Government need to deliver free trade on a new basis: on the basis not of political integration but of a new deep and special partnership with the European Union. It is the Government’s intention to deliver the best possible and most frictionless trading with our friends in the European Union, which it is in all our mutual interests to do. My right hon. and learned Friend talks about our duty, and he knows well that our duty is to look after the national interest of our constituents and of our country. That is exactly what we are seeking to do as we take these negotiations and this analysis forward.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Just yesterday, I was commenting in this Chamber that the only constants in the Government’s Brexit position are chaos and confusion. Far be it from me to get in the way of the Government undermining themselves, or of Tory feuding, but this situation counts, and their bluff and bluster just will not cut it any more. It is striking that the figures that have been released are very similar to the figures that the Scottish Government produced on Scotland’s place in Europe. If the Scottish Government can produce their figures, why can this Government not do so?

Mr Baker: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are not copying the Scottish Government’s analysis and that we are doing our own homework. The Scottish National party’s position is clear: it wants to break up the United Kingdom and have a Scotland within the European Union. The actions that he describes must be understood in that context.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): We have here some London-centric remonsters—that could be a way of describing the shadow Brexit Secretary—in the civil service who did not want us to leave the European Union in the first place and put together some dodgy figures to back up their case. They still do not want us to leave the European Union and are regurgitating some dodgy figures to try to reverse the result of the referendum. Does my hon. Friend agree with that analysis? If so, does he agree that this really is not a news story?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes a point that is very much in line with his long-held views. I should reaffirm that I am proud of the officials with whom I work. Irrespective of how they voted, they are demonstrating commitment to delivering on the decision of the British people. The intention of our current analysis is to improve on what has gone before and, as I set out in my initial response, we recognise that there were flaws in the previous approach.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): A lack of transparency is not in the national interest. On 6 December, I asked the Brexit Secretary, “have the Government undertaken any impact assessments on the implications of leaving the EU for different sectors of the economy?” He replied, “Not in sectors.” Now we learn that that work has been done, and it is reported that chemicals, clothing, manufacturing, food and drink, cars and retail will be the hardest hit sectors. Will the Minister offer the House an explanation for the discrepancy between what the Exiting the European Union Committee was told and what we now know?

Mr Baker: As I have explained, we have always said that our economic analysis was continually evolving across a wide range of activities. [Interruption] Opposition Members laugh, but what else would they expect but for the Government to work continually on a developing analysis? As I may not have said in my
opening remarks, I know that the Secretary of State only saw this particular document last night—I saw it this morning—and I think that that will explain the answers he has given.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that businesses up and down the country, including in Redditch, will wonder whose side the Labour party is on when its Members take great pleasure in forecasts that predict doom and gloom? People may conclude that Labour is not on the side of this country’s hard-working businesses and entrepreneurs.

**Mr Baker**: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Now that the decision has been taken, the vast majority of right-thinking people in the United Kingdom will expect it to be carried through with a good heart as a matter of choice. Time and again, we see a foot-dragging reluctance from the Labour party, which increasingly seems not to be respecting the choices of its own voters.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is reported that the analysis shows that the north, the Midlands and Northern Ireland will be hardest hit in all the scenarios. Will the Minister confirm that that is because all the scenarios assume that Britain is outside the customs union? Will he confirm, too, that the Government appear to have undertaken no analysis of the different customs union options and of the impact on our economy? Given how significant the situation is for northern manufacturing and for Northern Ireland and given that the CBI has said this is irresponsible and is letting down northern manufacturing, will he commit to conducting and publishing analysis before the customs Bill completes its passage through Parliament?

**Mr Baker**: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady because she has given me the opportunity to reassure her that there is economic growth under all the scenarios in the economic assessment. The only question is to what extent and how fast, but there is projected to be economic growth across a 15-year period in all the scenarios.

**Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend understand that many businesses in my constituency are already nervous about the apparently cavalier attitude of some Brexiteer opinion towards their continued success? Will he therefore confirm that the Government will seek to negotiate an arrangement and get a result that does not damage the long-term economic success of our country and the national interest of our people?

**Mr Baker**: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. The Government are not cavalier. It is precisely because we take our duties seriously that we are continuing to develop our economic analysis, and I can of course reassure him that we are seeking to establish a free trade agreement and other partnership arrangements that are of unprecedented scope and ambition.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): For the Minister basically to excuse his not publishing the information because he has not yet had the chance to edit, twist or distort it or to redact the information within it is a total and utter disgrace. The public have a right to know about their livelihoods and their futures, and it is deeply irresponsible and dishonest for the Government not to publish the information. It is a cover-up, pure and simple, and it stinks.

**Mr Baker**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on going for the hardest possible hit that he can manage, but it is not good enough. The truth is that the hon. Gentleman has made it perfectly clear through his words and his actions that he does not accept the referendum result. It is perfectly clear that he is among those who wish to see a revocation of the democratic decision of the British people, and he is acting in that spirit.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): As an antidote, will the Minister read Professor Minford’s work? Alternatively, he might just go to the cinema to see “Darkest Hour”.

**Mr Baker**: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. I can confirm that I will read Professor Minford’s work, and the transparency register will also show that I have met Professor Minford. I will continue to meet Professor Minford and to look at the work of Economists for Free Trade.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): As an antidote, will the Minister read Professor Minford’s work? Alternatively, he might just go to the cinema to see “Darkest Hour”.

**Mr Baker**: The right hon. Gentleman reminds me that I did not answer the other point of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I have been to see “Darkest Hour” and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) does a good job of reminding me that some people do approach our current circumstances in an unnecessarily bleak spirit. I say to him once again that the economic analysis is clear that there is to be economic growth in all scenarios. I encourage him to go back to the report published by the Treasury Committee, on which I served, during the referendum campaign and look at the documented abuse of figures by the remain campaign. I urge him not to repeat that abuse of figures.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): According to this analysis, the car manufacturing, chemical and food sectors, all of which are vital for my constituency, will clearly be adversely affected. Quite frankly, Minister, I take exception to being told that it is not in the national interest for me to see a report that would allow me to best represent my constituents. Parliament needs access to the best possible information on which to base our decisions.

**Mr Baker**: I have great faith in my hon. Friend, and we of course appreciate the importance of cars, chemicals and food. As I said at the beginning of my response,
when the time approaches for us to have a meaningful vote in Parliament, we will put appropriate economic analysis before both Houses to assist the choices that they make. However, we do not expect the European Union to publish all its analysis in a transparent manner, and we do not propose to go into the negotiations having revealed all our thinking.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister thinks that perhaps the person in the Whitehall establishment who leaked this document would be better off moving, and working in Brussels. Was the methodology used in this report, or whatever it is, the same methodology that said the country’s financial future would tank if we did not join the euro?

Mr Baker: We are carrying out the usual inquiries into who leaked the report. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that past economic predictions have been very poor, and poor for good reasons on which I would love to elaborate on another occasion. I have set out that critique of even the Bank of England’s forecasts, and she is absolutely right that, as I said earlier, we should have a healthy scepticism.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): We would be in a strange position if Governments had to publish every bit of advice to Ministers and every bit of analysis that they profoundly believed to be wrong. The last Labour Government did not do that, and the Minister should resist publishing this analysis if he believes it is not in the national interest to do so. I also advise him that people are trying to divert the Government’s direction on Brexit—there is absolutely no doubt about it. Will he look into why this particular document was leaked on this particular day, the day that the withdrawal Bill has its first debate in the upper House?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, makes an important and authoritative point about the conduct of government. Opposition Members would do well to reflect on how they would wish to govern the country if, God forbid, the electorate should ever give them an opportunity to do so.

All of us in this House need to have an eye on the long-term functioning of our democracy and our constitution. With that in mind, I hear what my hon. Friend says. There is clearly a campaign to overturn the referendum result, and it can be seen at work in the media and in this House. We will certainly bear in mind what he says.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that this cross-departmental analysis has not been co-ordinated by his Department, but on that there appears to be some confusion. When the Brexit Secretary gave evidence to the Brexit Committee last week, I asked him whether his Department is co-ordinating the cross-departmental work on the sectoral impacts of no deal, and he said, “Yes.”

If there is indeed no deal, we would likely fall out on World Trade Organisation rules. Will the Minister confirm that in one of the scenarios outlined in the report—the WTO option that is advocated by many Conservative Members—the impact of non-tariff barriers is the equivalent of a 10% tariff slapped across the economy?

Mr Baker: That was quite a long question. There are two particular scenarios that are not modelled in this analysis. One is the policy choices that the Prime Minister rightly set out in her Florence speech, and the other is exiting in the unfortunate, and we think unlikely, circumstance of not reaching an agreement and how one might take the right policy choices in the event of trading on WTO rules. We will continue to take this analysis forward, and I look forward to the day when we are able to present appropriate analysis to the House before the meaningful vote.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister recall, prior to the referendum, what became known as “Project Fear”? Everything was going to go wrong after the referendum if we voted to come out—something short of bubonic plague—but that did not happen. With those warnings, the British people still voted to come out, so of what relevance is another forecast now that predicts exactly the same as “Project Fear”?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I well remember “Project Fear” in all its manifestations. Most of us on the leave side thought at the time that those horror predictions would not come to pass after the vote and, happily, we have been proved correct. I look forward to continuing to prove economists wrong after they make horror story predictions.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Why have the Government assessed the impact of all the scenarios but not the one they say they want, the fantasy cake-and-eat-it one?

Mr Baker: I am grateful for that question, because I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman and the House that we will continue to develop and expand our economic analysis. We cannot control the timing of leaks, and were we to have chosen to publish an analysis, as we will when we approach the meaningful vote, it will of course contain the relevant information.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): My hon. Friend is of course right that this analysis does not question the result of the referendum, nor does it model his desired scenario, but what it does show is that modelling a fully comprehensive free trade deal with the EU post-Brexit, combined with the benefits of new trade deals, shows a net effect on economic growth of 1.5%. Where does he hope a special and deep relationship with the City will differ from a fully comprehensive free trade deal post Brexit?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend may know that Michel Barnier tried to include financial services in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership deal, and we believe that we can go beyond what has been agreed in the past. The analysis does not include a comprehensive deal of the scope we would like to agree; it includes only an average based on past precedents. We believe that we can reasonably go further than we have before, and of course we are well apprised of the importance of financial services and of ensuring that the City flourishes.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If the economic forecasts and impact assessments published to date have been so wrong, why do the Government not tell the British people what it is they want from the EU by way of a deal, cost it and publish the results? Why is that so difficult?

Mr Baker: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out what we want in the Lancaster House and Florence speeches. We are heading down the path of successfully delivering on what the Government have said we wish to have.

Joanna Cherry: Cost it.

Mr Baker: We will continue to carry out a wide-ranging and developing programme of economic analysis, which will help to inform our negotiating position and our decisions.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Can my hon. Friend agree that our post-referendum experience illustrates the danger of publishing incomplete and inchoate economic assessments? The Minister keeps on saying that he might have added to that catalogue of failures of the economics profession the failure to see the financial crisis. It is time for economists to re-examine their methods, for the reasons I indicated earlier. I am grateful to him for putting those past failures on the record.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Given that the leaked Government analysis confirms that, realistically, there are three ways that the UK might leave the EU, each with a very different impact on jobs, trade and livelihoods, why have MPs not been given a direct vote at the start of the process to determine what sort of Brexit the UK is pursuing? Is it not about time that we in this House are allowed to take back common sense and seek the sensible option of staying in the single market by staying in the European economic area and remaining part of a European customs union?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady is entirely wrong: the sensible and pragmatic way forward, which honours the result of the referendum and ensures that this is a democracy with an independent Parliament able to ensure that control is exercised over the laws of this country, is to carry forward my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s policy, as she has set out in Florence and in the Lancaster House speech.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is it not about time we set up a charity called “Soothsayers Anonymous” for people who simply cannot kick the habit of predicting when conflicts are going to break out, when we are going to have opinion polls that are going to be accurate and when we are going to have economic forecasts regarding the EU that are going to be accurate, even though history has shown time and again that they are not worth the paper they are written on?

Mr Baker: That is a very good point, but I am not sure we will make it Government policy to do it.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Minister will be well aware that Sinn Féin has already used the Brexit decision to agitate for a border poll. I say to the British Government that they need to be very careful to ensure that Sinn Féin does not use any more negative impact assessments to feed its narrative. In those circumstances, what guarantees can he offer the people of Northern Ireland that the economy will not suffer as a result of Brexit? We must make sure not to feed Sinn Féin’s narrative.

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady makes a sobering and important point, which the Government have heard. I say to her that in all scenarios in this economic analysis, there is economic growth—the question is only: how fast? It is this Government’s task to ensure we achieve the fastest GDP growth and indeed the fastest GDP growth per head, which is why we have brought forward a comprehensive programme on productivity. Of course we are most concerned to ensure the prosperity of the
people, not only of Northern Ireland, but of the whole of the island of Ireland and right across Europe. That is why it is in our mutual interest to agree a comprehensive and deep free trade agreement.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Even though these forecasts do not look at the Government’s preferred outcome, does my hon. Friend not agree that the data they contain, however imperfectly, do underline the importance of building a bespoke deal around maintaining customs union-style arrangements and ensuring as great a level of access as possible to the single market?

Mr Baxter: I agree with my right hon. Friend on most of his points, but, as I said in an earlier answer, we do not think remaining in the customs union, so that the European Union set our tariffs on imports, would be the right thing to do. We think that would be the wrong choice for the UK. It would prevent us from operating an independent trade policy and plugging ourselves into the rest of the world’s growth, where multiple authorities, including the European Commission, have admitted that 90% of the world’s growth will come from. So on that particular point I disagree with him, but on the rest of his arguments and, in particular, on the need, in our mutual interests, for a good-quality trade agreement, he is right and I agree.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Ministers keep using the excuse that it is in the national interest to withhold information about the economic impact of Brexit—that is on the days when they admit such information exists. I will tell them what is really not patriotic: pursuing a policy that will make our country poorer than it would otherwise be, in order to satisfy right-wing, nationalist ideology. So will the Minister tell me why we should believe part of forecasts—these forecasts that we would follow through on that decision. Will the Minister tell me why we should believe part of forecasts—these forecasts, which have apparently been published, are not complete—given that the initial information put out before the referendum was flawed?

Mr Baker: I must exercise some caution, Mr Speaker, because as you will know, Wycombe District, which is substantially larger than the constituency of Wycombe, did express the other view. However, what I think we need to do is come together to unite around the result as a country, and to choose for ourselves not to leave the EU because we must or because we ought, but to leave the EU successfully because we choose to abide by the democratic decision of the United Kingdom as a whole.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): How can we unite together when the Government are withholding information from the rest of the House?

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The gloomy pre-referendum Treasury forecasts led many of us to vote remain with a heavy heart. The public made their decision, and we stood on an election manifesto saying that we would follow through on that decision. Will the Minister tell me why we should believe part forecasts—these forecasts, which have apparently been published, are not complete—given that the initial information put out before the referendum was flawed?

Mr Baker: It is very difficult to answer the question of how we can unite together when certain Members of this House, including, I am sorry to say, the hon. Lady, keep provoking as much division as possible. She represents a party claiming to be liberal and democratic, and which once offered a real referendum on Europe, but we have had a real referendum on Europe and it is time for her to get behind the result.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister would not accept the premise of the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), but this morning we heard from the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Dunstan Smith), who cast significant doubt on the Government’s own ability to forecast the impact of Brexit on jobs and growth. What assurances will the Minister give workers in my constituency, for example, those in the Jaguar Land Rover or Vauxhall supply chains, that Brexit will not fatally wound the manufacturing sector on Merseyside?
Mr Baker: As I believe the record will show, I have said multiple times that in all scenarios in this economic analysis growth is forecast. So it is good news for the hon. Lady and for the country that in all of the forecasts—in all of the circumstances of the economic analysis—growth is forecast. She brings up the issue of the supply chain, so I also say to her that we are of course apprised of the imperatives of complex international supply chains, not just between the UK and Europe, but around the whole world. In particular, I draw attention to provisions in the Union customs code for inward and outward processing rules, which should assist manufacturers in her constituency.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Were the economists involved in these forecasts the same ones who said we would lose half a million jobs if people voted for Brexit? Since the referendum we have, in fact, gained 350,000 jobs.

Mr Baker: I am not able to give my hon. Friend exactly that information, but perhaps some of the economists are the same ones. In my experience, civil servants, at all levels, dutifully carry out the instructions of the Government, and I am sure they are doing that in this case.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It might surprise the Minister to learn that I have read a number of his articles, and there is much in them that I disagree with. He talks a lot about liberty, accountability, transparency and democracy, but he does not seem to like any of those principles when they are applied to him and his Government, and when they shed light on the reckless course that this Government are pursing. If they have not done a full, comprehensive analysis, they are incompetent. If they have done it, we should see it.

Mr Baker: As I announced at the beginning of my initial response, the Government will make available to both Houses of Parliament the appropriate economic analysis before we make a decision on the meaningful vote.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): No one in this House should dismiss the referendum result—that would be overstepping the mark—but it is our role, as the Government have accepted, to scrutinise the deal and ensure that it is the very best it can be for all our citizens, regardless of how, or indeed whether, they voted in the referendum. The impact assessments were made available to parliamentarians in absolute confidentiality, and I went to see them. I fail to see why that same process cannot be extended for this most recent and any further analysis. This is a one-time deal only, and I for one owe it to my constituents to prove to them that I have exercised full scrutiny.

Mr Baker: I cannot accept the premise of my hon. Friend’s question. We have gone to and fro in the House about the meaning of the term “impact assessments”. What was made available to colleagues were sectoral analyses. I refer my hon. Friend both to the written ministerial statement setting out how meaningful votes will happen at the end of the process and to my previous remarks about the need to protect the integrity of our negotiating position. We will ensure that, when we reach the end of the negotiating period, parliamentarians are able to access appropriate economic analysis when we all take that important decision.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Last week, I asked the Treasury’s permanent secretary whether he could confirm that just a single one of the Government’s scenarios for a deal post brexit would lead to a better economic deal and outcome than what we have as members of the single market and customs union. He did not seem able to answer. Is not the truth that no such model exists? Has it not been confirmed today that, as a result of the Government’s dogmatic determination to pull us out of the single market and the customs union, it will not be my city, London, that is most affected, or indeed the industries in the City of London that are worst affected, but the key sectors of the economy right across the UK, with the impact felt worst in the west midlands, the north-east and Northern Ireland? How on earth could that possibly be in the national interest?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman said that there is no such model; the truth is that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) referred to a model earlier. Economists for Free Trade are very clear about their modelling. Other models are available—at the time of the referendum, Open Europe did some modelling and found that the effect could be plus or minus 2%. The truth is that there are profound uncertainties facing not just the United Kingdom in this negotiation but all economies in the world. All face three big issues: the growth of technology; a new phase in globalisation; and, of course, the continuing aftermath of the financial crisis which, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, has left interest rates at levels the Governor of the Bank of England has described as extraordinary if not emergency. Those three issues mean that all economies are on highly uncertain paths. The Government will navigate their way through the future with confidence and boldness.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Is the Minister aware that in the past 40 years the European Union’s share of global GDP has fallen from 30% to just 15% and that 90% of future world economic growth is going to come from outside Europe? Does he agree that the future is not regional relative decline; the future is global?

Mr Baker: I do agree, and my hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. We need to make sure that this country is well positioned. He refers to the previous era of globalisation and particularly the emergence of China. The United Kingdom’s task is to take the right strategic decisions so that we can be plugged in not only to Asia but, I very much hope, to an emerging Africa, Latin America and the whole world, and so that we can participate on the basis of technologies that were unimaginable at the beginning of the EU’s life, not least the internet, inexpensive air travel and containerised shipping. Those three things have transformed our world for the better, and I hope and expect, as I am sure my hon. Friend does, that in future, over the course of our lifetimes, the world will improve in ways that we cannot yet imagine.
Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): We have learned today that the Government’s own analysis suggests that the economy will grow by less than 5% in the case of a UK-EU trade deal. That is people’s jobs and livelihoods. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s negotiating position has been decided not on the basis of the economic evidence but on ideology alone?

Mr Baker: Let us not pretend that there is no ideology among those who wish to remain in the European Union, even at the cost of overturning a democratic decision, remaining in the EEA and surrendering democratic control and power. The figure to which the hon. Lady referred is wrong—it is not as she stated—but I do not propose now to walk through what is in the analysis which, as I have said, is currently a provisional draft and is not yet Government policy.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): On Friday, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was on Teesside to set up an optimistic free trading vision for the UK after we leave the EU. Given that all estimates have consistently underestimated our economy, surely it is time to just get on with the job.

Mr Baker: It is time to get on with the job. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his colleagues for their brilliant work agitating for free trade zones, which I believe should be an important part of the Government’s consideration.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister is clearly making himself out to be a bit of a philosopher today, so I say to him that surely it is the mark of a democracy that those of us who take different sides do not question each other’s patriotism. If he does not trust the forecasts, will he take the sensible decision—like the one taken by the previous Chancellor, George Osborne—to get them out of the Treasury and say to the Office for Budget Responsibility, “You get the forecast done by the time of the spring statement”? Then we can all see what the truth is.

Mr Baker: I have been careful not to use the word “patriotism” and not to question anyone’s, but the voters of the United Kingdom are entitled to look at the words and actions of their parliamentarians and ask what they are trying to achieve. Are they committed to adhering to the referendum result? Are they doing so with a spirit of confidence and boldness, and with buoyancy and hope, or are they trying to demoralise the public and overturn the result through delay and revocation? The hon. Lady should think very carefully about what her voters—and, indeed, all our voters—will think about our actions. I hope she will commit to carrying through their democratic decision.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is in the national interest to get the best deal we possibly can. Does my hon. Friend agree that to do that we have to keep our cards close to our chest? These are tough negotiations, and to expose the goods and the bads in such negotiations plays right into the hands of an organisation that, let us face it, does not want us to leave anyway.

Mr Baker: I think the EU’s willingness to see us leave is increasing by the day as we go through this process. It is important that the House knows that key figures throughout the EU pay close attention to our newspaper headlines, so it is important and incumbent on us all to remain committed, in that spirit of buoyancy and hope, to carrying through the referendum result.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We have been here before, because the same gloom-laden forecasts were made before the referendum and none of them was anywhere near the mark. Does the Minister agree that these long-term forecasts are as useful for predicting future economic performance as newspaper horoscopes? More importantly, will he assure us that despite the hysteria from the Opposition Benches, the Government will not be distracted from honouring their commitment to deliver the United Kingdom out of the single market and the customs union?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman’s question reminds me of the great economist Galbraith who said, if I recall correctly, that the only purpose of economic forecasting was to make astrology look respectable. There is a great deal of truth in that.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Another great economist, J. M. Keynes, said, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?” Will my hon. Friend confirm that a deep and special partnership must include services as well as goods, because services account for 80% of our economy, and that any deal that did not include all services would not be in the interests of the United Kingdom?

Mr Baker: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of services, but I go further. It is extremely important that our ambassador to the World Trade Organisation, Julian Braithwaite, is chairing the relevant committee on services. It is in the UK’s and, indeed, the world’s interests that we take part in a global liberalisation of services in trade. That is key to unlocking the UK’s prosperity and, indeed, to unlocking Governments’ capacity to meet the commitments that they have entered into for their populations.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My constituents, many of whom are former Conservative voters, cannot understand why any Government would adopt policies that they knew would make them or the country worse off. The Minister’s tactic today is to rubbish his own commissioned analyses because they show that leaving the EU will be an economic disaster, to a greater or lesser extent. If he believes in Brexit at any cost, will he at least have the honesty to say so?

Mr Baker: That is simply not the case. As I have not hesitated to say several times, the economic analysis does not show the country being worse off; it shows the country being better off under all circumstances. It shows GDP growing—

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Nonsense!

Mr Baker: The shadow Minister says it is nonsense, but I can assure him that it is not. The economic analysis shows GDP increasing in all circumstances.
The point of the Government’s policy must be to carry through faithfully the decision of the British people and to do so in a way that proves these doom-mongers and naysayers wrong.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): In these negotiations, the UK is on one side, and 27 other Governments and the EU are on the other. Will my hon. Friend say how many of those Governments, as well as the EU itself, have confirmed that they will publish the entirety of their internal analysis on each option that they might be prepared to offer?

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I am not aware that any of them is prepared to reveal that information, and he was absolutely right to mention it. I can assure him that I have given instructions to our teams to analyse the interests of other member states simply for the purpose of demonstrating that it is in our mutual interests to conclude a deep and special partnership.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: As there is so much noise, I will call someone who has been behaving in a statesperson-like manner. I call Fiona Onasanya.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I refute the accusation that we do not accept what our constituents have voted for. In June, they were asked a simple question, which was something like this: would you like a divorce, yes or no? They answered that question, but they did not know who would have the children, who would get the house, and how the assets would be split. Will Ministers give us the detail of the impact analysis that has been done, so that we can advise our constituents on how leaving will affect them?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady makes a very interesting point, but I slightly regret her metaphor. We need to face up to the fact that the British public have rejected the idea of delivering free trade through political integration. Our task is to rise to the challenge of this new decision in strategic political economy and deliver free trade, which provides for democratic control of political power. I did listen carefully to what she said.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is with growing admiration that I listen to the pronouncements of the Mystic Megs, and indeed the Mystic Moggis, who, with near papal infallibility, pronounce this, that or the other as being an absolute certainty. I agree with the Minister when he says that this is an uncertain process. All my constituents and businesses in North Dorset want to hear from the Minister is that he and the Government are committed to a pragmatic, common-sense solution to this issue that we are facing, to ensure economic growth, stability in jobs and prosperity in Dorset.

Mr Baker: As I said in an earlier answer, I believe that that pragmatic way forward is as set out by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in the Lancaster House and the Florence speeches, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for underlining the fact that it is the right way forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): How dare the Minister suggest to my constituents that ignorance is bliss? My constituents were misled by the lies on the side of the Brexit bus. My constituents are now being deprived of the information that suggests that, up and down the north of England and in Yorkshire in particular, jobs and employment will plunge if we go out on the worst terms. Will he apologise to my constituents for misleading them?

Mr Baker: No, I will not. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to listen to the arguments that I have made and to the answers that I have given. In all scenarios in this analysis, economic growth increases. He talks about people being misled in the referendum campaign; there were two campaigns and both are susceptible to criticism. I encourage him to look at the Treasury Committee’s report, which criticised the remain campaign quite heavily; otherwise, I should not have been able to sign up to it.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In my constituency, more than 2,000 people work in insurance. Britain is home to the world’s largest insurance market, and many European companies need access to our market. Does the Minister agree that it is in the interests of both Britain and Europe to seek a much deeper and more modern trade relationship than the EU has with any other third country?

Mr Baker: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The United Kingdom has a comparative advantage in insurance, as it does in so many financial services. As I indicated earlier, it is in the interests of Europe and the world that we should be able to take that comparative advantage and put it to the service of the whole world.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Like that of the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), who is no longer in his place, my constituency is the gateway to Britain from the Republic of Ireland and on the frontline of Brexit. Businesses that I have spoken to in the past few weeks and months want, because of the uncertainty, an analysis of what Brexit will mean for them specifically. Will the Minister tell the House when he was intending to share this information with local authorities, the devolved Administration and, indeed, their MP who needs to keep them informed?

Mr Baker: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has been in contact with the Port of Holyhead, and we will continue our programme of engagement, well apprised of the need to keep talking to businesses, particularly those that provide our important infrastructure, such as the port in his constituency. He asked me when: I have said that, before the meaningful vote, we will make appropriate economic analysis available to the House.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): During referendum week, I was fortunate to speak to 25 schools, taking a neutral position. I visited two schools in the past fortnight, and the vast majority of the students, who would probably have voted to remain, wanted us to get on with the job rather than uncertainty. Does the Minister agree that it is essential that we respect the ballot box system that elected us, engage more with our constituents and get on with the job in hand?
Mr Baker: I do agree with my hon. Friend. I particularly lament the way that so much of the demoralisation that has taken place has been aimed at young people. It is precisely because we are concerned for their future that we want to deliver a successful partnership with the European Union as we turn out to take advantage of that growth, 90% of which will come from the rest of the world. It is their future that we are concerned about, and it is their future that led people like me to campaign for leave on the basis of upholding their democratic choice to choose a Government and influence its policies.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): These leaked figures indicate and expose the damage that will be caused by a Brexit outside the single market and the customs union. Is it not the case that the greatest failure of this Parliament, on the biggest issue of our time, and despite the damage that it will do to people’s livelihoods and standards of living, is that the British Government and the Labour Opposition share the exact same position?

Mr Baker: As I have already said, all scenarios in this analysis show growth. The analysis is heavily caveated with the profound uncertainties that exist, not only for the UK and Europe but for the world. In that context, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept the answers that I have given today.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Following directly on from that, is it not right that we should approach such economic modelling with caution? History has proven to be wrong and flawed in the past. The information is incomplete. Does my hon. Friend agree that it will not always be plain sailing—there will be difficulties along the way—but the end destination is worth getting to, and people up and down this country in increasing numbers are just saying, “Get on with it”?

Mr Baker: I agree with my hon. Friend that we do need to get on with it, and, yes, the end destination is worth getting to, although, hopefully, there will be no end to this journey. We will journey out into a new life of prosperity and self-government, which will give us the dignity of self-control.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): First, let me draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests concerning Weighton Bilanci. I have here a letter sent by the European Commission, which was received by British manufacturing firms, telling them that after Brexit all products certified for use by UK certifiers will no longer be eligible for sale in the EU. Those companies are now rushing to get their entire product range recertified, often at three times the cost, from European certifying authorities. What advice do the Government give to UK manufacturing firms that have products certified in the UK about what they should do in the run-up to Brexit and the need for recertification?

Mr Baker: I expect us to conclude a free trade agreement with the European Union that includes agreements in relation to product conformity. I hope that we will make rapid progress through these negotiations now that we have made sufficient progress and are moving on to the next stage. I very much hope that everyone in this country, including manufacturers, to which the hon. Gentleman refers, will be given an accelerated degree of certainty as we progress through the negotiations.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Is my hon. Friend familiar with the PwC analysis that suggests that the UK could be the fastest growing economy in the G7 between Brexit and 2050?

Mr Baker: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing that out.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that I have submitted 23 questions to his Department asking what assessments the Government have undertaken—all to ensure that businesses and workers in my area are safeguarded. The Government have repeatedly refused to release even the titles of these assessments, so will the Minister confirm how many impact studies the Government have conducted and for how long he expects Members to have access to these documents before we vote on the final Brexit deal?

Mr Baker: I think that the documents that we put out and discussed at great length continue to be available to colleagues. As I have said, we will lay before both Houses the appropriate economic analysis before the decision is taken.
Mr Baker: I will make two points. First, as far as I recall, I have never been disparaging about civil servants with whom I have worked; it is quite the reverse. What I have been disparaging about is method in the economic sciences. That is quite different. Secondly, all the circumstances in this analysis predict growth. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I gave earlier, pointing out all the flaws in the predictions of the Bank of England. I ask him to start working out how he can play his part in leading this country forward with a spring in its step.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. In the past week, Mark Carney and Jaguar Land Rover have blamed Brexit on the fall in growth and business respectively. For Jaguar Land Rover, this is resulting in prolonged shutdowns and declining production. This is happening now. Will the Minister accept the reality of what is happening and publish the Government’s analysis?

Mr Baker: I accept that Jaguar Land Rover does not sell as many cars as I should like it to. I consider it this Government’s duty to enter into trading arrangements with the whole world that facilitate the company’s complete success. I look forward to working out how he can face up on the table, and we are not going to do that. We will continue our programme of engagements with the devolved Administrations and the English regions. What we will not do is publish or reveal information we consider to be prejudicial to their interests and the national interest or that would harm our negotiations.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Mr Speaker, you will recall from this morning that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) ducked my question on the impact of these assessments on small businesses, so I will try again. Leaked or not, if the Minister is willing to be disparaging about his own civil servants who are producing his own reports, does he also reject the reports from the University of St Andrews that point out that small business will be hit by lower levels of investment and access to finance, lower growth and reduced product development opportunities?

Mr Baker: The Secretary of State went to the region only last week to make an important speech about the implementation period, precisely because we understand the importance of industries and businesses there. There is no question of our ignoring analysis. We are conducting the analysis to inform our position, as I have tirelessly set out.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): This is about the UK Government doing their job, and they have spectacularly failed to do that. This leaked paper talks about the impact of Brexit on different areas of the UK, despite the Government telling devolved Governments and Administrations that they have no such information. The Minister failed to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), so when will this information be shared with the devolved Administrations, so that they can make decisions on behalf of the people they represent and govern?

Mr Baker: We will make information available once we are through the negotiation, so that we do not end up putting ourselves in the position of publishing information that is prejudicial to the national interest. I would expect that information to be published—and, in particular, to be made available to both Houses of Parliament—once the negotiations have concluded and before the meaningful vote.

Mirs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Why do this Conservative Government not trust the voters of Bridgend, many of whom rely on the Ford engine plant for their jobs? It is acknowledged that car manufacturing will be one of the hardest-hit areas. The Minister says that there is going to be growth. In that case, let the people of Bridgend know where the growth is going to be and what better growth could be achieved by staying in the single market. Is he more interested in healing the wounds within the Conservative party than looking after the people of Bridgend?

Mr Baker: I am interested in healing the wounds across the whole country, getting people to unite behind a democratic decision and thus taking it forward. It is precisely because we do trust the voters that we want not only to carry through the referendum result, but to ensure our parliamentary independence, so that the voters can materially affect a Government’s policy choices.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am concerned about some of the recent answers. Will the Minister confirm what damage will happen to the UK’s negotiating position if this analysis is shared with the devolved Governments?

Mr Baker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman can easily find a wide range of literature that will explain how to do a negotiation. But what one does not do when going into a negotiation is to place one’s cards face up on the table, and we are not going to do that.

Jo Platt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: I will take this point of order now, as I believe it relates to the subject matter that we have been discussing.

Jo Platt: Further to the question that I have just asked, I have tabled 23 written questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Treasury over the past six weeks, asking for the titles of any assessments that the Government had conducted on the impact of our withdrawal from the European Union. However, none of these questions has been adequately answered. What I have received has been vague; my questions have often been ignored; and Ministers have not provided me with the information I requested. Mr Speaker, without any obvious avenue to take, I seek your guidance on how I can secure an answer from Ministers to the questions I have asked in order for me to ascertain the number of assessments the Government have undertaken and their titles.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intended point of order, although I am not at all sure that I can offer her much satisfaction or comfort. The content of ministerial answers to parliamentary questions is the responsibility of the Minister concerned. It is not, and cannot be, a matter for the Chair. I understand her dissatisfaction with the answers that she has received. I am afraid that it is not uncommon for answers from successive Governments of different complexions to fail to engage—eithr fully or, in some cases, at all—with the question in the view of the recipient of the answer, or, indeed, to do so only vaguely. However, I advise the hon. Lady to persist and to discuss with the Table Office what other avenues she might pursue.

I must emphasise, on the basis of some little experience in the House, the merits of quantity, persistence and, above all, repetition. Members must—if I may very politely say so—keep at it. I remember one year tabling, I think, a little under 4,000 questions, which somewhat irritated Ministers at the time, although that caused me no concern whatever. I was simply concerned to table the questions that mattered to me. If that caused some inconvenience to other people, it was really beside the point. Democracy costs.

On whether Members will be granted access to analytical studies on the impact of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU ahead of any vote on the final deal, I do not know the answer to that question beyond what we have heard from the Minister today, and the Minister has said some things today on which Members can reflect. He will have heard his right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chair of the Brexit Committee, who asked a question on this matter early in the exchanges. The right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues can pursue the matter if they so wish. They have a track record of doing so on previous occasions and might choose to do so on this occasion. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.
PIP Back Payments

1.52 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the process and timetable for the personal independence payment back payments.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): As a result of our decision not to appeal the recent PIP judicial review judgment, we informed the House via a written statement and in a response to a parliamentary question that we will be carrying out an administrative exercise to identify claimants who may now be eligible for more support from PIP. The Secretary of State took the decision less than three weeks ago. As previously said, we will be working with Mind—experts in the field—and doing things as sympathetically and effectively as possible. While efficiency is important, I cannot stress enough that I want the appropriate scrutiny and complete accuracy to be applied to this exercise, so it will not be rushed.

This exercise will include screening the existing PIP caseload of some 1.6 million people to identify the group who may benefit, but the vast majority of claimants will not be affected. As the Secretary of State said last week, we currently estimate that up to 220,000 people will be affected by the judgment. For the group of people who may be affected, we will undertake a detailed review of their applications and awards. We will write to the individuals affected, and all payments will be back-dated to the effective date in each individual claim. There will be no—repeat, no—face-to-face reassessments of awards. DWP case managers will be conducting a review of the existing information we hold, with a view to establishing whether claimants are entitled to more. If case managers need more information to make a decision, they will contact the claimant and/or their doctor.

I am sure you will understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is a complex exercise, and we need to undertake testing to ensure that we implement it safely. We therefore do not yet have an estimate of how long it will take. Obviously, we will keep the House updated on our progress in this exercise. Based on preliminary calculations, we estimate that the overall costs of implementing the judgment could be up to £3.7 billion by 2022-23. However, this number is highly likely to change as we work through all the impacted cases.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question.

Following the written statement of 19 January and last week’s urgent question, yesterday we discovered in an answer to a written question that the Government will be reconsidering approximately 1.6 million PIP claims—effectively, everyone currently in receipt of PIP. However, no timetable was issued or detail provided for this process. We know that 55% of people with mental health conditions transferring from disability living allowance to PIP receive a lower award or no award at all. As the High Court found, the Government’s regulations are highly discriminatory.

I am pleased that the Secretary of State and the Minister’s Department have finally seen sense. However, there are a number of questions that the Minister must answer. By what date will the Department have changed the PIP assessment guide, so that she can implement the judgment? How quickly thereafter will the Department be able to identify affected claimants? Is her Department prioritising the PIP claims it is re-examining? If so, will she publish the prioritisation criteria? By what date will all 1.6 million PIP claims have been reviewed? Will it be weeks; will it be months; or will it be years? Do the 1.6 million claims to be reviewed include those that scored zero points and were not awarded PIP? Will there be an appeals process for the PIP claimants not contacted by the Department who believe that they should receive back payments? Will the Department compensate claimants who have fallen into debt and accrued interest charges? After the equality assessment was published in February 2017, the estimated number to receive the higher rate of PIP went up to 164,000, and it is now 220,000. Will the Minister publish an updated assessment? What assessment has she made of the administrative costs to her Department of undertaking this complex exercise of a considerable scale?

This mess is one of the Government’s own making. It is a clear example to this Government of the dangers of seeking to undermine both the independent judiciary and the House of Commons.

Sarah Newton: It is absolutely not true to say that we are trying to undermine the independent judiciary, because we have accepted the findings of the appeal and are now going to painstakingly, carefully and safely implement the findings. It is incredibly important for our democracy that we have an independent judiciary, and we stand by that.

The hon. Lady asked a number of questions. First, for clarification, the information that was provided in response to the written parliamentary question was absolutely the same as that given at this Dispatch Box by the Secretary of State last week and that contained in the written statement.

Moving on to some of the hon. Lady’s more detailed questions, she mentioned the updating of the PIP assessment guide. She is absolutely right: that is the starting point to making sure that we properly and thoroughly implement the recommendations of the appeal. I am delighted to say that Paul Farmer of Mind has agreed to work very closely with us to get that right. I have spoken to Paul Gray, who has undertaken the independent reviews of PIP, and he has also offered his help. I recently met a broad range of our PIP stakeholders and invited them to share their expertise.

As I said in my previous response, it is incredibly important to me that we get this right. The exercise will be complex and, to carry it out accurately and safely, we want to ensure that stakeholders and experts are involved. As a result, I cannot set out a timetable at this stage, but it is now 220,000. Will the Minister publish an updated assessment? What assessment has she made of the administrative costs to her Department of undertaking this complex exercise of a considerable scale?

We want to discuss the prioritisation of the review of PIP claims very carefully with our stakeholders to ensure that the process is fair, transparent and open. We will be reviewing people who had zero points in their original claim. We are currently considering the best way to handle an appeals process.
[Sarah Newton]

Of course, I will update the House regularly. The Secretary of State said that she would do that from this very Dispatch Box last week. We have oral questions every six weeks, so there are plenty of opportunities for Members to ask us about the progress we are making in this very important work.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What impact, if any, will this effort have on the processing of new claims?

Sarah Newton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important question. I want to reassure him that it is very important to me that the progress we have seen in making timely and good decisions on PIP continues.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I find it shameful and depressing that it took a court case to drag this Government back to the edge of decency, and I find the money wasted on legal proceedings abhorrent. However, since they are now at the edge of decency, may I urge the Government to take a few more steps? Will the Secretary of State apologise to the victims of the Government’s actions? I appreciate that she is new in her post, but this is important. Will she also apologise to the families of those who have taken their own lives as a result of the Government’s benefits policy? Will she confirm that she is now undertaking to restore some semblance of dignity to this policy area by reviewing all PIP cases where benefits have been stopped or reduced, rather than just those involving mental health? Will she undertake to come back to the Chamber in the very near future with a plan to start repairing some of the damage that has been done? One month should be sufficient time to get that rolling.

Sarah Newton: It is with deep regret that I hear the hon. Lady making such appalling and unsubstantiated claims about people committing suicide as a result of this. All of us in this House have a duty to be very mindful of the language and evidence we use to make such assertions. We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society, and it is shameful when Members deliberately misuse data.

I am pleased to have this opportunity—[Interjection.] Listen, the data to which the hon. Lady is referring is often misquoted, and it comes from the adult psychiatric morbidity survey. The deputy chief medical officer, Professor Gina Radford, has said that the adult psychiatric morbidity survey does not show any causal link between being on benefits and suicidal thoughts or behaviour. The survey findings indicate certain associations, but they do not indicate causality. The hon. Lady might not want to take my word for it, but is she seriously doubting the word of the deputy chief medical officer?

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am very pleased that the Secretary of State has decided to accept this ruling from the Court and that the Minister has today confirmed that there will be no face-to-face reassessments—that is absolutely right. I am also greatly encouraged that the Minister will be working with Mind, Paul Gray and other knowledgeable people to rectify the situation. Might she continue to work with them on an ongoing basis to see what other improvements can be made to PIP? The Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, is about to publish its recommendations. I believe that a fundamental overhaul of the PIP process is required, but a number of very small things could be done, such as introducing videoed assessments, that would make a huge difference to how claimants feel about the process.

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for her question and for the invaluable work that she and other members of the Work and Pensions Committee do. I look forward to receiving the Committee’s recommendations and will give them careful consideration.

I want to reassure my hon. Friend and other hon. Members that I believe in continuous improvement. I am very grateful for the constructive working relationship that I have with many disability rights organisations and charities that support disabled people, and for the time they give to my PIP stakeholder group. We are about to set up panels of claimants of both employment and support allowance and PIP so that we further engage with claimants themselves. Of course, we undertake proper independent customer satisfaction surveys to ensure that we take every opportunity to improve the claimant experience.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister has told the House that all 1.6 million existing claimants will have their cases reviewed. I am grateful to her for adding that those who had zero points, and therefore did not get PIP, will also be included in the review. Will she confirm that the 180,000 people who used to be on disability living allowance and are no longer receiving benefit will be included? In total, on top of the 1.6 million, how many cases does she expect to review?

Sarah Newton: As all Members will know, people have been going through a managed process of transferring from disability living allowance to PIP. We will be looking at people who have gone through the PIP assessment process. Just over half of people on disability living allowance have gone through the managed process to PIP. There are still people on DLA who are yet to go through the process, but we are taking on board all the findings of the appeal and improving the process to ensure that we make the right decision the first time. That is really important to us and to claimants.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): This is a significant and important announcement. Will the Minister give a clear commitment on continuing to work with stakeholders and charities not only to learn the lessons, but to help them to communicate with all their members so that they can be kept up to date with that work?

Sarah Newton: When my hon. Friend held my position, he did a really good job of engaging with stakeholders, and I am building on that legacy. It is very important that we take on board their concerns and communicate with them frequently so that they can provide reassurance and information to their beneficiaries.
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The system is in fundamental need of review. My constituent Martin Wright suffered a terrible life-changing accident at work several years ago. Despite that, he has been reassessed three times in three years and has now had his payments reduced. We will take Martin’s case to appeal, and I have to tell the Minister that every single case from my constituency office that we have taken to appeal in the past year has been overturned. Does that not show that this system is broken, inhumane at times, and in urgent need of fundamental change?

Sarah Newton: Of course I do not like to hear of individual cases when things have not worked out as we would like them to. If the right hon. Gentleman would like to meet me to discuss his constituent’s case, I would be very happy to do so. I hold meetings twice a month so that Members or their caseworkers can come along and meet my officials to review such cases.

It is worth setting all we are doing in context. We have made 2.9 million—I repeat, 2.9 million—PIP assessments, and 8% of those go to appeal, of which 4% are upheld, so the vast majority of people are getting the benefits to which they are richly entitled. If we look at the claimant work we do—the customer satisfaction surveys—we find that most people are satisfied with the process. Of course, until we have no appeals and 100% satisfaction rates, we will constantly be seeking to improve the situation, but the facts do speak for themselves.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on her response to the urgent question and ask her whether she will be kind enough to check my understanding of the figures? I think she said that there are 1.6 million PIP claimants and that she expected just over 200,000 to have their assessments changed—improved. It therefore seems to me that the 1.4 million people who will not see a change in their benefit will have had their expectations raised by this announcement. How will the Minister manage those expectations?

Sarah Newton: The Secretary of State has made it clear at the Dispatch Box that the figure is about 220,000 people. Some of the things that some Members of this place have said in the media are very disappointing, having both scared people and raised false hope.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I make one suggestion to the Minister about how the Department is going about this reassessment. Will the Minister give those individuals now, because some of them have been left in a very difficult position, through no fault of their own, some sort of service that we provide for new applicants or, indeed, pending revisions to the assessment guide?

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The mental health charity Mind found in its survey last year that 22% of the people it surveyed did not actually appeal against a PIP refusal because of their condition—they did not feel able to do so. I assume from what the Minister is saying that those people will be part of the reassessment, but what advice should Members of Parliament give those individuals now, because some will want to put in new applications? What support will they be given, because some of them have been left in a very difficult position, through no fault of their own, due to their mental illness?

Sarah Newton: We will be working with Mind—I agree that it is an excellent charity—and other organisations, and they will help us to shape this process so that it is conducted in a sympathetic and appropriate way to make sure that we reach all people who are entitled to PIP.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and for the way in which the Department is going about this reassessment. Will she assure the House that, as the Department undertakes this major operation, it will still be able to deliver assessments for people moving on to PIP for the first time and that this will not affect their claims in any way?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend asks a really good question because, as I have demonstrated with the numbers I have shared with the House, more people are benefiting from PIP than from DLA, its predecessor benefit. I do not want people to miss out on the opportunity that PIP affords them. We are absolutely determined to make sure that there will be no reduction in the quality of service that we provide for new applicants or, indeed, people transferring from DLA to PIP.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that the Court’s ruling has taken effect, what interim guidance has the Department provided to assessors pending revisions to the assessment guide?
Sarah Newton: We are working through every aspect of undertaking this complex and challenging task. At the heart of everything we will be doing is working very closely with Mind and our other key stakeholders to get this right. The process must be done accurately and it must be done safely.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): May I congratulate the Minister on the tone in which she has conducted these proceedings? It has been absolutely spot-on, and it really does refute some of the more accusatory comments from Opposition Members. Will she set out by how much spending on the main disability benefits has risen since 2010?

Sarah Newton: I very much appreciate my hon. Friend’s question. We have a proud track record as Conservatives. In every year since 2010, the amount that we provide to people with health conditions and disabilities has risen, and it will continue to do so in every year of this Parliament. The figure is well in excess of £50 billion each year.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I receive many emails every week, as I am sure we all do, from constituents who are distraught about their PIP application being rejected. The whole process has been cruel beyond belief, and we now know it has all been for naught. Will the Minister reassure my constituents who have faced shocking suffering that they will be considered as part of this review, and what advice should I give them to ensure that that happens?

Sarah Newton: I simply rebut what the hon. Lady says about anybody in the DWP treating people cruelly. I assure her that we want to make sure that people claiming our benefits are treated with respect and dignity, and that the process is fair. Independent evaluations show that the majority of claimants rate their experience as good.

To answer the hon. Lady’s question about the advice that she could give her constituents, they will be contacted by DWP if we feel that they are entitled to more money. Nobody is going to be called in for a face-to-face assessment, and nobody is going to have money taken away from them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): We have all met constituents in our surgeries who have concerns about PIP, so I really welcome today’s announcement, which will help people in my constituency. Will the Minister confirm what more her Department will continue to do, in the light of this announcement, to move forward the transformative benefits of getting disabled people back into work, which is one of the greatest levers for improving mental health for disabled people?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for her question but, no, I think that by far the best thing is to say that we will contact the people affected. I am concerned that if people started doing such a thing, it would be a distraction and could use up the resources that I want for people. A core part of our Work and Health programme is that we do everything we can to test and learn so that we enable more people to play their full part in society, including at work.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Portglenone medical centre in my constituency is one of the largest rural practices in Northern Ireland. It deals not only with vulnerable people, but with some of the most marginalised in the country, because of their rurality. The practice has written to me to say not only that the system is deeply “flawed”, but that it is already “seeing multiple patients having to appeal inappropriate decisions”. I know that the Minister will not want to hear those words, which distress us all. Given that there is no Executive in Northern Ireland, will the Minister meet me and all party colleagues represented in the House to discuss how Northern Ireland can benefit from the decisions that she takes as a result of today’s announcement?

Sarah Newton: Of course I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues. I hold regular sessions in Parliament—teach-ins on PIP and ESA, which any Member of Parliament and their caseworkers may attend, bringing their casework along, so that we can have a really good dialogue. However, if the hon. Gentleman would like to have a specific meeting about the situation in Northern Ireland and what we can do to support him in doing his very important job of representing his constituents, I would be delighted to do so.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Would it be helpful to create a specific phone number that affected claimants or their advisers could contact to suggest that they think they ought to have a change of decision, rather than requiring them to wait while the Department searches through 1.6 million records to try and find them?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I very much appreciate my hon. Friend’s words, which distress us all. Given that there is no Executive in Northern Ireland, will the Minister meet me and all party colleagues represented in the House to discuss how Northern Ireland can benefit from the decisions that she takes as a result of today’s announcement?

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): When the Government announced the changes to the regulations in 2017, their own assessment was that approximately 164,000 claimants would be directly affected. Will the Minister commit to recommending that priority is given to those people who were directly affected and lost money, and to addressing the problems with some urgency?

Sarah Newton: I am having a conversation about prioritisation with Mind and stakeholders. It is really important that we work with experts and stakeholders to help us to decide the prioritisation. I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady and everyone in the House that this is of the utmost importance and that we are acting at pace to get it sorted as soon as possible.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Supporting the vulnerable and people with disabilities and health conditions should always be the Government’s top priority. Will the Minister confirm that personal independence payments are not subject to the benefits cap or means-testing, and that payments will continue to rise with inflation and to be untaxed?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Keeping people safe and taking care of the most vulnerable people in society are the top priorities for this Government, and I know that my hon. Friend does...
a huge amount of work in her constituency to support the most vulnerable members of her community. I can absolutely provide that assurance—PIP is a non-means-tested benefit that is not subject to the benefits cap. It plays a vital role in enabling disabled people to play as full a part in society as they can, which is something I know that my hon. Friend and I both want.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is nothing short of a national disgrace that Ministers persisted with this utterly flawed and unfair system of PIP assessments despite all the warnings. It was only when the High Court ruled that Ministers’ changes to PIP were “blatantly discriminatory” against people with mental health conditions and were a breach of their human rights—the opposite of parity of esteem in action—that the Government announced that they would review the 1.6 million cases. Can the Minister assure the House that PIP assessments will take into account the full range of symptoms and factors affecting mental health, especially those symptoms that we cannot see that present differently on different days, including due to bipolar disorder, depression and phobias?

Sarah Newton: I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that we are utterly committed to making sure that mental health and how it affects people are properly and fairly treated throughout the PIP assessment process, but I do think we should look at the number of people who are now receiving help, and the number of people with mental health problems who are now receiving financial support through PIP who were not under DLA. Some 200,000 people now receive the highest level of support, and more than 100,000 people receive the highest level of mobility support. Clearly PIP is not broken, because it is supporting many more people than DLA did.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend set out the potential costs of the review. Will she put that in the context of her Department’s overall spending to support people with disabilities and health conditions? Will she reaffirm that spending in this area increased in the last Parliament and will continue to go up during this Parliament?

Sarah Newton: Every single year, the funding that we put into supporting people with health conditions and disability has grown, and that sum will continue to grow. At the moment the budget is about £51 billion, and we estimate—it will only be an estimate until we have undertaken careful review, and it is probably a worst-case scenario—that this process will cost £3.7 billion. My hon. Friend is probably much better at calculating percentages than I am.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): By no means an isolated case in my constituency, one of my constituents in Drummadrochit, despite being clinically assessed with mental health issues, was marked as a fail for a mandatory assessment. That has exacerbated the conditions that she suffers from, and also the pain that she has to endure daily. How will the Minister ensure that my constituent gets the urgent help and review that she needs and deserves?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that constituency case and I would be delighted to meet him to review it.

I would sound a word of caution. I have met many people who would be described as having severe mental health problems, who play a really full part in their community and also work. We have put a lot of money into supporting innovative programmes that enable people with mental health problems to manage those conditions, so that they can stay in work. I have met people who have told me that the work we are doing has literally saved their lives. I have met consultants who have told me that they would never have believed that people with such severe mental health conditions could be so well supported to play their full part in society, including work. Each person is unique and each person’s needs must be assessed individually.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As part of this review, will the Government be looking at people who currently have one component of PIP, to see whether they might be entitled to both components, and will they be looking at people on the lower rate of PIP, to see whether they might be entitled to the higher rate?

Sarah Newton: As I say, we will be ensuring that we fully implement the findings of the appeal, and we will be doing that by working very carefully with our stakeholders to make sure that we get this right. We will be reviewing all 1.6 million PIP claimants.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Labour party for securing an urgent question on this important issue. We know that the Government’s attempt to prevent those with mental health issues receiving the higher mobility rate was, frankly, nothing but a shoddy attempt to save money. That was a disgrace. They then dragged it out through the courts for many, many months and I think that was absolutely disgraceful behaviour. I know that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is new in her post, but is she proud of what her Government did over this particular PIP episode?

Sarah Newton: It is disappointing that the hon. Gentleman is not prepared to recognise the contribution of Lord Freud, a fellow Liberal Democrat, who held the ministerial position that developed PIP when he was in the coalition Government; and it is disappointing that he is not celebrating the shared achievement of PIP and how it is enabling many more people to be supported. I do think it is really important that the hon. Gentleman listens carefully to what I have said—that we are going ahead with vigour to implement the full findings of this review.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has been celebrating the Government’s desire to ensure that all PIP claimants live as full a life as possible. Can she confirm that cases, like those in my constituency, where people have had their vehicles taken from them will be reviewed as part of this process, and that mobility vehicles will be returned where appropriate?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, and suggest that she comes to talk to me with those constituency cases so that we can fully understand. As people are migrating across benefits, such as when people are on ESA, we have a really well worked out programme with Motability so that people do not have to lose their cars. Of course, the devil is always in the
detail, and without the details of her constituency case I
cannot properly respond. I invite her to come and
discuss it with me.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and
Lesmahagow) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in
the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a
psychologist, and when I look at the PIP criteria it
appears to me that they do not seem to lend themselves
to a full assessment of mental health issues. It is also a
concern that collateral medical information is not routinely
sought from applicants. Will the Minister come to the
all-party parliamentary group on disability, which I
chair, to consider these issues pragmatically and to look
at how people are trying to navigate the system, to
ensure that the most vulnerable do not fall through the
gaps?

Sarah Newton: I can assure the hon. Lady that PIP
was co-designed with experts in the field. Where appropriate,
medical information is of course used, but it is important
to remember that the PIP assessment is a functional
assessment; it is about the impact of someone’s mental
or physical health on them as an individual, and no two
people are the same. Of course, medical information is
important, but the impact of listening to the individual,
their carers and the people who support them is just as
important. As for her kind invitation to the APPG, I
would be delighted to come along and meet her.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I welcome the
fact that the Department will be working with Mind
and that mental health has been mentioned so often
today, but I have not heard enough about real, solid and
tangible change that will support people with mental
health conditions. Will the Minister commit to looking
again at the assessment process to ensure that people
with mental health conditions are assessed by a mental
health clinician in the first instance?

Sarah Newton: The Government are deeply committed
to supporting people with mental health issues. By 2020,
we will be spending more than £1 billion a year,
which includes a wide range of investment in services
and in recruiting and training more people. I assure the
hon. Lady that the people carrying out the PIP assessments,
just like the people carrying out the work capability
assessments, receive thorough training. We are always
working with stakeholders to see what more we can do
to improve the claimant and our customers’ experience.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I recognise that
the Minister has great compassion in her role, and the
manner in which she has spoken today confirms that,
but I was very disappointed by her response when Motability vehicles were mentioned. The Minister must
take a much more robust direction in this regard. I have
constituents who have definitely been refused PIP on
account of their mental health condition and have
therefore had a letter sent to them notifying them that
the Motability car must be returned by a deadline. My
constituents cannot comprehend what is going on. So,
we would like a much more robust approach to Motability
cars and a stay on their removal until PIP assessments
have been properly completed.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind
words and her question. I would be delighted to meet
her to consider that specific case to see what more I can
do to work with Motability to ensure that people who
need their cars get to keep them.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
A constituent of mine, a 63-year-old man, was deemed
by his doctor to be unfit for work, having suffered from
coronary artery disease, and was placed on the higher
rate of PIP. He subsequently received a review form,
which he duly completed within the timescales and
resubmitted. He was then informed by the DWP that
the form had not been received, and that as a result he
would forfeit his benefits and be liable to pay back
everything he had received up until that date. That
clearly caused him unacceptable mental anguish, on top
of his bad physical condition. It was only after the
intervention of my caseworker that that review form
was identified, found and his payments were reinstated.
What will the Government do to deal with the clear
anguish that that has caused my constituent as part of a
wider symptomatic issue? Will they reinstate a compensation
scheme to ensure that these people are adequately
compensated, particularly when they have fallen into
severe debt?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman exemplifies the
important role of a Member of Parliament in supporting
constituents through their casework. He might like to
meet me about that case. It is by reviewing individual
cases that we find out how we can make improvements.
I reassure all Members that if a decision is overturned
and the Department has made a mistake, we back pay
people to the date from which they are eligible for the
benefit.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North)
(SNP): We all want—at least I hope we all want—to
make sure that all those in need get what they need to
live, not just to exist. To that end, will the Minister
confirm that the £3.7 billion that this is expected to cost
will be an additional allocation from the Treasury and
will not be found from existing DWP budgets?

Sarah Newton: The figure of £3.7 billion is an estimate
of what this will cost. As we work through sorting out
the problem, we will have a much better idea of the
numbers, but I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman
that we will not make savings in our Department to
fund it.
Points of Order

2.36 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following two similar points of order made last week by my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), I am sorry to have to make this point of order but I am beginning to fear that this pattern of failure is not an accident.

Last Friday, the following Members of Parliament came to my constituency: the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I was notified only of the visit of the Secretary of State, and that was after 8 pm the previous night. I received no notification from the other two hon. Members. What is more, I was not invited to a departmental, non-political event at Teesport in my constituency, whereas the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, who has neither a port nor a constituency, whereas the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, who has neither a port nor the River Tees in his constituency, was. I can only presume that it was because he is a Conservative MP. The same situation arose last year with a visit from the Prime Minister and the Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse.

Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to whether this is an appropriate politicisation of a departmental visit and a breach of parliamentary protocol? It is not a matter of parliamentary protocol, but a matter for Government. However, it strikes me as unsatisfactory, and rather curious, not to invite all local Members to an event that is intended to be non-political, as the hon. Lady indicates this one was.

The hon. Lady also asked me to clarify that the existence of a directly elected Mayor does not mean that Ministers can circumvent local Members of Parliament when visiting constituencies. I can certainly confirm that the existence of an elected Mayor has no bearing on the matter and the usual exemptions apply. I am sure that the point of order has been heard on the Treasury Bench, and I hope that it will be conveyed to the Secretary of State and the Minister.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) would raise that point of order, so I had not mentioned to the right hon. Member, to whom I will not refer by name, that I would respond to it. However, I found out last night that a Member of the Cabinet visited my constituency this week and certainly did not inform me or my office of that visit.

My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, which I might ask you to address again, Madam Deputy Speaker. What she described is apparently becoming something of a habit—a commonplace occurrence. Can you advise whether there are mechanisms, through the Chair or other procedures of the House, whereby we might monitor where these affronteries are taking place, so that we can quantify them and see whether a pattern is indeed emerging that needs to be quashed?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will have heard what I said about the fact that it is in everybody’s interest that the existing conventions are upheld, and I reiterate that. On being notified of other possible breaches of the convention, it is up to individual Departments to make sure that they follow the conventions. If individual Members wish to draw to the attention of either the Speaker or Government Ministers that they are not sticking to the convention, it is absolutely up to Members to do that.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm whether the same convention applies to members of the shadow Front-Bench team? I have had experiences that relate to this in exactly the same way, when I have not received due notification.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The convention applies to all Members. It is important that shadow Ministers inform Members when visiting their constituents, so the answer is yes.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think I saw the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) down on my Island during Cowes Week last year, sitting in a VIP tent, so I presume that he was there in part because of his role as a Member of Parliament. He is a politicisation of a departmental visit and a breach of parliamentary protocol. It is not a matter of parliamentary protocol, but a matter for Government. However, it strikes me as unsatisfactory, and rather curious, not to invite all local Members to an event that is intended to be non-political, as the hon. Lady indicates this one was.
member of the Labour party, so it would be good if all sides respected the rules. Because we are terribly laid-back and chilled on the Island, I did not mention it, but I suppose that I could have made a drama out of it if I had wished.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We have to be sensible about this. Obviously, people will pay private visits to other people’s constituencies. That is quite different from official visits or visits by Ministers.

[Mr Bob Seely]

Kew Gardens (Leases)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.43 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that the Secretary of State’s powers in relation to the management of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, include the power to grant a lease in respect of land for a period of up to 150 years.

Kew Gardens is a priceless asset, not only to those of us who are lucky to live in west London or even to the UK, but to the whole world. I feel immensely fortunate that my constituency covers Kew, but my interest in, and support for, the gardens goes well beyond my role as the local MP.

Many Members will know the beauty of Kew. It is a UNESCO world heritage site that attracts nearly 2 million visitors every year, including 100,000 schoolchildren, and is an oasis of calm and beauty in our frantic and busy city. I am also honoured to represent the great Sir David Attenborough as one of my constituents—I might even say, my children excluded, that he is my favourite constituent—and he described Kew as “the premier botanical gardens in the world”.

Tourists flock from all over the world to see it.

Kew has the world’s largest collection of living plants, but it also has one of the world’s largest botanical library collections. Last November, I was taken round Kew’s herbarium, where more than 7 million plant specimens are kept, including 350,000 type specimens—the original specimens on which new species descriptions are based. The plan is to digitise that entire collection and make it available to anyone in the world who wishes to access it.

Kew’s real value derives from much more than being an attraction, or even a stunning garden: it has been a pioneer in plant science and research for well over 250 years. Kew is at the cutting edge of research to identify, for example, ways in which plants can help to combat cancer, diabetes, antimicrobial resistance and much more besides. It is worth pointing out that a quarter of all prescription drugs come directly from plants.

Kew is also leading the way on climate change adaptation of crops. Fifty per cent. of the calories consumed by our species come from just three big grasses—wheat, maize and rice—so the in-built vulnerability of the global food system is self-evident. The work being done at Kew to breed resilience into essential commodities is critically important. Kew truly is a national treasure.

Hon. Members may wonder why the management and finances of Kew Gardens are a matter for this House. Kew is Crown land and as such, is governed by the Crown Lands Act 1702. It is managed by the Secretary of State and a board of trustees, and it is partially funded by the Government through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Four years ago, I led a debate in Westminster Hall along with the now shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), when it became clear that the Government’s proposed cuts to Kew’s funding were threatening its core scientific work. I was absolutely delighted that we won that argument. The right hon. Gentleman is not here now, but I pay tribute to and thank him for his help in delivering that change.
Since then, Kew has gone from strength to strength. The Bill that I am proposing would help to build on that success and ensure Kew’s future for many more years to come. This straightforward and simple Bill would have a very big impact on Kew Gardens. It is backed by Kew Gardens and its trustees, and the Bill’s previous incarnation—it was brought to the House during the last Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger)—was also backed by Members from across the House. It is also supported by the three councillors who represent Kew ward.

Simply, this is what the Bill would do. The 1702 Act prevents the sale of Crown land and limits the length of leases granted from Crown land to a maximum of 31 years. The Bill would simply allow the Secretary of State to grant leases of up to 150 years, in line with Crown Estate land. In practice, 31-year restrictions on leases are stifling, and Kew Gardens has struggled to find commercial interest. A 31-year limit is clearly not attractive to those who would seek to lease the buildings, but a 150-year lease clearly would be.

I stress that the Bill—this change—would not involve selling assets, nor would it be about renting out Kew Gardens. The sale of Crown land is forbidden already by law, and any leasing of land would be on non-core land and property, and not on the gardens. The Secretary of State, who has the power to grant a lease, can do so only with the consent of Kew’s trustees, who are duty-bound not to approve anything that would affect the gardens’ core purpose. The Bill would do absolutely nothing to undermine that. Kew’s UNESCO world heritage status adds further protection.

It is difficult to give a precise figure for the financial benefits that accrue from 150-year leases, but Kew Gardens estimates that the revenue generated could amount to around £40 million, with the majority coming from increased visitor numbers. That extra income would be significant and transformative for Kew Gardens. As Members will know from visiting it, much of the Kew estate is in need of improvement for Kew Gardens. As Members will know from visiting it, much of the Kew estate is in need of improvement and conservation.

The phenomenal scientific research I have described can be continued only if there is sufficient funding. This simple Bill would help Kew become more financially self-sufficient. It is backed by Kew Gardens, Kew’s councillors and numerous London MPs—many more than I could pack into the Bill. I am sorry I could not include the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) in the list I will be reading off shortly, but he has expressed her support as well, along with other MPs. The Bill is entirely uncontroversial, and I hope it will receive the House’s support today.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Zac Goldsmith, Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger, Richard Benyon, Ruth Cadbury, Theresa Villiers, Dr Matthew Offord, Robert Neill, Bob Blackman, Paul Scully, Mr Iain Duncan Smith, Chris Philp and Andy Slaughter present the Bill.

Zac Goldsmith accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February, and to be printed (Bill 158).
Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way so early in his speech, and I ask him to forgive me as I may not be able to be here for its entirety because I have other duties outside the Chamber, but I hope to return. He says he is very proud of this new railway the Government are building, but can he explain why he is building a railway with old technology? Back in 2015, the Japanese were on different sides of the argument, but, having studied it at first hand, I do not believe it is the right project for this country, and nor do I believe it could deliver the level of capacity that HS2 will. HS2, of course, is a capacity project that brings with it speed, not the other way around, and that is what our transport system needs more than anything else. It is crucial, too, to the development of the north of England, which has a population of more than 15 million and over 1 million businesses, and which has exports worth upwards of £50 billion. The north of England makes a huge contribution to the success and prosperity of this country, but it needs strong and effective new transport links, and this project will be an important part of that, which is why it is so important to the whole UK.

Chris Grayling: It is interesting. I have travelled on the Maglev line in development in Japan. It is a project that has a role to play in the Japanese transport system, but, having studied it at first hand, I do not believe it is the right project for this country, and nor do I believe it could deliver the level of capacity that HS2 will. HS2, of course, is a capacity project that brings with it speed, not the other way around, and that is what our transport system needs more than anything else. It is crucial, too, to the development of the north of England, which has a population of more than 15 million and over 1 million businesses, and which has exports worth upwards of £50 billion. The north of England makes a huge contribution to the success and prosperity of this country, but it needs strong and effective new transport links, and this project will be an important part of that, which is why it is so important to the whole UK.

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend will know that I have always talked about this improvement in terms of capacity, and I will continue to do so, because that is the most important part of it. We can debate the rights and wrongs, but I believe it is a capacity project—the speed is a bonus. I do not believe in building something with old technology—we should have a state-of-the-art railway—but the big difference this will make will be to capacity.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Bill, but I note that the Minister referred to connecting the west midlands to HS2. What about the northern powerhouse and Liverpool’s connection to the new high-speed line?

Chris Grayling: I did mention the northern powerhouse. In terms of Liverpool, which, as the hon. Lady knows, is a city I have great affection for, as we move beyond the Bill and develop northern powerhouse rail and integrate what needs to be done in the north with the north-south routes and HS2, I believe that all the great cities of the north—Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, York, Hull—will benefit, as indeed will places further north, such as Carlisle and Scotland. I will come back to Scotland in a moment.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): If that is the case and Ministers are concerned for the north, why has electrification between cities in the north been cancelled?

Chris Grayling: As I have said many times in the House, we are delivering a process of modernisation on the midland main line that will transform journey times and deliver much improved rolling stock and brand-new trains much sooner. Our proposed model will deliver the improvements people want in the early 2020s, which is sooner than any other project would have done.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being very generous so early in his speech. I agree with him: it is about capacity. We cannot have an effective, modern society unless we have capacity, and we have to have good infrastructure, which means connectivity. Would he therefore consider advancing the Government’s excellent plans for HS2 by bringing on the other piece of the Y to Leeds? I believe that people throughout the whole of the east midlands support HS2, and we want it as soon as possible, please, especially at Toton in Broxtowe.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Toton is going to be a fantastic centre in the east midlands for commercial development—transport and residential—whose benefits will ripple out across the area and have a hugely positive effect on the whole of the east midlands. I understand her point. We are working as fast as we can to bring before the House the powers we need for the east midlands and Yorkshire leg. I want to get it right—there are sensitivities on the route, as she will know—and I have travelled much of the route myself and looked at the issues as and when they arrive. We will do everything we can to minimise the impact on residents—I understand that such major projects have a negative effect on some people—but I assure her that we will bring the measure for the rest of the route before the House as soon as we can.

I have talked a bit about the north. Let me now talk about Scotland, because I want it to benefit from HS2 on the day it opens. When the full Y network opens in 2033, HS2 trains will run seamlessly on to the west and east coast main lines from the network that is then built. My Department and Transport Scotland are working closely with Network Rail in looking at options that will go beyond HS2. We want to identify options for strong business cases that can improve journey times, capacity, resilience and reliability. Our ultimate ambition is for three-hour rail journeys between London and Scotland’s central belt—a further strengthening of the Union that we all hold so dear. That, I think, is the point: HS2 will be a transformative project for the entire United Kingdom, including the parts that it does not serve directly. The benefits in terms of job creation, business opportunity and technological development will be enormous for the whole country.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I strongly support the Bill, and agree with my right hon. Friend’s comments about capacity in our rail network and the positive impact that HS2 will have on our northern economy. Can he tell us a little more about the impact on job creation in the north and elsewhere outside London?
Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he has done on this project. He has been a very distinguished Transport Minister. He has not only made a major contribution to its development, but has been immensely sensitive in dealing with residents. He should take great credit for that.

The point about jobs is crucial. Our industrial strategy sets out a vision of a Britain that is confident and competitive, a global trading nation that is in charge of its own destiny, and HS2 can play a big part in that. Last year we announced which train builders were vying for the £2.75 billion to deliver Britain’s state-of-the-art high-speed trains. That investment alone will create many opportunities in this country.

I have said previously that during the procurement process, as we pick the organisations that will build these trains, it must be clear that they will have to leave a substantial skills and technology footprint in this country. We will not countenance trains being built in another part of the world, put on a ship and delivered to the UK, with no benefit at all to the UK itself. This project will have a lasting impact. Indeed, the whole construction of this railway will create jobs, careers, technologies and expertise that will last a new generation of engineers for a lifetime. That is another reason why it is so crucial.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Siemens in my constituency has been shortlisted to provide the signalling for HS2, and Chippenham hopes to benefit from the fact that 70% of the new jobs will be outside London. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this project has the potential to benefit the south-west as well?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right, and I am delighted that Siemens has been shortlisted for that work. I want as much of the work as possible to be done in the United Kingdom, so that we can develop that skills footprint, developing those young apprentices and developing the engineering skills that we need for the future. That must happen throughout the United Kingdom: south-west, north-east, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, south-east, Midlands, the north and East Anglia. I want to see jobs and opportunities for British businesses, and businesses based in Britain.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have Crossrail as a model? It is being finalised this year, and will be operating next year. That project was built on the use of engineering and industry in the United Kingdom as a whole. It brings benefits to all parts of the United Kingdom, and HS2 will bring benefits to all parts of the United Kingdom. Northern Powerhouse Rail, when it is constructed, will bring benefits in southern as well as northern England, and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom. The more that we invest in these projects, the more economic benefits we will deliver across the UK.

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. Crossrail may be a project for transport in London, but it is also a project for engineering and industry in the United Kingdom as a whole. It brings benefits to all parts of the United Kingdom, and HS2 will bring benefits to all parts of the United Kingdom. Northern Powerhouse Rail, when it is constructed, will bring benefits in southern as well as northern England, and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom. The more that we invest in these projects, the more economic benefits we will deliver across the UK.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend not to take his eye off a distant ball, which is the future of the west coast main line after HS2 is constructed? More than 44 stations on that line will not be served by HS2. It is very important for passenger traffic to be maintained on the west coast main line, and to ensure that it is not used just for freight traffic.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right. As one who has sailed through his local station many times, on Pendolino trains, I believe that we can and should do better at such intermediate stations. We should provide better commuter links to Birmingham and to towns such as Northampton and Milton Keynes, and we should provide better links within the Trent valley—from Nuneaton to Lichfield, and up to Stafford. We will be able to do all those things to a greater degree in the future. Yes, there will be a freight benefit. We all want a freight benefit, because we want fewer trucks on the M6 and the M1, but the fact is that we can do both. Creating that extra capacity on HS2, or via HS2, is, to my mind, its great benefit. It will of course be a fast, state-of-the-art railway, but first and foremost it is about giving our transport system the capacity that it will need to enable us to grow in the future.

I know that there are people for whom this project is bad news. There are people who are affected by the routes, many of whom are in my hon. Friend’s constituency. I genuinely wish it were possible—I am sure that Members in all parts of the House wish it were possible—to deliver infrastructure improvements like this without human consequences, but it is not possible. What we must do is try to treat those people decently.

HS2 has not always got it right, and we will not always get it right, but I give the House today an assurance that I have given it before: when an injustice is being done, we will do everything we can as a ministerial team to sort it out. Members need only come to us and say, “This is unfair”, and we will look at it. Indeed, I have already done so in places up and down the route, and I will continue to do so, particularly in respect of this part of the project. A number of constituencies on the route from the Trent valley up to Crewe are affected. As the two Ministers responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), and I will happily talk to colleagues during this process. There will, of course, be many opportunities for them to make representations about the impacts to the Committee, assuming that the Bill is given a Second Reading today.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I appreciate what my right hon. Friend is saying today. We have also had many conversations about the ways in which some of my constituents are affected. That has been going on since 2013. We may get there in the end with compensation and agreements, but the problem is that it takes so long—for far too long for some people. Some of my constituents are very elderly, and some are quite ill. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me, and my constituents, that we can improve the process?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. There are processes that we must rightly follow to protect public money, but there are exceptions that always step outside what is planned. Part of the job...
that we have, as Ministers, is to ensure that when those exceptions arise—and I know that there are two in my hon. Friend’s constituency, which she and I have been talking about—we must resolve them before we reach a point at which those people are suffering in their lives. We are a little bit of time away from the phase 2 Bill and the process involved in phase 2b. As I have said to my hon. Friend and to other Members, we will try to sort out those exceptions so that people do not suffer inappropriately. I will continue to work with my hon. Friend to try to resolve the situation.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): While the Secretary of State is handing out assurances, may I, on behalf of the people of Stoke-on-Trent, ask for an assurance that the existing direct and frequent services from Stoke-on-Trent to London, Birmingham and Manchester on the west coast main line will in no way be diminished or reduced as a result of HS2 taking up some of the capacity through the classic compatible services?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman will know—and I have given this assurance to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton)—I am acutely aware of the issues in Stoke-on-Trent. I want to ensure not only that the high-quality service that it deserves is protected, but that HS2 trains run through it, which is also what it deserves. I have given that clear commitment to the people of Stoke. I want them to have a first-rate rail service, and HS2 will make it possible for them to have an even better rail service than they have at present.

Let me say more about the affected communities. Last week we announced an additional £5 million for communities and businesses that are disrupted by the construction of phase 2a, which can be spent on public projects, community centres and so forth. That will add to what we have already committed in terms of the mitigation and compensation in place, and we will carry on looking at ways in which we can minimise the impact on local people and the areas affected.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am totally in favour of the project, as train travel is environmentally friendly because it gets people out of their cars and on to trains. But will the Secretary of State reflect on the potential loss of ancient woodland because of HS2, and whether consideration might be given, where possible, to using tunnels so that we keep these wonderful, magnificent trees? We have only 2% of them left in the whole country. Will we consider doing this? If not, and if there is unavoidable loss, could we consider 30% amelioration, as recommended by Natural England, rather than the figures banded about today?

Chris Grayling: I am very well aware of the potential impact on ancient woodland. We have already made changes to the design of the project to try to mitigate that impact, and there is an absolute commitment to look to plant afresh and to develop environmental measures to compensate for any loss of woodland. Also, there are some exciting potential projects on the route that can enhance the natural environment at the same time as we are having to make changes elsewhere.

I assure my hon. Friend that we are very sensitive to the issue she mentions, and we will do our best to make this project in as environmentally friendly a way as possible. We cannot build something new like this across the whole country without having some impacts, but we can try to mitigate them and put money into positive alternatives. That is what we are committed to, and that is what we will do.

This is a step on the way towards creating a 21st century new rail network: phase 1 to Birmingham, phase 2a to Crewe, eventually phase 2b to Manchester and Leeds, and then across the top with Northern Powerhouse Rail, and then, through that, the connections to the north-east, which the shadow Secretary of State will hold dear, to Scotland—colleagues on both sides of the House representing Scottish constituencies are keen to see that connection put in place—and into north Wales through the Crewe hub that we are working on at the moment.

This project will provide the capacity our transport system needs in the 21st century. It will deliver better journey times and, particularly importantly, much better connections between our northern cities—Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds—where there are poor connections at the moment; this will make a huge difference to them. But above all this is about making sure this country has a 21st century transport system. I hope the project commands support across the House. I know that some Members have issues both about the principles of the project and constituency impacts. To those with constituency impacts I simply say again that we will do our best to minimise those and to work as closely as possible with them to make sure that people who are affected are treated as decently as possible.

This Bill is enormously important to this House, to the future of this country, to our nation, to strengthening our Union, and to delivering economic growth across the whole country, and I very much hope that this House will give it its support today.

3.13 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am pleased to stand here today to support a project which was instigated by the last Labour Government. National infrastructure investment is too important to be left to the vagaries of the election cycle. It is to the Government’s credit that they have continued to back both HS2 and Crossrail since 2010. Labour has always maintained that HS2 must be built as a network rather than a standalone piece of infrastructure. It is this approach which will deliver the maximum economic benefits. Both main parties can agree that HS2 is about more than transport. High-speed rail is about unlocking the economic potential of the north and the midlands. It will drive a rebalancing of the UK economy by improving connectivity between the north and south.

Michael Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman talked about HS2 being an integrated network, but one of my criticisms of HS2 is that it is far from integrated. The original plan was for it to go direct down through the channel tunnel and into continental Europe and I can give other examples—I will probably put do so in my speech—but this is far from integrated: it is stand-alone, meets at Crewe and does not actually go into Birmingham New Street. Why is this?
Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and it is key that HS2 integrates. We have just heard words from the Secretary of State about the need to ensure that it does connect with our northern cities, but we are yet to see those plans unfurl. We have heard about Transport for the North’s aspirations, but this cannot be a stand-alone project; it is essential that it links into our great towns and cities throughout the nation.

Linking the great cities of the north and midlands is equally important and will bring much-needed economic benefits to those regions. Labour supports the nearly 30,000 jobs the construction of HS2 will deliver and the huge uplift it will give to apprenticeships and training, particularly outside London. It is not too early to consider how we will retain and develop those skills in the future in other infrastructure projects both at home and abroad. I would be interested in any comments the Secretary of State has on this point, particularly with regard to Northern Powerhouse Rail and Crossrail.

I also make a plea that we must not repeat the catastrophe of the Carillion experience with apprentices. Apprentices in my constituency are being left flapping in the wind, not knowing whether they are going to be paid. We hear today that their employment will come to an end at the end of this month. It is a disgrace that £6.5 million of public money has gone into an apprenticeship programme that leaves our apprentices short of their qualifications and without employment. The Government should intervene now to guarantee that those apprentices will receive that assurance from this Government today.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for giving way, and he and I share that view. I can assure him that, on the HS2 project, the apprentices who were employed by Carillion are migrating to work for Kier and those employed by Carillion have been moved on to the project with the other two partners. So not only should there be no hiatus in the work taking place, but, more importantly, the people on those projects are moving to different companies involved in them. There are obviously some very difficult circumstances elsewhere as a consequence of the collapse of Carillion, but I have been very keen with this project to make sure we have the seamless transition we contracted for last summer, and I am delighted to see the apprentices move on in a way that enables them to carry on with their apprenticeships.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful for that reassurance in the context of these projects, but I am particularly concerned about these apprentices in the here-and-now; there are 100 out of the 1,400 who have been prejudiced in my community and we want to see this Government respond by coming to the table and making sure those young people have a future. It is difficult enough to encourage people into these industries in the first instance without leaving them high and dry, as has happened on this occasion.

I welcome the commitments contained in HS2’s environmental principles. It is imperative that environmental standards and air quality are at the forefront of the project. Many of the arguments about why we need HS2, and why we do not, have been well rehearsed in this House over many years: passenger rail numbers have doubled since 1995; rail freight has grown by two thirds over the same period; and the existing network has been operating at full capacity for years. No amount of timetable-tinkering can change this; I trust that all Members are in agreement about that.

Although it is important to maintain our vital road network, there is an urgent need to secure modal shift across transport: we cannot build our way out of congestion on our roads and we must be watchful about the sustainability of domestic air travel. In addition, we face the prospect of the population of Britain reaching 70 million by the end of the decade. So the question is: how are we going to move our people around our nation? It is no exaggeration to say that the very economic and social livelihood of this country is at stake. Our capacity to move people by rail and bus is therefore crucial.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Given those circumstances and the pressure on the system, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the last thing this country needs is the nationalisation of our rail system?

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the former Minister for his intervention. If he will be patient for just a few more minutes, I will happily address that point in full detail.

I was proud that Labour forced the Government to introduce much tougher reporting on HS2 spending through an amendment to the High Speed Rail (Preparation) Act 2013 before the previous Bill came to the House in 2014. I pay tribute to my predecessors, my hon. Friends the Members for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), in that respect. We also amended that Bill to improve integration with existing transport networks and the specific reporting of the jobs and skills created by the project.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I do not want to digress too much, but this is all relevant. We only need an incident on the west coast main line for everything to stop, and that certainly needs to be looked at. Also, I have constituents who will not qualify for compensation as a result of this project.

Andy McDonald: One of the main points about this project is that it will allow us to build resilience into the network. That is not an either/or; this is not simply about building HS2. My hon. Friend is right say that we need to build greater resilience into our network. On the point about compensation arrangements, it has been noted on both sides of the House that we need to ensure that proper compensation is paid. These are really sensitive issues, and people should not be left wondering whether compensation arrangements will come forward. My hon. Friend is right about that as well.

I am keen to hear the Minister’s views on striking the right balance between HS2 services and freight on the parts of the network where high-speed trains will run on conventional tracks. HS2, the Department for Transport and Network Rail need to address the important concerns that are being expressed by freight operators. Elsewhere, there are significant questions to be answered about how the new high-speed railway will integrate with the
existing rail network. During the Second Reading debate in 2014, the previous Secretary of State for Transport boasted that “upgrading Britain’s rail infrastructure is a key part of this Government’s long-term economic plan.”—[Official Report, 28 April 2014; Vol. 579, c. 567.]

He also said: “we will be electrifying more than 800 miles of line throughout the country”.—[Official Report, 28 April 2014; Vol. 579, c. 561.]

It is quite clear that the Government have broken those promises over the past four years. They made commitments on rail ahead of the 2015 general election, only to break them days later. The reality is that the last two Transport Secretaries have cut upgrades to rail infrastructure and cancelled the electrification of rail lines. Of course, HS2 is but one piece of the jigsaw. I am therefore concerned that if the other pieces are not right, the whole thing will not fit together properly.

The current Secretary of State for Transport came to the House in November to announce his strategic vision for rail. The problem was that his plan was neither strategic nor visionary. It was a smokescreen to cover up a blatant multibillion pound bail-out of the east coast main line franchise. It is clear to passengers and taxpayers that this Government are defending a broken franchising system. Under this Government, protecting private companies comes before the public interest. Giving Carillion a contract for HS2 last July while that company was imploding was an appalling decision, and the Minister’s legal justifications for that decision were risible. His bail-out of Stagecoach-Virgin on the east coast was yet another serious misjudgement in which his dogma won out over pragmatism and common sense.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I think the hon. Gentleman has wandered into the wrong debate. We are talking about HS2, not about Carillion. Can we stick to the subject, please?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. That is a matter for me, actually.

Andy McDonald: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman will find out what HS2 has to do with the east coast and west coast main lines if he can be patient just a little longer.

The Secretary of State’s promised east coast partnership between track and train by 2020 is unworkable and undeliverable. No one in the rail industry believes that it is actually going to happen. Another of his pet projects is the west coast project—perhaps the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) will want to pay attention to this—which is going to be awarded later this year. The winner of that contract will run services on the west coast main line and oversee the introduction of HS2 services. The Government have a track record of accepting bids from the private sector that are either too high or too low, and the Department for Transport has proved unable to manage such projects. Given that the Secretary of State has been found wanting so often, what makes him think that his west coast partnership will work any better than his east coast partnership?

High Speed Rail

(West Midlands - Crewe) Bill

729 730

30 JANUARY 2018

High Speed Rail

(West Midlands - Crewe) Bill

High Speed 2 will be the jewel in the crown of Britain’s rail network when it begins operations in the next decade. It will be a shining example of Britain’s capability and talent, and it will encapsulate our technological and engineering prowess. However, I can tell the Secretary of State that there will be uproar across the land, should this piece of the family silver be handed over to Virgin Trains, Stagecoach or others of their ilk. I can tell the House today that there will be no gift of HS2 to Richard Branson or Brian Souter under the next Labour Government. HS2 will be built with public money and it will stay in public ownership.

3.26 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on bringing forward this Bill. I also congratulate all those people in the Department for Transport and in HS2 who are working to finalise these proposals. It is a pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), although I think he slightly spoiled his speech by going off piste and talking about electrification. We will take no lessons from Labour on electrification, given its record between 1997 and 2010, during which time it electrified 10 miles of railway. I would like to say that that was a snail’s pace, but I think that a snail would have travelled further in 13 years than Labour did with its electrification.

Andy McDonald: The former Secretary of State seems to have totally forgotten the 67 miles of HS1 that were electrified then. Those 67 plus 10 miles add up to a lot more than this Government have ever electrified.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I think that HS1 was operating before Labour came into government.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) rose—

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will make some progress.

It is right to say that we have seen a renaissance on our railways since privatisation, and that renaissance continued under the last Labour Government. Indeed, in their 13 years in government, they did not seek to change the franchising at all. They felt that that was the best way to operate the railways. We had the private sector and the public sector involved, and we saw our railways improve tremendously. If we get to a situation—I hope we do not—of the railways going back to a fully nationalised body, what happened in the ’60s and ’70s will happen again. Rail was always at the back of the queue for investment. Hospitals and education took priority; the railways were left without any priority whatsoever. There is no doubt in my mind that privatisation has led to the rejuvenation of the rail industry, and so much so that passenger numbers have increased from something like 700 million to some 1.6 billion, which speaks for itself.

I am pleased that the Bill has been introduced. David Higgins recommended that we try to bring the investment and benefits of HS2 more quickly to the north. Should this Bill get its Second Reading today, it is worth remembering that we will see high-speed services to Crewe by 2027. In infrastructure terms, and given the
necessary planning, that is not that far away, so I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on bringing the Bill forward.

I know that the Government are well aware of this, but I want to talk about the importance of continuing to develop skills in engineering. The National College for High Speed Rail, which is based in Doncaster and Birmingham, will enable people to get the engineering skills that are so important. All that follows on from the remarkable Crossrail project, which will start to open to the public later this year. We saw such skills in the television programmes covering its development across London.

This important Bill is about capacity. There are those who say that the Department for Transport and its Secretaries of State have changed their mind and that they talk about capacity more than speed, but the very first HS2 document that was published referred to capacity, too. The west coast main line is one of the busiest lines in Europe, if not the busiest. We need a massive injection of infrastructure, and this Bill is the answer

Mr Jim Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right that we want to speed things up and that the west coast main line is very busy, but to go back to the point that I made to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), what are we going to do about the bottlenecks? There were cancellations yesterday, and there only has to be one incident for everything to stop. That affects freight as much as anything else.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: More than £200 million is being spent in Derby on re-signalling and a new platform to ensure that London trains no longer have to cross the lines going to other parts of the country, thereby enabling those trains to go straight through on the main line. That is the kind of investment that is already happening in our railways up and down the country. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been successful in securing extra investment not just for HS2, but for all the other railway lines that so badly need the kind of upgrades that we will see in Derby. We will no doubt complain when the station has to be closed for a period over the summer, but such a thing is inevitable if we are to achieve such overall benefit. We saw something similar just a few years ago at Nottingham station.

Mr Seely: My right hon. Friend speaks eloquently about busyness, capacity and bottlenecks on the west coast main line. Does he have anything to say about the south and south-west rail routes into London? Those routes are busier and have more capacity problems than many northern routes, but they will be unaffected by HS2 and might have their funding skewed because of it.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I do not think that that is the case, but there is nobody better than the Secretary of State to answer those points. The tremendous investment at Reading station has improved the whole network to the south-west. The investment at that station alone was in the region of £800 million or £900 million. Extra flyovers were put in to improve capacity down to the south-west.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The improvement in overall capacity is brilliant for the people we represent in towns such as Redditch that are outside the major conurbations. The improved capacity will create an opportunity for more services from Redditch to Birmingham for commuting and jobs.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: My hon. Friend is right that HS2 will free up a lot of capacity that is currently used not for local services, but for services from London to Birmingham and on to Manchester. That is one of the answers provided by HS2.

Gareth Snell rose—

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I give way for the last time.

Gareth Snell: I thank the former Secretary of State for giving way. What does he think will be the extra capacity for commuter services around Staffordshire? There are no additional plans for commuter services under the proposals. There is no additional infrastructure, other than the HS2 route itself, so there is no immediate benefit.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman wants us to have a detailed timetable for 10 years’ time, but extra capacity will become available for new services. I believe that Stoke-on-Trent will benefit greatly from HS2 because of its link, its service and its closeness to Crewe. We then have to improve some of the road structures in and around Stoke-on-Trent so that people can receive the benefit. That will represent far more
investment than Stoke-on-Trent saw in any year under a Labour Government, so we can be rightly proud of what we are doing.

I fully accept—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State addressed this—that any big infrastructure project will always lead to certain people being inconvenienced. If there were a way of ensuring that people would not be inconvenienced, we would all move for it. I am afraid that inconvenience is inevitable. It is worth remembering that the first time a railway was proposed between Birmingham and London, the idea was defeated in the House of Commons because everybody said that the canals were perfectly adequate. That was part of the problem with the west coast main line, and it is why certain diversions were built into it.

The line from the west midlands to Crewe will be of significant benefit to transport infrastructure in this country, the United Kingdom as a whole and our cities outside London by creating connectivity not just between London and our cities, but between those cities. The line is important, and it is moving in the right direction. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on this proposal.

Mr Goodwill: I wish to remain consensual throughout this debate, but I must point out, once again, that all the hon. Gentleman has done is to confirm that no work had been done to look at the economic benefits for Scotland and the north of England.

The Secretary of State’s argument that Scotland will benefit from HS2 is patently false. If HS2 is to be built, it should be expanded to include Scotland and the north of England. The scheme has the potential to deliver significant benefits to the whole of the UK, and it would be a national tragedy if it did not go ahead. The net number of working days lost in Scotland due to rail delays was 150,000 in 2017. If HS2 is to proceed, it should be expanded to include Scotland to ensure that the project delivers maximum benefits to the whole country.

Mr Goodwill: It is patently obvious from all the traffic flows and the passenger numbers that as one gets closer to the capital, the congestion due to passenger numbers builds. As I say, we have 5,000 people standing every morning into London Euston, and there would be more Scottish people standing if we did not start in London and work our way up. It is, however, great that the time saving is going to benefit people in Scotland from day one.

Mr Goodwill: I wish to remain consensual throughout this debate, but I must point out, once again, that all the hon. Gentleman has done is to confirm that no work had been done to look at the economic benefits for Scotland and the north of England.

The Secretary of State’s argument that Scotland will benefit from HS2 is patently false. If HS2 is to be built, it should be expanded to include Scotland and the north of England. The scheme has the potential to deliver significant benefits to the whole of the UK, and it would be a national tragedy if it did not go ahead. The net number of working days lost in Scotland due to rail delays was 150,000 in 2017. If HS2 is to proceed, it should be expanded to include Scotland to ensure that the project delivers maximum benefits to the whole country.
to hit the three-hour target—but the Government still have not recommended a route to Scotland. Is it going to be on the east or the west coast? They must now start to work on the best options for Scotland, consider the benefits and different business cases, albeit belatedly, and deliver so that people in Scotland get some value.

If the Government share the ambition of delivering sub-three-hour journey times, we will support that, but the project should not be about only times or the physical build. As the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said, we must consider skills and opportunities. He mentioned Crewe and other locations, but unfortunately he did not mention Scotland. This project can and should build skills, expertise, capability and jobs for a generation, but it also needs to be inclusive in terms of its opportunities and STEM objectives. We should be alive to the chance to provide opportunities to young people, especially girls and young women, who do not get mentioned enough in this context. Scotland has successfully delivered major infrastructure projects, with the Borders rail link a prime example among many others, and is already positioning itself as a hub for rail expertise. The Heriot-Watt high-speed rail centre of excellence has put Scotland firmly on the map as a place for specialist high-speed rail knowledge.

Let us expand the network to Scotland with some hitherto unseen urgency. Let us hear the answers on the Barnett consequentials. Let us have guarantees from the Government on the future governance of the project. If a true partnership is desired, as the Secretary of State has stated, let us see some ambition on the preferred route, a commitment to utilising the expertise and talent of the men and women of Scotland, and investment in our centre of excellence.

3.46 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House, while recognising the increasing need for additional north-south rail line capacity to relieve congestion on the West Coast Main Line south of the Midlands and to improve connectivity between major cities and with London, declines to give the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill a Second Reading because (1) there are better ways to address any rail capacity issues north of the Midlands, (2) the line set out in the Bill is routed through unspoiled countryside unnecessarily damaging the environment including wildlife habitats, ancient woodlands and waterways, fails to connect via HS2 Phase 1 with HS1, the Channel Tunnel and the European continent, fails to connect directly through HS2 Phase 1 with potential airport hubs for London and the south-east of England, and fails to connect directly to existing major mainline stations and the existing rail network, (3) the Bill provides inadequate compensation to those blighted by the route and those whose property is subject to compulsory purchase orders, (4) the Bill fails to provide for sufficient public transport to disperse HS2 passengers disembarking at London Euston, and (5) the Bill does not implement a more environmentally sympathetic, better integrated, and more cost-effective route, such as the route originally proposed by Arup which would have used existing transport corridors minimising environmental damage and reducing costs by around £10 billion, and which would have connected directly with HS1 and the continent, London Heathrow Airport, Birmingham International Airport, and major conurbations.”

First, may I say how much I welcomed the Secretary of State’s answer to my question about Lichfield? Many of my constituents will be reassured by what he said.

If he is half as good as his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), he will be very good indeed.

Having said that, I am afraid that I must now destroy the cosy consensus that seems to be prevailing on the Opposition and Government Benches. I shall explain why. When HS2 was first envisioned, people spoke about people in Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham being able to get on to a high-speed train and end up in Paris, Lille and, indeed, even Berlin, with Deutsche Bahn. But that is not to be. We heard from the shadow Minister that HS2 is an integrated railway, but it is not. It is nothing like that at all.

Let me present a hypothetical situation. One of my constituents from Lichfield, together with his wife, two children and all their luggage, decide that they are going to give up travelling by dirty aircraft and will instead travel by clean rail down to Paris. What is the reality going to be? Imagine my constituent, the wife, the children and the baggage. They get on the train at Lichfield City station—although this applies to stations up and down the country—and end up at Birmingham New Street. Then what happens? They have to leave Birmingham New Street with the two children and all their bags and walk for 22 minutes. At this point, I wish to praise Councillor Tony Thompson in Lichfield who has done the walk and timed it. Without the children and all the bags, it took him 22 minutes to tramp across Birmingham to get to Curzon Street to the proposed HS2 station.

After all that, can the family then relax, knowing that they will end up in Paris? No, they cannot—because, instead, the train arrives at Euston. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, when he was Mayor of London, pointed out, quite rightly, that Euston has a capacity problem—not with trains arriving, because Euston is to be extended, but with getting people away from Euston, because there is not the public transport. Even if there was sufficient capacity, the family then have to tramp, yet again, either down a series of escalators and back up again, with children and with all the bags, or they walk across London to get to St Pancras.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I will give way in a moment.

Michael Fabricant: I will give way in a moment.

Finally, when they get to St Pancras, they can settle on the train. So much for a quick and easy journey from the north-east down to Paris.

Michael Fabricant: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman who has been trying to get in.

Ian Mearns: For 15 months, I was a member of the HS2 Bill Committee, and I did that very walk myself. I did not get a friendly councillor to do it for me; I did it myself. It took about six to eight minutes top whack. I know that, in future, the route will be better than it was then because an awful lot of construction work was going on around New Street at the time. It was six to eight minutes top whack.
Michael Fabricant: But the hon. Gentleman is thin, lithe and athletic. I am talking about a harried husband, a wife, squabbling children and loads of luggage. That is what I am talking about.

Chris Grayling: May I take my hon. Friend slightly closer to home, not perhaps in his own constituency, but alongside? Those people who seek to commute from Rugby, Coventry, Birmingham International and intermediate stations into Birmingham find that their daily journey is delayed by the fact that this line, which is two-track only and which can only be two-track, has express trains, local trains, intermediate trains to Northampton and even some freight trains on it. It is chaotic and jammed all the time. HS2 takes off the express trains and gives those people a better commute into Birmingham. Is that not something that the west midlands should champion?

Michael Fabricant: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. I do not think that there is any argument about the capacity problem. It was he, or perhaps it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales, who said that the west coast main line is operating at 100% capacity and that it is the busiest line in Europe. In fact, it is a triumph in that people have moved on to those trains in their millions since the time when a Labour Government were in power, and certainly since the time of nationalisation—and we all remember those curling sandwiches. Of course there are advantages, too, but it could have been done in a much better way. It is not a connected service. What do we have now? The genesis of it all was Lord Adonis who, in 2007, came up with the idea of the route. I can tell Members that he was astonished when the Conservative Government accepted that route. Again, let me say very clearly that I am arguing not against HS2 itself, but against the way in which it is being executed. That is what I am criticising. Lord Adonis wanted an ultra-high-speed line. As a consequence, he got rulers on maps, drew straight lines, crashing through countryside, which had previously not been damaged, destroying ancient woodlands, and generally messing up the entire area.

Anna Soubry: Twenty-seven?

Michael Fabricant: Twenty-seven, yes. Do not knock that, though. We are talking about ancient trees and woodlands, which cannot be repeated. We cannot dig them up and then replant them because—hey!—they are not ancient anymore. The definition of an ancient woodland is that it has to be 400 years old with a soil structure that can only be generated when it is 400 years old. As the Secretary of State said, all large infrastructure projects will cause damage, and of course I accept that. But if we had gone with the original Arup route, which Lord Adonis thought would be far too slow—it would only run at high speed, not ultra-high speed—we would not have had so much damage.

I am very pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) in the Chamber. He ought to be a right hon. Member because he chaired the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill Select Committee for phase 1. I praise all the Members who served on that Committee, because at least I can offer my constituents the hope that, if the Committee that will be set up if this Bill goes through Parliament is half as good as his Committee, there will be improvements. If people petition and petition well, there will be changes to the route.

Finally, I re-emphasise the point I made earlier in a question to the Secretary of State. It is important that we do not lose sight of the west coast main line and continued passenger services. I believe that 44 railway stations on the west coast main line will not be directly affected or served by HS2. We still need our Virgin trains and our slower trains including the excellent service that is now being provided by London Northwestern Rail.
Railway, which succeeded London Midland, which, incidentally, started off badly but improved a lot during its franchise period.

There will come a time when the Pendolinos will become unusable because they have reached their age limit. It is hugely important that the Department for Transport begins to start thinking about a replacement for that high-speed service, because Lichfield commuters do not just commute into Birmingham, Stafford and places like that—they are commuting down to London daily. One very senior guy at the BBC said to me, “Michael, I don’t have to send my kids to a private school”—this is the BBC for you, but we know about their salaries—“because the schools are so good in Lichfield, and I can afford to live in a large house with lots of land around me, which of course I could never do in London.” That is thanks to the Pendolino service.

Rachel Maclean: With regard to broadcasters and where they could be located for their jobs, does my hon. Friend not think that HS2 is a great argument for Channel 4 to be relocated to the west midlands, because the Channel 4 executives could commute from London, or wherever they like to live? They could be based in Lichfield and make their programmes there.

Michael Fabricant: They could be based in Lichfield, yes, or in Birmingham. I hope that Channel 4 will indeed move out of London. I know that this is completely out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am now putting in our bid for the west midlands on that.

I have explained why I cannot support this Bill. I will not press my amendment to a vote, but if, as I expect, there is going to be a Division on the substantive motion, I am afraid that I will have to vote against the Government on this occasion.

Anna Soubry: Shame!

Michael Fabricant: It is a shame, as my right hon. Friend says. I very rarely vote against my own Government, because we are so successful in what we do, but there is this blindness about the design of HS2 and it has permeated across to the Labour Front Bench as well. I could not believe it when the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) said that it is an integrated railway line, when it very clearly is not. I will vote against this Bill, and I hope that other colleagues in the House will join me.

Laura Smith: I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). I am not sure if my speech will be quite as colourful, I must say.

The significance of this Bill for my constituents cannot be overstated. Crewe is a proud railway town. In fact, it is believed that Crewe was named after the railway station, rather than the other way around. The current station was completed in 1837 and has been recognised as one of the most historically significant railway stations in the world. Crewe was chosen after the nearby town of Winsford rejected an earlier proposal, as had landowners in Nantwich, which is also in my constituency. Nowadays, there are 23 trains passing through the station every hour, with additional, less frequent, services. The railway has shaped our history, our heritage and our culture in my constituency. It still plays a part in our local industry at Crewe Works, which has been owned by Bombardier since 2001. At its height, Crewe Works employed more than 20,000 people, but that dropped to fewer than 1,000 just over a decade ago. That gives a feel of just how much my constituency has changed.

Many of my constituents see HS2 as an opportunity for Crewe to regenerate economically and reconnect with its identity as a key player in the country’s national transport strategy. Today, I will set out the reasons why I support the Bill and the case for HS2—a project that was, indeed, proposed by a Labour Government. In doing so, I hasten to add that my support for the project is not unconditional.

One reason why HS2 has had support in my constituency is that it is not simply another project designed for the benefit of the south-east, but would benefit regions across the country. However, there are concerns in Crewe and Nantwich that as the project increasingly comes under budgetary strain, the Treasury might lack the appetite for the level of spending needed to deliver the greatest return on investment.

I am particularly concerned by comments made previously by the Secretary of State for Transport that decisions regarding the future of my constituency will be subject to affordability. We cannot afford not to get this right. As such, I ask the Secretary of State to clarify today when we will hear the outcome of the Crewe hub consultation and the Government’s plans.

If all that HS2 achieves is a fast track between London, Birmingham and Manchester, there is a very real possibility that it will reduce my constituency to little more than a bedsit on a commuter belt, where the next generation are priced out of living in the towns that they grew up in.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I apologise for being late. I fully support my hon. Friend on the need for a proper, integrated hub at Crewe, not least because that makes the spur that was proposed through Warrington absolutely redundant. A proper hub would enable many more towns in the north-west to benefit from HS2.

Laura Smith: I agree, and I will come on to connectivity shortly.

Such short-sightedness would be a huge strategic miscalculation and a missed opportunity to future-proof towns such as those in my constituency from the troubling economic trends that we face. This cannot be about helping to expand the cities at the expense of squeezing out growth in the communities that I represent.

Limiting the service to two stops per hour at Crewe is simply a nonsensical proposal that will not only hold back my constituency for generations but will have consequences for areas beyond the north of Crewe and north Wales. For Government to overlook the clear business case for seven stops per hour at Crewe, or to act as a barrier to the strong local and regional ambitions, would be unforgivable.

Regional inequality is a major threat to the UK economy. Despite talk of a northern powerhouse, we are being presented with further evidence that the north-south divide remains as deep as it has ever been. Many living
in left-behind towns look to the past with nostalgia and to the future with cynicism—and who can blame them? Their communities have suffered all the worst consequences of aggressive globalisation, and for very little reward. In Crewe and Nantwich, there are almost 4,000 children living in poverty, and wages are below the UK average. In fact, 28% of workers are paid less than the living wage, which is worse than the average for the north-west. Young people struggle to see a future filled with opportunities, and work no longer provides an escape route from poverty for struggling families.

In many ways, it is getting worse. A report this month by IPPR North suggests that the attainment gap between the north and the rest of England has widened to 5% at NVQ4 level, setting the north up to be the worst affected by an adult skills crisis. Another report this month by the Centre for Cities predicts that the rise of robots will deepen the economic divide if current trends continue, with almost a third of jobs in the north and the midlands vulnerable to automation and globalisation. Another report by IPPR North this month indicates that planned transport investment in London is two and a half times higher per person than in the north of England.

Many northern towns and cities are still struggling to recover from the industrial decline of the 1970s and 1980s, and this north-south divide threatens to hold back our national productivity. Some businesses choose to pay almost four times as much per square foot for their premises in London and the south because of poor connectivity in the north. Decades of inaction by successive Governments have left the north at the mercy of the markets.

There is no greater example of the need for Government intervention and strategic economic planning than the unsustainable situation we find ourselves in. The market has failed to provide any answers for the north, and HS2 provides one way in which the Government can begin to address this problem as part of a wider strategy. If delivered properly, this project will place my constituency at the heart of the UK’s most vibrant economic area, at the right place at the right time for a knowledge-based economy, excelling in areas such as high-tech manufacturing. Such an economy will require a national transport strategy that prioritises high levels of connectivity. This requires increasing capacity and reliability, not just decreasing journey times.

Crewe is already a gateway station for the north-west, with regional and long-distance connections to the wider north-west, the east midlands and Wales. The phase 2a link will help to provide much-needed additional capacity for freight and will improve reliability for commuter services. It should be welcomed that the Government have brought forward the opening of the phase 2a link to 2027 as that will provide benefits to the north-west and beyond. Making the most out of connecting HS2, classic rail and the motorway network at Crewe could create 120,000 jobs across seven major local authority areas. Work undertaken by the Constellation Partnership indicates that 20,000 jobs would be created at the Crewe hub campus alone, with 17,000 additional jobs in the wider area.

My vision for HS2 is not as an end in itself, benefiting only businesses and commuters, but as a catalyst for the radical rebalancing of our economy, redistributing wealth from London to places such as Crewe and Nantwich and the rest of the UK. I must stress that this is not about asking London to lose out to the north; it is simply about achieving sustainability for London while allowing the north to achieve its full potential, which will benefit our entire country.

I want everybody in my constituency to feel the benefits of HS2, even if they never ride a train in their lives. Rail lines from Crewe reach out across to the smaller towns of Cheshire, to Warrington and the Wirral, to Manchester and Liverpool, to Lancashire, Shrewsbury, Derby and Stoke, and even to Scotland and Wales. A proper regional hub at Crewe, with a new northern junction to allow for maximum onward connectivity, will provide unrivalled opportunities for the whole of Cheshire, north Staffordshire and beyond. It is imperative that Crewe has direct high-speed services to key destinations, including London, Old Oak Common, Birmingham, Manchester airport, Manchester Piccadilly, Preston, Liverpool, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

As such, I support not only this Bill, but expanding the scope of the current HS2 programme to enable the interventions needed to deliver the services I have described. Although the services that run on our high-speed network will not be determined by statute, our legislative framework will determine what we are capable of achieving. It is vital that this Bill is supported today, and that future Bills do not limit our options. A proper regional hub could take advantage of existing connectivity and extend the benefits of HS2 to millions of people in the north, including those in our often forgotten towns beyond the major cities.
However, my main concern is the cost to the other parts of the rail network. Again, Members have spoken eloquently about the need for greater capacity. HS2 does nothing for capacity for southern rail or for south-west rail. The south-west rail network is crying out for investment. We need rail flyovers at Woking and at Basingstoke to get more services on that line. We need to update the signalling system between Waterloo and Woking, and eventually elsewhere on the line, to improve speeds and services. We need infrastructure on the Portsmouth line, to increase capacity. Getting from London to Portsmouth, you travel at an average speed of around 45 miles an hour, and the idea that we are spending billions building a rail network to go superfast up north when we are still travelling at branch-line speeds on mainline routes in the south of England is very galling to very many constituents in constituencies across southern England.

We need also, probably, to double the track between Southampton and Basingstoke. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State talked about a bright new future for the railways. We do not see that on south-west rail lines. If I remember correctly, my right hon. Friend, whose agenda I very strongly support and for whom I have a high regard personally, has assured me that south-west rail projects are not affected by the HS2 project. So can he—or can she—put on record a confirmation that HS2 has not delayed, or has not affected the funding and supply of, south-west rail mainline improvements, or of Crossrail 2, which will benefit the users of south-west rail, if they use Clapham?

Michelle Donelan: I agree, and I want to see benefits to connectivity in my constituency, including a new station in Corsham. But will my hon. Friend accept that HS2 does benefit the UK as a whole, in the form of our constituencies whose supply chains and customers HS2 does benefit the UK as a whole, in the form of station in Corsham. But will my hon. Friend accept that to connectivity in my constituency, including a new travel in to Waterloo every day. Will he—or will she—rail and feels the pain of the half a million people who I know that my right hon. Friend is a user of south-west Bournemouth and, yes, the Isle of Wight—my constituency?

Mr Seely: In principle, my hon. Friend makes a very good point and I thank her for her intervention. The problem is this. I return to the profit ratio—or the cost-benefit ratio. If any of us were to go to a Minister or Government Department and say, “This is a fantastic project and it has a ratio of 1:2.3,”—which are the Government’s own figures for HS2—we would get laughed at. To get a project off the ground, according to Green Book assessments, a ratio of 1:5 upwards is needed, and preferably 1:7. So 1:2.3 is a very poor return for Government money by the Government’s own figures. Anything that helps, within reason, expenditure and our economy is to be welcomed, but by the Government’s own figures this cost-benefit is dubious. I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention.

If HS2 will cause no delay to south-west rail projects, will my right hon. Friend commit to prioritising the necessary work on the south-west rail route that could speed up journey times between London and south coast destinations such as Portsmouth, Southampton, Bournemouth and, yes, the Isle of Wight—my constituency? I know that my right hon. Friend is a user of south-west rail and feels the pain of the half a million people who travel in to Waterloo every day. Will he—or will she—consider setting Network Rail and the new franchise a speed target of a 60-minute service to Southampton and Portsmouth? You can get two trains an hour down the main line to Southampton. They take about one hour 17 at the moment. If we are interested in high-speed rail, can we set a new target of getting people to Southampton and Portsmouth within the hour?

In addition, I will write to my right hon. Friend tomorrow in connection with the Island. He has been kind enough to sound positive about the needs of my constituents for better public transport, especially since we get precious little infrastructure money. In my letter, I will ask about the programme of reopening branch lines and investing in the Island line. Earlier this month, Isle of Wight Council voted to support a feasibility study on extending the branch line in possibly two directions and, working with our wonderful heritage line, the Havenstreet steam railway, to get people into Ryde, which would be very important.

My letter will cover support for investment, support for a feasibility study, and, dependent on the results of that study, support for the branch line and capital work on Ryde Pier Head to ensure that the railway line there stays feasible, continues and has a future. I am supportive of my right hon. Friend. Friend on his agenda, which is excellent, but will you assure me, considering that you are spending £52 billion on one line, that the Department will not tell me that you cannot afford a feasibility study?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Minister, he must say the Minister, not you. I apologise for interrupting him, but this is becoming a widespread habit of Members all around the House and it must not go on. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is the person who is hearing this, and I am sure that other people will now be rather more careful. He is not a consistent offender; he is normally very proper in his behaviour.

Mr Seely: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do apologise; I had noticed that I had written a few yos, and I scrubbed them out and put hes and shes. If my notes still contained a few yos, I apologise. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is not here, I was trying to work out whether I should be using he or she, or whether we have reached a post-gender age for Ministers as well as for the rest of us.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman and the House. The word “Minister” is very useful, because it covers just about everything and anyone, no matter which gender they might be on that particular day.

Mr Seely: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. On that point, I will wind up.

I am very supportive of the Minister’s agenda, whichever one we are talking about, but given that we are spending a great deal of money, will the Minister assure me that the Department will not be telling me that a feasibility study is not possible because of cost? Will the Minister assure me that if a feasibility study recommends extension of our lines, that will be supported, given that the costs involved, £10 million to £30 million, are margins of error in Government accounting in the Department of Transport? Will the Minister assure me that there will
be support for infrastructure projects both for the South Western Railway network and the Island line, notwithstanding the considerable amounts of money that are been spent elsewhere?

4.23 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). If he will forgive me, I might disagree with him on one point. In my view—the figures are overwhelming—the investment in infrastructure in London and the south-east, although it perhaps does not extend entirely down to his patch, is around nine or 10 times as much as that in my area in the north-west and the north of England. Plenty of people will look at the HS2 expenditure and say it is about time that the north-west of England got some expenditure.

In principle, I am very much in favour of HS2—and HS3, HS4 and HS5. Infrastructure spending is good for the economy; it generates growth, it drives growth and connectivity, and it is a good thing for the whole country. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), however, I share the concern that what we might get is, to coin a railway phrase, the wrong type of HS2, on the basis that all we will have is a fast line linking London, Birmingham and Manchester, and no benefits will accrue to the surrounding areas. In terms of growth in this country, the cities are already overheating, whereas towns and counties—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) rose—

Christian Matheson: I give way to my good friend.

Kevin Hollinrake: Does the hon. Gentleman therefore welcome the £300 million that has been set aside to connect HS2 with HS3—also known as Northern Powerhouse Rail—which will stretch from the west coast of the north to the east coast?

Christian Matheson: I will welcome it when it is built and when we actually have something going. HS3, or Northern Powerhouse Rail, is a slogan rather than a railway, and I look forward to its being a railway rather than a slogan. There is a real danger that the benefits that accrue will not do so for the whole country. This is a national project and the benefits that derive from it should be national, too.

In particular, I want to discuss the Crewe hub, which I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State refer to several times. We get lots of positive, warm words—if that praise is not too derogatory—about the importance that Ministers at the Department for Transport attach to the Crewe hub. However, time and again, after two years of pressing, we still have had no firm details about what format it will take or how it will integrate into the rest of the network.

I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), the shadow Secretary of State, talking about the need for HS2 to be integrated into the rest of the network. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) might have misunderstood, but that was very much my understanding, and that is exactly where the Crewe hub would come in. With the greatest respect to my good friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), Crewe does not have a large enough population to justify an HS2 station, but the lines and connectivity radiating from it as a central hub in that part of the north-west and the north midlands would provide the services and the weight of gravity to make the Crewe hub essential to HS2.

Michael Fabricant: What the hon. Gentleman says about Crewe is absolutely right, but does he understand my disappointment that there will be two separate stations in Birmingham and two separate stations in London, instead of it being integrated there as well? While the north is important, so are the midlands and the south.

Christian Matheson: I do understand the hon. Gentleman’s disappointment. Actually, I share some of it, and if he bears with me I will come on to that in a moment.

The lines that would radiate from Crewe would include the existing west coast main line, which my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) talked about, so Warrington, Wigan and south Lancashire would benefit, as would my constituency and hopefully, the north Wales line. Again, I say to Ministers that for the real benefits to accrue, the Chester and north Wales line would need to be electrified; I have not given up on that, even if they have.

The Crewe hub would mesh nicely with the Growth Track 360 proposals that leaders in Cheshire West and Chester and across the border in north Wales have put together to really try to mesh our railway offerings. I know that Ministers have seen those. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State was extremely helpful when I talked to him about my concerns. He took them to HS2 Ltd, which was asked about the benefits that somebody from Chester might gain. This is where I come back to the hon. Member for Lichfield. Apparently, under the current HS2 proposals, those benefits would include HS2 freeing up capacity on the west coast main line, so that more trains would be able to go through, between Chester and Lichfield, on that line. He talked about the potential, over time, for the west coast main line to wither on the vine, and I share that concern. Those of us who are not in London, Birmingham or Manchester may not get the full benefits, because we will be asked to take the benefits of the west coast main line instead. Much as those are benefits, that is not the high-speed line on offer.

I detect a certain disconnect—I ask Ministers to look carefully at this—between HS2 Ltd and its proposals and the plans from Network Rail and the Department for Transport for the development of the railways. HS2 Ltd has been tasked with building the HS2 line and some amorphous idea of a Crewe hub, but we are still not sure what or exactly where it is in Crewe or of the layout of Crewe station. The plans do not fit in with the broader sub-regional plans for the growth of the railways. All HS2 Ltd seems concerned with is the delivery of the new high-speed line. I urge Ministers to look carefully at ensuring that the proposals for HS2 and others, such as Growth Track 360, mesh together in the connected way that my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State talked about; otherwise we will not accrue the full benefits.
I welcome the Minister to her place, and I make this plea to her: I ask that she think carefully about how the Crewe hub can be given a reality that benefits not just the big cities but north Shropshire, south Lancashire, all of Cheshire, all the railway lines radiating from Crewe, and particularly—as far as I am concerned—the Chester and north Wales line. It has to mesh together. At some point, we have to stop kicking this particular can down the road and come out with firm and deliverable proposals for a Crewe hub that will share the benefits of HS2 that will not otherwise accrue.

4.30 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and to contribute to this debate. I too welcome the new Minister to her place. I am sure we will be having many conversations over the coming months and years.

I would like to speak specifically to the reasoned amendment in the name of my hon. Friends. Although I cannot support it, I have some sympathy with it, specifically on the issue of property compensation. The compensation packages agreed under the Bill will have a significant impact and influence in the future when similar measures are agreed for phase 2b, which affects my constituency. It is extremely important, therefore, that we get it right now for those affected by phase 2a and phase 2b.

I am sure that my residents are not unique in their frustration with the process, but what are unique are the specifics around the property market in Long Eaton. The plus 10% on offer through the express purchase scheme for residents in the safeguarded area is not enough for many of my homeowners to buy a new home just two streets away. This is not acceptable. These residents, some of whom have lived in the same home for many years—often 40 years and more—are losing their homes, and for them their home is their castle. There must be an alternative for my constituents, and I hope that a way forward can be found.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister agree, as they have both said in this place, that no one should lose out as a result of HS2. On 17 July last year, the Secretary of State said: "I am clear that I do not want people to lose out as a result of this."—[Official Report, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 674.] On 11 October, in a response to a question of mine, the Prime Minister said:

“my hon. Friend the Rail Minister is determined to see that fair and comprehensive compensation for those directly affected by the route is paid, and it will be paid as if HS2 did not exist, plus the 10% and reasonable moving costs.”—[Official Report, 11 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 328.] I would suggest that Long Eaton is the town most affected by HS2 across the whole of the country along any part of the line. It may not have a long stretch of the rail line—indeed, it is estimated to be only 3.3 miles—but those 3.3 miles will be directly through the town on a 16-metre high viaduct. That is why it is so important to get it right for residents who are losing their homes and those left behind, and why I ask the Minister to take another look at the compensation packages, not just for my constituents but for those affected along the whole line. For residents in relatively low-cost housing areas, such as New Tythe Street and Bonsall Street in Long Eaton, I would like to suggest a scheme that encompasses an equity share option. We should also recognise, however, that it is not just about money; it is about keeping communities together, and I believe an equity share scheme would do just that.

HS2 Ltd has a specific question to answer about why it is pursuing and progressing with special measures for the Shimmer estate in Mexborough but not applying the same principles to Long Eaton. I am also concerned by the way it is interpreting current guidelines and so often appears to be working against residents rather than with them.

It is also important to consider the impact that HS2 will have on businesses that are blighted by the project. For my local businesses, the uncertainty has existed since early January 2013. It has been over five years, with no end in sight yet. It is imperative for HS2 Ltd to improve on its poor record of engagement by engaging in early and meaningful interaction with businesses on which compulsory purchase orders have been served.

Michael Fabricant: It was certainly my experience with phase 1 that the constant changes of personnel within HS2 Ltd caused problems. There was not just disengagement between HS2 and our constituents, but, apparently, disengagement between HS2 personnel themselves, with one hand not knowing what the other was doing.

Maggie Throup: Not just people but processes seem to change, and HS2 Ltd is not passing the information to the chartered surveyors who are working on its behalf or to those who are working on behalf of the residents.

The Country Land and Business Association has reported that rural business owners who go through the compulsory purchase process find it difficult to secure funding to develop their businesses, or have existing finance agreements reviewed. Whether it is rural or urban, the problem is the same, as some of my local businesses in Long Eaton have discovered.

The Country Land and Business Association has also told me that the Government have committed themselves to enacting legislation to provide for advance payments, and I ask the Minister to comment on that today. Business cannot continue to be successful with such uncertainties hanging over them. As many Members know, all successful businesses have short, medium and long-term business plans but they cannot operate, given the current air of uncertainty.

Let me issue one final plea. At present, many of the areas affected by the line of route have only a very narrow safeguarded area on either side of the line. I ask the Minister to urge HS2 Ltd to be realistic about the amount of land take required, and take action now to safeguard the true area needed so that residents can get on with their lives.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I do not know whether my hon. Friend agrees with me that, so far, HS2 Ltd’s approach has been to limit the amount of compensation that it pays, and reduce it. Although it has, I believe, acknowledged that it may need to pay more to finalise claims, it is the interruption to lives, businesses and landowners that is causing so much aggravation. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should immediately enact the legislation to provide for advance payments, and that that really must happen soon?
Maggie Throup: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. We need to get these things moving. I know residents whose properties, under the need-to-sell scheme, were being valued at over £200,000, but under the express purchase scheme, they were offered £140,000 for the same properties. Many of these people are elderly, and they are often quite ill. It is really distressing to see what they are going through.

In 2015, the then Secretary of State—my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), who is no longer in the Chamber—said that the Government were committed to going above and beyond what was required by law, including discretionary measures to help more people. That is what we are talking about today—going “above and beyond”.

The HS2 residents charter aims to ensure that residents are treated in a fair, clear, competent and reasonable manner. I hope that, as we debate this hybrid Bill today and when, in the future, we debate the hybrid Bill providing for phase 2b, the charter will feature front and centre in the treatment of constituents along the whole HS2 route. They deserve that: it is the least we can do for them when we are taking their homes away.

4.39 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): May I begin by making my apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker? I was present for the opening of the debate, but I had to leave afterwards because I had a meeting with Mr Speaker. May I also welcome the Minister to the Front Bench?

I supported HS2 for many years. I truly believed that it would help to bridge the divide between the north and London in the south. I even defended the astonishing cost to my constituents, as I thought that it would benefit people in my constituency. However, I now believe that the case has become flaky at best, owing to a number of factors.

A Public Accounts Committee report raised a number of serious issues. It said there was a “serious risk of fraud, corruption and error” due to a combination of poor financial controls and other systems. It highlighted the fact that HS2 was set up eight years ago with substantial Government backing yet still shows a lack of organisational maturity. Given the huge budget that HS2 has been provided with, this is truly concerning.

The Government currently say HS2 will cost £55.7 billion to build. The costs originally started at £32.7 billion in 2010 and were last updated in 2015. Yet the National Audit Office stated in 2016 that HS2 was running £7 billion over-budget, which is not contested by HS2. This should put the official cost at £63 billion. I believe we can do so much more with this money, in particular on the electrification that this Government scrapped.

Most business leaders believe that if the north is to thrive the links between northern cities need to be improved, not just by having another route to London. Another Public Accounts Committee report says that HS2 made £1.6 million of unauthorised payments to staff during 2016-17; that is not a massive amount of money, but it is a shocking waste of taxpayers’ money. The report states that the unauthorised schemes proceeded due to weak internal processes and that there is no means for these sums to be recovered. It should concern us all that we have an organisation spending public money in such a way and that those sums cannot be recovered.

Both the Department and HS2 need to address these issues as a matter of urgency, and I believe that the relationship between the Department for Transport and HS2 was an unhealthy one and the necessary checks and balances were not in place. I do not think they are now either, but I will not raise issues that concern me at a local level because we are discussing a different part of the plan.

With all this in mind, I no longer believe that HS2 is likely to fulfil the aims it was designed to achieve. I will therefore vote for the amendment declining to give the Bill a Second Reading. I no longer have confidence in HS2 Ltd or the Government’s ability to oversee it.

4.42 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I want to make clear straight away, on behalf of my constituents and in the light of my personal views on this Bill, my vehement objection to the proposals before us. I will vote against the Bill if there is a Division, which I rather think there will be. I have discussed my objections on various occasions both before the House and locally; they derive from the vast impact on my constituents in Baldwin’s Gate, Bar Hill, Whitmore and Madeley and the surrounding area, and Yarnfield and Stone and surrounding areas, as well as from my scepticism about the Government claims on the benefits of the HS2 scheme in general.

The Government in their 2012 national planning policy framework set out the three pillars of economic, social and environmental factors that all new plans must satisfy. I find it incomprehensible that the Government can so ignore their own framework on a national scale in relation to the HS2 scheme.

First, I shall comment on the lack of benefits in the proposed phase 2 scheme. Its cost is £3.48 billion, a figure that is bound to rise as the project proceeds. This has not been enough to stop it being characterised by the Country Land and Business Association as full of “delays, secrecy, broken promises, and poor management.”

This has directly damaged already-strained relationships with those most affected by HS2 and is preventing the complaints of those involved from being heard effectively.

Moreover, the actual overall costs, which are escalating all the time, are incredibly badly accounted for. As the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) indicated, we have seen report after report, including economic reports and independent assessments, from the Public Accounts Committee and all kinds of other committees, and it is inconceivable that the amount of money that is currently expected to provide for all this will be adequate.

There is also the problem of providing proper compensation for those affected, including advance payments, as was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan). I also understand the concerns being expressed by some of my constituents, who are deeply worried about the possibility of terrorist threats to the service. Associated with those threats is the inevitable delay that will be built in to the security needed to avoid them. That will increase the amount of time it takes people to get on to the trains. HS2 might go very fast, and it might increase capacity, but there is no doubt that there will also be an enormous amount of delay, because its security arrangements will have to be similar to those used for other methods of travel such as air.
Phase 2 of HS2 will also have an immensely destructive effect on the environment. The Woodland Trust has noted that, unbelievably, given the impact on the environment that phase 1 will have, phase 2a will be more destructive per kilometre. The whole scheme will damage or destroy 98 ancient woods, with 18 alone coming from phase 2a. Over 10.5 hectares of irreplaceable ancient woodland will be lost in phase 2a, as well as at least 27 ancient and veteran trees. That loss is completely unacceptable.

The environmental impact does not end there. The National Trust has stated that phase 2a of HS2 will “impact adversely on the conservation of the special places” that it is charged with conserving, operating and managing, “affecting both the experience of our visitors and the lives and livelihoods of our agricultural and residential tenants.”

The preservation of our natural heritage will be jeopardised by this project.

Michael Fabricant: I am listening to my hon. Friend with considerable interest. Does he not agree that the saddest thing of all is that Arup came up with an alternative proposal that would not have damaged all those ancient woodlands because it would have used existing transport corridors? We could have done this so much better.

Sir William Cash: I absolutely agree, but unfortunately that advice has not been taken.

Secondly, I have no confidence whatever in the Government’s stated outcomes for HS2 phase 2 in building costs or in social and environmental impacts. This comes from the dismal experience of their failures over their own reports on phase 1. The House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee cast doubt on phase 1 from the beginning of the process, arguing that the evidence used to calculate the magnitude of benefit was out of date and unconvincing. The Library briefing shows how the benefit to cost ratio of phase 1 has fallen consistently over time. Nothing has been done to address these flaws in the economic modelling.

Progress on the delivery of phase 1 is similarly criticised by the National Audit Office in its 2016 review, which stated that the Department for Transport had “set HS2 Ltd a schedule for achieving delivery readiness that was too ambitious”, and that:

“There is a risk that the combined impact of cost and schedule pressures result in reduced programme scope and lower the benefit cost ratio.”

It also stated that:

“Effective integration of High Speed 2 with the wider UK rail system is challenging and poses risks to value for money”.

The NAO attacks the cost estimates for phase 2, which it says are “at a much earlier stage of development than phase 1”, with some elements currently unfunded. For the past four years, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has put HS2 just one step above appearing what it defines as “unachievable unless significant, urgent and often substantial action is taken.”

I ask the Minister what evidence there is that this will be done.

Cost overruns and delays have long been associated with public construction, but HS2 dwarfs the problems of the past. Think about the amount that could have been available to the public services if these billions and billions of pounds went towards something other than this white elephant in the making. We are doomed to exist in a perpetual cycle of departmental over-promising and under-delivering. In the light of concerns about the phase 1 Bill, it is impossible to trust the Government’s assertions as to the benefits of phase 2.

Thirdly, I must cast doubt over the ability of HS2 Ltd. The Public Accounts Committee accuses HS2 Ltd of having a culture “of failing to provide full and accurate information to those responsible for holding it to account” and states that it “does not have in place the basic controls needed to protect public money.”

There cannot be a bigger condemnation than that. Those basic failures underline the incompetence with which the project has been conducted. Most damningly, the PAC accuses both HS2 Ltd and the Department of not appearing “to understand the risks to the successful delivery of the programme”.

This is a Second Reading debate, and I am saying that all the reports indicate that we can have no trust in how the principal objectives of the project are being conducted. That is evident in the employment of Carillion as a key contractor on the project. A clear lack of oversight and due diligence has jeopardised public money. Those arguments mean that the Bill fails to meet the standards required of this House.

Moving to the local issues that affect my constituents, I am thoroughly dismayed with the entire project. Not only does the proposal carve through my entire constituency, but many will acknowledge that the current west coast main line provides a good service and short journey times. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham has indicated, this HS2 project will be overtaken by new technologies, such as the possibility of a maglev system or a hyperloop system, and the technology used in the HS2 project is increasingly out of date. Within the timespan for the completion of the project, the money would be better spent on other programmes and public services.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the project involved running autonomous passenger and freight vehicles or other vehicles of the future up and down the line, it would probably be slightly more popular? The trouble is that the technology and the whole approach involved will produce something that is from the last century.

Sir William Cash: That is completely right. It is also perhaps true that travel times were quicker in those days than they are now. This project is about not simply capacity but efficiency, and I do not believe that its objectives will be achieved.

Turning to my local objections, a railhead will be established at Yarnfield during the construction period and will later be turned into a permanent maintenance facility. The relocation of the planned facility away
from the original destination in Crewe has caused massive consternation to all my constituents in Stone and Eccleshall, and in all villages around the area, particularly Yarnfield. On 24 November 2016, I secured a half-hour Adjournment debate on the matter, and I have spoken in a variety of meetings both locally and in the House since then. Most recently, I had a meeting with the Stone Railhead Crisis Group on Friday 19 January. I will be offering help with petitions to anybody who wants it. I have invited the Clerk of Private Bills to meet the group, and I hope that that meeting will take place soon.

I reiterate that the way in which alternatives to the final proposition were considered was appalling. The original proposal for the railhead to be at Crewe was not selected. I believe that there has been serial misdirection and misinformation about employment and environmental issues. Crewe would have been far better, but now HS2 has decided to go for Yarnfield and the vicinity thereof, which will do appalling damage to my constituents, and their traffic and schools. Every single aspect of the development will have the most serious and deleterious effect on the communities of the area.

The disruption due to works at Norton Bridge has already started, and the HS2 works at Stone and Swynnerton belie the notion that disruption will be minimised—it is liable only to get worse. The HS2 phase 2 environmental statement draws attention to lighting being visible along Yarnfield Lane and on the north eastern edge of Yarnfield itself. That is on top of the significant and noticeable noise that the facility will generate, the destruction of woodland, the destruction of visual landscape and the substantial noise from construction traffic.

I am also deeply concerned about the impact on the elderly, and it is shameful that retired people who seek a peaceful rural life will find their area violated. I am also concerned about the communities that are being directly destroyed, such as two properties in Shelton under Harley. There will be noise from construction on Pirehill Lane. There are also problems for several grade II listed buildings, including Blakelow farm, the water tower on Stab Lane and the Swynnerton Heath farmhouse, in addition to non-listed heritage sites such as Eaglesden pool, the milestone near Cash’s pit and areas of the Sherfon under Harley farm. That is yet another example of the damage that will be done.

In an update statement on 17 July 2017, the Secretary of State for Transport assured me that Yarnfield Lane will remain open. I am afraid to say that that assurance is useless without any consideration of the impact of heavy goods vehicles travelling along that narrow road, rendering it impassable during peak hours as if it were fully closed. That is bound to have a very bad effect on my constituents’ health and welfare. The proposal to use Eccleshall Road as an access and supply route will block the whole area, which is already oversubscribed.

Cold Norton is a cluster of 40 dwellings within 500 metres of the M6, but it does not appear to be included in the documents. If the works lead to the closure of the B5026 and Yarnfield Lane, my constituents in Cold Norton, Norton Bridge, Chesney, Yarnfield, Swynnerton and Eccleshall will not have access to their main travel route into Stone. There will also be an impact on Great Bridgeford and many other areas in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).
In conclusion, I will be voting against the Bill, as I did on the previous Bill for phase 1. My constituents will be petitioning against the Bill and will appear in front of the Select Committee. I urge the Government and that Committee to do all they can to pay the most careful attention to these petitions if this Bill goes through today, and to provide my constituents with every opportunity to be heard. This is a very, very big thing for them—it is massive. Hon. Members should think what it would be like if this were to happen to any other constituency on the scale it is happening to mine, which is similar to the situation in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham. She has done a fantastic job and we will try to do the same in our area. At the moment, I am deeply disappointed with these proposals and I shall be voting against them.

5.2 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, welcome the Minister to her place. I support the Bill because it brings the potential benefits of HS2 to parts of the north earlier than was envisaged—2027 is a lot better than 2033. HS2 is visionary, but that vision will be realised only if the high-speed network is linked to the existing classic network and if regeneration takes place not just at high-speed rail stations, but in areas around those stations and beyond, in supporting transport links and investing in businesses. Local enterprise partnerships, perhaps working together and looking across regions, need to put together regional strategies to ensure that transport investment leads to more opportunities for business, employment and skills.

We have said a great deal about the importance of high-speed rail, and HS2 specifically, in bringing new capacity on to our rail line. That is, in essence, what this is all about. But in ensuring that that increased capacity is maximised, we have to look at how we can develop services on the classic line once the high-speed line has been built. We also have to remember the importance of developing freight links, as freight routes are essential. In areas such as Liverpool, among others, where port trade is developing, it is crucial that new freight lines are made available. One of the strong reasons for HS2 is the existing lines running passenger services on the west coast main line are virtually full and there is simply no space for freight. As we develop HS2, it is essential that thought is given to freight.

Let me turn to some specific issues that affect the north in general and Liverpool in particular. I emphasise the importance of Northern Powerhouse Rail, which has already been mentioned, for people throughout the north. I certainly welcome Transport for the North’s having been put on a statutory footing in the past couple of weeks. Nevertheless, when will the transformational changes promised by Northern Powerhouse Rail and Transport for the North actually be realised? It is important that those changes happen so that places such as Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle and Hull have much better lines of communication between them as part of the development of their economies.

I welcome the setting up of Northern Powerhouse Rail because it goes beyond the parochial and shows that we are looking at things on a regional and cross-regional basis. That is the only way we are going to bring real economic changes to our communities, but those changes have to take place in a reasonable timescale. They must not remain simply promises for the future that do not actually happen. It is important to restate that although Northern Powerhouse Rail is extremely important for Liverpool and for the north, it is not an alternative to HS2. It is foolish for people to suggest that.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I, too, welcome HS2 for the very same reasons. There needs to be investment in the north. What with the £70 billion of investment in Northern Powerhouse Rail over the next 30 years, we have an opportunity to get the vision off the ground and really make a difference in the north of England.

Mrs Ellman: I agree with the hon. Lady. It would be a grave mistake to have a new high-speed line from London to Birmingham that stopped there and left the rest of the country to deal with lesser investment that will bring fewer economic development returns. We need both.

The case has long been argued that Liverpool needs a direct link to the new high-speed line. I recognise that the existing plans will bring benefit to Liverpool in terms of increased capacity and quicker journeys between Liverpool and London and between Liverpool and other cities. Nevertheless, for Liverpool to benefit in a way that is comparable to other major cities, there needs to be a direct link. Proposals have been developed for a new line so that Liverpool can have a direct link to both Northern Powerhouse Rail and HS2. However, the exact status of those proposals is unclear to me. They have been worked up in considerable detail and put into various potential plans, but will the Minister tell me exactly what their current status is?

I asked the Secretary of State about this at the start of the debate. I welcomed his comments about his support for Liverpool—indeed, he said that he was very fond of Liverpool and reiterated that it would benefit from HS2—but he was not specific about how anything was going to happen. What progress has been made on linking Liverpool directly with both HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail? Liverpool is increasingly successful, partly because of its transport links, but for its potential to be realised fully, we must improve this even more, which means having a proper connection to high-speed rail, along with investment in the classic rail system and in Northern Powerhouse Rail.

Liverpool’s new deep-water container port is extremely important. It is important to have freight links to the northern ports. We are developing as an increasingly important logistics centre and as a visitor destination, and the growing cruise line sector is extremely exciting, which means that Liverpool needs to maximise its transport links. I hope that I will get a proper answer from the Minister on those issues.

I will just refer, too, to some concerns about how the Crewe hub is intended to develop based on the information that is available now. There are proposals to do with splitting trains at Crewe, which could adversely impact on current plans for high-speed Liverpool to London journeys. I query whether improvements will be made on Liverpool to Birmingham journeys in a way that they were first envisaged. I ask for that to be looked at again during the further discussions that will inevitably take place.
In summary, I welcome this Bill. It is a great step forward. I support high-speed rail; I think it is visionary, but for that vision to be realised, there must be continued investment in the classic line, new lines where they are required and business regeneration connected with that transport development to develop new regional economic strategies that will help to transform the north.

5.10 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I rise to oppose the Second Reading today for reasons very similar to those given by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and for Stone (Sir William Cash). I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield—I am not at all opposed to additional rail capacity, or indeed to relatively high-speed rail capacity. The problem with the Bill before us now is that it is capable of pretty much no amendment. Yes, there can be very small adjustments made, but none of them would do anything for my constituents who are hugely affected by this development.

First, I want to talk about why the Bill, and indeed the whole project, is wrong in principle; secondly, about the specific problems that we face in the Stafford constituency; and thirdly about some suggestions for how those problems might be ameliorated. We do not need a 400 km an hour line in the United Kingdom, with the little connectivity that these proposals give us. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield has said, the line is forced to go so straight that it does not take the most appropriate and sensitive route. A line of 250 km to 300 km an hour would have been easily adequate. In fact, it is very unlikely that the trains will ever reach anything more than that.

In my constituency, the line seems to head straight for the villages, and not for the open countryside. It affects four villages directly, and it is adjacent to a fifth. I would welcome any hon. Member who wants to come for a visit to note the impact on this part of the world—in Staffordshire and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone. Lots of alternatives have been put forward. We have already heard about the Arup alternative. There is also the High Speed UK alternative, which provides much better connectivity between 32 prominent cities of the UK. I have looked at it in some detail. I am sure that holes can be picked in it, but those holes will be considerably smaller than the ones that can be picked in the proposals that are before us now. This is the wrong solution to a problem that we undoubtedly have.

Just before people say that this is simply a nimby attitude, I point out that both my hon. Friend the Member for Stone and I have supported an extremely large rail project in our constituencies, which came at some inconvenience to our constituents, but nevertheless we saw the benefit of it. That was the Norton Bridge junction, which has increased speeds on that line, and increased capacity on the west coast main line. Indeed, before I was elected, I supported the proposal of the previous Government on the Stafford bypass, which also had an impact on my constituency.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was in Committee upstairs, and came down particularly to hear the hon. Gentleman’s speech. He knows that I passionately oppose HS2. I applaud his opposition, and would love to make the visit to his constituency to see the degradation, because £100 billion of expenditure should go not on this, but on a decent railway service across the north of England.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is welcome to visit my constituency; we will make an arrangement. He will see the beautiful countryside of the upper Trent Valley, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone would also show him across Swynnerton Park and up towards Madeley, so that he can see the effect of the line on those areas.

The business case is another reason I believe this is the wrong project. We have heard from other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), that the business case is not particularly compelling. In fact, our former colleague and former Chair of the Treasury Committee, Andrew Tyrie, said that HS2 “has the weakest economic case of all projects” within the infrastructure programme. As has been mentioned, there is a hole in the business case. That is, there is no business case that I can see for the continuation of the existing west coast main line without the revenue from the high-speed services that currently use it and generate most of its revenue. How will that line be maintained? Will it be maintained purely with the revenue from local and regional services, on which prices can be extremely low? Will that generate enough revenue? Alternatively, will it be maintained using revenue from freight services? I do not know, but there is not a business case. I have asked for it and it has not been provided. I urge the Government—particularly if they are about to put out to tender for the package of HS2 and the west coast main line—to insist that we have a proper business case for the entire package, not simply for HS2.

Sir William Cash: Does my hon. Friend agree that this has all the hallmarks of a vanity project and that that is why there is not a proper business case? To a certain extent, that answers his question.

Jeremy Lefroy: Well, I am not sure that it is a vanity project because, if constructed, it certainly will bring benefits to the country, although probably at much more expense than it should and at a huge cost to our constituents. When I challenged a very senior person who has been involved in this project in the past, they said, “Well, actually, it’s gone too far. We wouldn’t have started it here but we have gone too far.” The west coast main line was started, I think, in the 1850s—possibly even earlier—so this project will last for 200 years. What is a few years to get this right and to put it in the right place? I shall return to that point.

On the problems, let me start with the problems for people because people are the most important. I get pretty frustrated when HS2 staff come around to count bats. Yes, bats have importance, but my constituents are more important. HS2 is prepared to spend an awful lot of time and money counting bats and various other things, but not talking to my constituents. I have constituents who have waited for a visit for a year. These constituents have dairy farms, and HS2 wants to take 100 acres away from their farm, which would make a dairy farm uneconomic. Only last week, a constituent of mine suddenly received...
a letter from HS2 indicating that his entire property was needed, when it had previously only needed a very small part. I have a strong objection to the uncertainty and inefficiency with which my constituents have been handled. That is not to criticise every single employee of HS2. I have met some extremely good ones. There have been some who I would praise for their work, but there have been others who, I am afraid, have fallen short.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I do not entirely agree with my hon. Friend that bats have no importance whatever, but I do agree with him that people are important. He may actually experience what I experienced in my constituency, whereby HS2 implied and said that it was going to take a property and then decided that it was not going to take it, which can also have severe implications for businesses affected in that fashion.

Jeremy Lefroy: I entirely agree. I apologise if I gave the impression that I do not care about bats at all, but I care about my constituents a little bit more. There are also the issues of the slow process, the lack of engagement, totally unnecessary arguments over valuations and a lack of knowledge. For example, one constituent of mine was not aware of what was going on. He sold the property after the line was announced and made a huge loss, but was then unable to claim for that loss because he was told that he should have gone through the process. This elderly gentleman was basically robbed of tens of thousands of pounds simply because he did not quite understand the system. Will the Minister see whether there is some way that we can get compensation for my constituent, who deserves it? I have constituents, an elderly couple, whose property is going to be boxed in by the works on HS2—literally boxed in. Yet, as things stand, they are not going to be allowed to sell their house to HS2, for reasons I fail to understand.

Then there is the impact on communities and the environment. The line runs adjacent to Great Haywood. It goes through Ingestre, Hopton, Marston and Yarlet. These are mainly old and ancient villages with strong communities. Hopton has lost a lot of its population because HS2, for reasons I fail to understand, they are not going to be allowed to sell their house to HS2, for reasons I fail to understand.

Sir William Cash: Does my hon. Friend recall the impact that this will also have on Yarlet School, which is a very serious problem for those who have this fantastically good school and the facilities that go with it?

Jeremy Lefroy: I do indeed. The line goes pretty much straight through Yarlet School, which is one of our ancient woodlands. I think it is even noted in the Domesday Book, so it is the best part of 1,000 years old.

Another very important part of Staffordshire life that the line goes straight through, or almost straight through, is Staffordshire showground, which hosts not just the county show but hundreds of other events every year, with probably the best part of 300,000 or 400,000 people attending. It is a very important employer and economic entity within my constituency.

The line goes very close to Shugborough. The irony of this is that when the west coast main line was put through Shugborough in the 19th century, the Earl of Lichfield persuaded the railway company to build a cut-and-cover tunnel through Shugborough, which one still sees when going on the main line up to Liverpool. We have been unable to persuade HS2 to provide such tunnelling for my constituents. Clearly, where the railways would listen to the Earl of Lichfield 150 years ago and more, they do not listen to the ordinary people today who would like to have some protection from this line. The line also goes pretty much straight through the beautiful Ingestre and Tixall parklands and landscapes.

The next issue is transport infrastructure. The line cuts straight across several major roads, including the A51, the A518, the A34 and the M6, and goes over the west coast main line. As far as I can see, HS2 and Highways England do not seem to have a plan on how to manage the inevitable disruption to local, regional, and indeed national transport that is going to be caused. I hope they do have one, because the M6 must be, if not the busiest motorway in Europe, then one of the busiest, and the A34 is a kind of relief road for the M6. If both of those are going to be disrupted, particularly if it happens at the same time, the consequences for the regional and national economy, right up to Scotland, will be quite substantial.

Another problem is connectivity after HS2. Clearly, connectivity from Stafford will be better. There will be a faster journey from Stafford to London than at present. It is already an extremely good and fast journey—nobody has complained to me about it in the past—and it will, I admit, be a few minutes faster. Northbound, we are really concerned about connectivity, because we understand that the trains through Stafford and Stoke will end at Macclesfield. I have nothing against Macclesfield; in fact, it is a wonderful town. However, most of the time the constituents of Macclesfield tend to prefer to go further to Manchester and Liverpool rather than to stop at Macclesfield. As I say, I have nothing against Macclesfield.

The next problem is the impact on businesses. Last week, I heard from a business that received, out of the blue, a letter saying, “We want all your land.” This business employs a large number of people in a rural area; it is possibly the biggest employer in that area. Yet suddenly, with literally no notice, we are suddenly told that HS2 needs the entire plot that it is working from, without any alternative.

Mr Sheerman: I rarely agree with the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), but I do in this case, about this being a vanity project. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that this is not really about connectivity or helping local industry? As he says, it will damage local industry. The French experience already shows that it does not liberate and rejuvenate the provincial cities and towns. It actually drains even more power and influence down to London and the metropolitan area around the south-east.

Jeremy Lefroy: I largely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I fear that that will be the case unless, as speakers both in favour and against have said, connectivity is taken much more seriously. I urge Ministers to look at the proposals of High Speed UK, even if they do not like...
those proposals, because it has some extremely important points to make about connectivity for other major cities in the UK.

If the line goes ahead—it seems there is a majority in the House at the moment for it, but that may change—I would like to make some proposals. First, for my constituents and my colleagues’ constituents, we must employ full-time sympathetic and responsive liaison officers who work together with businesses and constituents to ensure that problems are dealt with quickly, efficiently and compassionately. We must also give additional support to local health services. Quite a large number of my constituents have found this a very difficult time and have needed additional support, particularly with their mental health, and local surgeries have not necessarily had the resources to provide that.

It is very important that local people see that there are local jobs in this, and that people are not just brought in. Obviously we need the right skills, but as far as possible, local businesses and local people must be employed.

On the issue of mitigation, I urge the Minister, who I welcome to her position and congratulate on her appointment, to look at more tunnelling, particularly in the area of the Staffordshire showground, Hopton, Marston and Yarlet. I think it is possible. A green tunnel was proposed for Hopton, but it was removed on spurious grounds, or at least grounds that could have been overcome.

I ask the Minister to ensure that we have full planning well in advance for local, regional and national transport, including additional roads. I suggest a link between the A34 and junction 13, just as we have a link between the A34 and junctions 14 and 15. The very long viaduct at Great Haywood must be of outstanding design and faced with traditional stone or brick. I also suggest that the bridge constructed over the M6 for the railway or at least the supports for it should be put in place when the M6 is widened between junctions 13 and 15, rather than having to close the motorway for two separate civil works.

In conclusion, I would rather the Government paused, rethought and built for the whole country, with much better connectivity than this proposal gives us. If this goes ahead, at least for the time being, I ask that all the mitigations that my colleagues and I have put forward be taken seriously, because to date, they have not been.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that, as they can see for themselves, seven hon. Members are still seeking to contribute to the debate, therefore there is a premium on reasonable brevity. If each contributes for no more than 10 minutes, all should have the chance to do so before the winding-up speeches begin.

5.28 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): You will be glad to hear, Mr Speaker, that I intend to speak only briefly, to raise one particular concern that I believe needs urgent consideration by the Government as the HS2 process continues.
England, and we have always known that to assist in increasing the prosperity of the north of England, the cross-Pennine links should have been prioritised a long time ago. It is a pleasure to follow her short but elegant speech.

May I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench? My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) is an extremely capable person, although I have to say that I do not envy her her task. She follows in the footsteps of no less than—let me see—one, two, three, four, five, Secretaries of State and one, two, three, four, five, six junior Ministers. Since 2010, it appears that no Minister has managed more than two years in this position in charge of HS2. I would not have wished HS2 on her, but I hope her ministerial career will last a great deal longer than that. I wish, however, that her colleagues would listen and that we could have a Minister dedicated to HS2 on its own, because this project is such a gargantuan one that it really deserves to have ministerial attention focused on it completely. If we look at the project’s history since its inception, with the catalogue of failures and problems it has thrown up, we can see that a Minister dedicated to it is much needed and would be very welcome.

Mr Speaker, I feel like saying, “Here we are again, and yes, I am on my feet.” I think we probably do divide into sheep and goats on the Floor of this House as far as HS2 is concerned. Whether I am a sheep or a goat I do not know. I am probably an old goat, but I am happy to stand up here with some other old goats, like my hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), and even the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman)—most of whom happen to be in the Chamber at the moment. I have been really heartened by the support that I have had over the years as I have tried to fight this project, and then tried to have it altered and modified so that it did less harm than was envisaged.

Mr Sheerman: In passing, I congratulate the right hon. Lady on becoming a dame. Is it not a fact that she and I have campaigned against this project for a very long time, on the grounds that it will not deliver, it will never deliver, by 2033, and it will be superseded by different forms of transportation by 2033, and also on the grounds that £100 billion of national treasure that still continues to be a problem, and I would ask the House what extra funding will be required from the Treasury to deliver those growth and regeneration benefits that have been so much boasted of. I think HS2 will turn out to be, as Michael Byng said, the most expensive railway on earth, at £403 million a mile. In fact, Michael Byng, who created the method used by Network Rail to cost its projects, made the estimates for the DFT and said the line would cost double the official figure, and 15 times more than the cost per mile of the TGV in France. We need to be very careful about how those costs are escalating.

I want to mention the environment. I have had some notable gains in Buckinghamshire—our own county—to save the Chilterns from even greater damage than was first anticipated. I am grateful for the tunnelling. It saves some 9.2 hectares of ancient woodland in three separate woods, but the Woodland Trust has estimated that on phase 2a and 2b it is losing 24 irreplaceable woods, and we shall still lose 63 ancient woods on phase 1 to start off with. I say to the House: once they have gone, they are lost forever. You cannot replace ancient woodland, however much planting you do in other areas of the country.

I want to mention the process. I think the hybrid Bill process for phase 1 was a travesty of our procedures, and I pay tribute to the Chairman of Ways and Means and the House authorities who looked at the Standing Orders and changed some of the aspects of a hybrid Bill to improve the petitioner experience. I want to place it on the record that I think our Clerk who is no longer with us, Neil Caulfield, who was so excellent, would have been pleased to see adjustments to these procedures. Although it is still an arcane process, I think it was important that we fed back the agonies of going through the hybrid Bill process, and that the House responded. I think the positive changes that have been made, particularly the changes to the language, which will increase accessibility to the petitioners, will make a difference and protect the rights for petitioners to be heard. I also think that submitting petitions electronically is a way forward. I still think that the fee of £20 to fight for one’s house, business, land or property is insulting, and I see no reason why petitioners must pay £20 to have their case heard when the state is trying to take their property.

I also feel that corridor deals need to be stamped out. Corridor deals conducted by silks and barristers acting on behalf of the Government are completely opaque and have no enforceability. There is intimidation and pressure from the QCs and the legal teams, hustling up to people in the corridor right before their petition is heard. I hope that the Government will listen and ensure that corridor deals are stamped out completely in this next legislative phase.

I want to refer to engagement by HS2 and the attitude towards the people affected. My colleagues have spoken eloquently already about the ways in which HS2 and its staff and personnel still fail to engage with the people who are most affected by this project. Estimates for the whole project show poor engagement up and down the line, and the Country Land and Business Association reports delays, secrecy, broken promises and poor management.

We are still waiting for answers on various matters, such as the incident that took place in the Colne Valley the other day. I asked for the outcome of the investigation, because I thought that was quite a serious incident.
I have still not had any response outlining exactly what happened and why people behaved in such a fashion to people crossing land that would be affected by HS2.

I would also very much like to find out what is happening in my own constituency, in Buckinghamshire. The other day, the Secretary of State promised that I and other MPs would be informed where works were taking place and that has not yet happened. The Secretary of State gave a categorical undertaking at that Dispatch Box, but messages I have had none.

Only today, despite a clear, agreed contract with HS2, a constituent has found that the payment they were due to receive within 21 days is still outstanding three months later. I will give details to the Secretary of State because it came in just today, but that just proves to me that HS2 still cannot keep its commitments or treat the people who are being affected by the project in a rational, decent and respectful manner. It is a gross miscarriage of justice for people to be treated in such a way by the Government and by HS2 Ltd.

Michael Fabricant: Like me, my right hon. Friend has gone through the phase 1 experience—I am, of course, affected by phase 2a as well. Does she not think that HS2 as an organisation is dysfunctional? One official does not speak to another, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing; surely that does not augur well for the construction of a railway line.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A project of this nature needs to be run in the most professional fashion possible. It needs good governance. It does not need its top executives to be paid 10 times what an MP is paid. It has been criticised up hill and down dale. We have seen it handing out £1.7 million of unauthorised redundancy payments. We have seen the conflicts of interest that have caused major companies to pull out of the bidding process and the contractual process, the failure to carry out due diligence, a turnover of staff, and an attitude towards the people they deal with that can only be described as arrogant.

I still hope that this project can be pulled back into shape. That is why I encourage my colleagues to think about dedicating the Minister’s career over at least the next two years solely to looking after HS2. I thought long and hard, and I have the freedom of the Back Benches, which is a great pleasure, and it is with a heavy heart that once again I have to say that although I know that my hon. Friends will not press their amendment to a vote, if anyone does call a vote on Second Reading, I will again be forced to walk through the Lobby against it.

5.44 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan). I too welcome the Minister to her post and wish her very well.

In the UK, we are rightly proud of our status as the birthplace of the railways. However, our rail infrastructure—much of it from the Victorian era—requires significant investment if it is to continue to serve the people of Britain in the 21st century. In our 2017 manifesto, Labour promised to create a national transformation fund to invest some £250 billion over 10 years, and we remain firmly committed to investing in our nation’s infrastructure.

HS2 represents one of the largest infrastructure projects in Europe. The scheme will provide much needed capacity to support future demand for rail services, and it aims to deliver wider economic benefits to the regions that it serves and beyond. Although very few would argue against those goals, it is crucial that the project is conducted in the right way: by providing jobs and opportunities to our young people, minimising the disruption caused to our communities and protecting our precious environment.

Although I support the HS2 project in principle, I think it is important to focus on a number of issues. London’s economic output is more than double the rest of the UK average. For the country as a whole to prosper, the balance needs to be redressed, not to the detriment of Londoners but for the benefit of all. According to Government figures, when HS2 is fully completed, it will deliver a benefit-cost ratio of 2.3 when wider economic impacts are included. I want to make sure that those benefits are shared by as wide a group as possible, and especially the areas that are directly affected by the construction of the line. Billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money is being spent on this project; that money must benefit more than just the shareholders of a handful of large companies.

Both the Birmingham chamber of commerce in my constituency and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull local enterprise partnership support HS2, recognising the economic benefits that better connectivity will bring. I want Birmingham’s economic output to continue to grow, its people to find well paid, secure and skilled jobs, and the city’s potential to be further recognised as a result of the project. I want to see the construction of HS2 ignite greater interest in engineering among our young people, and apprenticeships to be made available to all young people in our communities, whatever their background.

Rachel Maclean: I completely agree with the hon. Lady about the benefits and how they should be spread across Birmingham and the region. Does she also agree that this is a great opportunity to capture the talents of women, particularly in engineering, in this Year of Engineering?

Preet Kaur Gill: I absolutely agree; we need to see more women coming into engineering.

However, one of my concerns is that the recent fiasco surrounding the east coast main line franchise, combined with the demonstrable success achieved after the last private sector rail bail-out by Directly Operated Railways, serves only to highlight the need for public ownership of our railways. At a time when living standards are squeezed, wage rises are not keeping pace with the cost of living, and rail passengers have just had to endure the largest fare rises in five years, it is not acceptable for private companies to table inflated offers for these vital services, extract the profits, and then simply walk without honouring their commitments.

Finally, this project should not come at the expense of our environment either. In future, when our children are using HS2, I want them to benefit from the cleaner air that the increased use of rail will bring, but I do not want the construction of the tracks that they are travelling
on to have caused untold damage to the environment. Organisations such as the Wildlife Trusts have raised concerns about the loss of ancient woodland, sights of special scientific interest and nature reserves. The construction of HS2 should serve as an example of how large-scale infrastructure projects can be conducted in an environmentally friendly way—changing the environment, yes, but not destroying it. This is an opportunity to achieve a net gain for nature.

The sums of money involved are too great and the potential impact on communities too large to get this project wrong. That is why the Government need to ensure that the process is as transparent, cost-effective and environmentally friendly as possible, so that HS2 delivers for the many, not the few.

5.49 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As an enthusiastic supporter of improvements to our rail network, I welcome the principle behind the Bill—establishing a high-speed railway beyond Birmingham—but I have some concerns, so I welcome this opportunity to set out how I think the Bill could be improved, particularly for the ambitious and growing city of Stoke-on-Trent.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, as a recent and welcome visitor to my constituency, will know exactly how ambitious we are. The scale of the local rail improvements we are seeking and planning for are, like HS2 itself, unmatched since the Victorian era. We are keen to embrace the many opportunities arising from HS2. HS2 is going to happen—that is no longer the debate; phase 1 preparations are already under way, and the actual building of phase 1 begins next year. Time is marching on. The section we are debating in the Bill, phase 2a, is due to open to passengers by 2027—the end of the next Parliament. We must get on with the Bill, or it will not be long before we are living with the consequences of getting it wrong.

The principle of a high-speed railway line from the west midlands conurbation to Crewe is sound—releasing capacity for passengers and freight services on the existing network, while cutting the fast times to Crewe from London to under an hour—and in principle I welcome it, but for the social and economic benefits of HS2 to be maximised in practice, there needs to be much better integration, as many hon. Members have mentioned. Improvements to infrastructure on the existing network around Stoke-on-Trent, as well as local rail improvements for connecting trains from Crewe, including the Crewe to Derby line, which serves Longton in my constituency, are vital.

The Secretary of State joined me on that service earlier this month and has seen at first hand the improvements needed on it. I welcome the much-needed investment in our local transport infrastructure that he proposed when he visited, but there is much left to be resolved around how the benefits of HS2 will be delivered in and for Stoke-on-Trent. As the briefing note that the public affairs department of HS2 Ltd kindly sent to MPs for this debate puts it:

“Detailed work and consultation is currently being undertaken on options for the development of the HS2 Crewe Hub, with the potential for a HS2 service at Stoke.”

That is a tantalising, and potentially a very lucrative, assurance for the city.

There is clearly a need for Stoke-on-Trent to be connected—it is fundamental to HS2 being of maximum benefit to my constituency. We are told by HS2 Ltd that the Bill “could” mean better commuter services and the potential for extra freight trains, and we are assured by the Rail Delivery Group that it “will” add much-needed space for more and faster trains. I say that it “must” deliver these benefits. To do that, the Government need to be clear that a viable option for the Stoke connector, as promoted by Stoke-on-Trent City Council, is firmly on the table, to ensure that the infrastructure around Stoke-on-Trent receives the vital upgrades it needs.

This would mean getting, in addition to the proposed Handsacre link, which is appropriate for Stafford, a low-impact five-mile line designed to take classic compatible HS2 trains from the main HS2 line through the very significant Stoke-on-Trent catchment and on to the rest of east Cheshire, Macclesfield and Stockport. Such a dedicated Stoke connector would provide the necessary link to improve connectivity and boost capacity. It would do so by getting around the bottleneck that will otherwise remain on the west coast main line to the south of Stoke-on-Trent. That is the way to maximise the full opportunities for more housing and jobs, and I will continue to pursue this matter as the Bill progresses.

It is also imperative that Stoke-on-Trent continue to enjoy regular fast train services to and from London—at least one service every half hour or more frequently. HS2 compatibility should offer my constituents improved journey times as well as being able to maximise both housing and commercial development in the city, fully seizing the economic opportunities that Stoke-on-Trent offers.

It is essential to address the lack of fast, direct services between Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham, to match the good quality of the services currently offered between Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester. Through the Bill, HS2 has the potential to address the severe overcrowding and poor connectivity that are currently experienced between Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham. There is also the potential to improve connectivity further by providing the direct intercity services that are currently lacking between locations such as Stoke-on-Trent and Liverpool. That would fully exploit the potential for economic growth from the midlands engine and northern powerhouse initiatives, with Stoke-on-Trent as the gateway to the north.

As well as improving services, it is essential to do more to improve both the capacity and the offer at Stoke-on-Trent railway station. Although it is the main station serving the potteries conurbation, which consists of more than half a million people, it currently has limited platform and concourse capacity, as well as poor-quality retail facilities. Again, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has stepped forward with detailed proposals. The Stoke-on-Trent HS2 master plan sets out the ambition to transform the station, vastly improving capacity and facilities, and leveraging significant redevelopment in the wider area on the back of those improvements. It is important for those proposals to be realised if we are to ensure that the station is HS2-ready and playing a full part in the city’s regeneration.

I fully support the principle of the Bill, and it will receive my support tonight. I am a positive and enthusiastic supporter of improvements in our rail industry, and I am keen for us to finally emerge from the legacy of the
disastrous erosion of Stoke-on-Trent’s rail network that we saw under nationalisation. I know that the Secretary of State is equally committed to large-scale improvements, and I thank him for the commitment to invest in our local transport infrastructure that he gave during his recent visit to my constituency; it was hugely welcome. However, I take very seriously the need to improve infrastructure interconnectivity, and further work needs to be done on that. I also take very seriously the opportunities promised by the Department for Transport and HS2 Ltd, which have said that detailed proposals will continue to be refined for HS2 as the Bill progresses. I look forward to playing my part in that process to the full.

5.57 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), in this important debate. I disagree with him about the support that should be offered to the Bill this evening. The principle behind a high-speed rail network is absolutely fine, but the Bill should actually be entitled the devastation of Staffordshire Bill. It will lay an iron scar across our county, and it will bring very little in the way of economic benefits. All that it does is seek to take all the potential benefits and, through a bottleneck, funnel them down to London and the south-east, where there will be no benefit for my constituents or those of the hon. Gentleman. I find myself in what some might describe as the invidious, or perhaps I should say unusual, position of agreeing with the hon. Members for Stafford, for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—the holy triumvirate of Staffordshire—on this Bill. The hon. Member for Lichfield rightly pointed out that there is no economic benefit not to having a greater presence in Stoke-on-Trent. There is the issue of where the services coming north go to. The hon. Member for Lichfield stole most of the things I wanted to say, and he made the point that this is meant to be about connectivity but it really is not. Connectivity does not mean having to tramp across London to make a change, and it does not mean having to change stations outside Birmingham—and Birmingham Curzon Street to Birmingham New Street is quite a long walk for those carrying a bag or if there are a lot of people in the town centre that day.

The system certainly does not recognise the fact that the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine will be properly connected. The hon. Member for Lichfield stole most of the things I wanted to say, and he made the point that this is meant to be about connectivity but it really is not. Connectivity does not mean having to tramp across London to make a change, and it does not mean having to change stations outside Birmingham—and Birmingham Curzon Street to Birmingham New Street is quite a long walk for those carrying a bag or if there are a lot of people in the town centre that day.

The system does not address the east-west connectivity of Stoke-on-Trent, which is a greater issue. It does not look at the route that goes from north Wales all the way through to Derby. It does not seek to change the single-carriage railway we currently have that is often over-subscribed. It does not seek to deal with the fact that parts of the M6 are still not in the managed motorways system, so we drive north on the M6 and hit junction 13 and all of a sudden we drop down to three lanes and the traffic is a bit gnarly and not particularly flowing well, and then we reach junction 17 and all is fine again. That is part of the connectivity that we need.

The system certainly does not recognise the fact that junction 15 of the M6 is one of the worst junctions to navigate of all time. I have sometimes had to wait longer there to get on to the M6 than it has taken me to

benefit of a ceramic deal in Stoke-on-Trent, and the fact that Stafford is a growth point in our county and that we could have new jobs and regeneration and place-based economic growth through a potential ceramic park bordering my constituency and in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South. Yet although we are told that a place-based industrial strategy is important, we are also told that Stoke-on-Trent station, which has 2.8 million rail users a year, is not worthy of anything other than a single one-hour service that will only go north to Macclesfield and will terminate in London, when the journey time of the current service to London is adequate and capacity on the Virgin line is not too much of a problem.

The bigger capacity issue in Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire involves the line run by CrossCountry that services Stafford, Wolverhampton and Birmingham International, where it is often standing-room only in some of the most unpleasant circumstances we can imagine. Yet while we are talking about trying to bring Government policy on regeneration strategy together, there is no economic benefit not to having a greater presence in Stoke-on-Trent.
get to Birmingham once on the M6, simply because of
the way that junction works. So if we are talking about
connectivity and there being a need for greater integration
of transport provision, we must look at that as well as
looking at high-speed rail.

The Secretary of State is not in his place at present, but
the new Minister is and I welcome her to her role.
Can we get some clear and categorical commitments
that the existing Virgin service that we have from Stoke-
on-Trent will not be diminished? Every time we ask that
question, we get a slightly different answer; we get some
sort of, “Yes, but, maybe, if,” but those terms do not fill
us with confidence that any options that come out of
the Crewe hub will not lead to a reduction overall in rail
service from Stoke-on-Trent. If we include journeys
from the constituency of the hon. Member for Stafford,
we find that 5 million rail journeys are conducted out
of Staffordshire every year. That is a large number of
people, and they deserve to know what the future of
their rail service will look like.

I would be grateful to the Minister if she gave greater
consideration to ensuring that trains going north go past
Macclesfield. There is a genuine economic boom to be
harnessed in north Staffordshire and south Cheshire
if we can have a proper high-speed rail link to Manchester
and Manchester airport. That is a proposal that the
local chambers of commerce have been putting together.
I would welcome any words from her or her colleagues
in the Department for Transport about the managed
motorway system on the M6. We need to take a
holistic approach if we are to make north Staffordshire
and south Cheshire a good place to do business, deliver
economic regeneration and, most importantly for my
constituents, provide the rail service that they need. I
support the principle of the Bill, but I cannot support
its content, and if there is a Division on it, I am afraid
that I will not offer my support to the Government this
evening.

6.5 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am grateful for
the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and
I commit my support for the Bill’s Second Reading. I
have listened with interest to the entire debate, and I
want to thank all those Members who have talked
about the changes that need to be made. As a former
resident of Birmingham, and someone who now lives
close to it, I endorse what colleagues have said about
connectivity across that city. I very much hope that the
issues can be addressed in the final plans. We have heard
arguments about how long it takes to walk between
Birmingham New Street and Birmingham Curzon Street.
My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael
Fabricant) is obviously a very speedy walker; other Members
walk more slowly. If that route could be joined up, it
would be beneficial for everyone who passes through
what is one of our nation’s great cities.

I want to touch on the question of productivity,
which is a key theme in the debate and links closely with
what we are trying to achieve with transport infrastructure
in this country. This is the main reason why I am
supporting the Bill tonight. The Government brought
forward many measures in the industrial strategy to
boost productivity across the country. That is really
important to all of us who live outside London and the
south-east. We all acknowledge that wealth, jobs and
productivity are not spread evenly across our country,
and one of the major things that we can do to address
that is to build a decent high-speed train service that
can enable our constituents, wherever they are, to travel
up and down the country to access jobs and opportunities.
The Government are making a fantastic commitment
to this project, which underpins their mission to spread
wealth and growth across the country.

Michelle Donelan: Is my hon. Friend aware that this
is the biggest infrastructure project in Europe?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for that
intervention, because she reminds me of the significant
amount—about £100 billion, I think—that Governments,
including the previous Labour Government, have put
forward. We have not built any new railways in this
country since Victorian times, so it is really important
that we are committing this funding now and in the
future to build our railways. The project will be important
to our constituents’ quest to travel not only from London
to the midlands, but from the midlands up to the north.
It will also help our quest to take pressure off the
overheated south.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a very good
argument. Does she agree that this is not just about
freeing up the lines to the south, because there will be
help for lines to some of the smaller stations where
services do not stop at the moment? This is not just
about people who want to travel from city to city; it is
also about travel between towns.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for her
intervention. I am sure that many of her constituents,
like mine, have to travel to the nearest big city or town
to get to work or leisure destinations. The project will
help to free up capacity on those secondary lines.

The project will make an important contribution to
our global competitiveness as a nation. Thanks to the
Government’s economic programme and their management
of the economy, the UK is seen as a highly attractive
destination for business investment. I want to see that
continue. When foreign investors look at our country,
they consider the transport links, because they want to
invest in places from where it is easy to get around the
country so that people will find their businesses attractive
and want to work for them.

HS2 will benefit not only my constituents in Redditch,
but the country as a whole. Although we will not benefit
directly from HS2, we live only a short distance away
from Birmingham, which will be a major stop on the
line. Many of my constituents work, play and socialise
in Birmingham, and the economic prospects of a place
such as Redditch are intertwined with those of Birmingham
and the larger west midlands conurbation. When the
project is completed, we will see benefits for business
and residents, and transport routes up and down the
country will be opened up.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend share my
passion for the National College for High Speed Rail? It
will not only help to fill the skills gap for high-speed
rail, but train people so that we deal with the long-term
skills gap in the engineering, design, technology and
construction sectors.
Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is a great champion of engineering and I have been inspired by what she has done in her constituency. HS2 will definitely provide a boost for engineering careers. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) rightly said that we do not mention careers for women in engineering enough, and I want to go at least some way towards rectifying that. I hope that the National College for High Speed Rail will have a mission to bring more women into engineering so that this project provides a boost to help address the dire lack of women in engineering and construction, particularly given that it is the Year of Engineering and also 100 years since women got the vote. There are many reasons to focus on that issue and ensure that we get things right.

Maggie Throup: We need engineers to construct the line, but we need them in the supply chain, too. Bombardier’s base is close to my constituency, and I have met the female apprentice engineers who build the underground trains that we travel on every day. That is just one example of how much more we can do to spread the word that engineering is for men and women.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. We can all encourage employers to be role models and women to speak out. Businesses that value such careers should pay people decent salaries so that they do not all go off to work in the City. That is what this country needs. We need a dynamic economy that works for everyone.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I was until recently the Minister for the Year of Engineering, and I looked at the possibility of establishing an advisory group to examine exactly the issue my hon. Friend describes: how groups that are under-represented in engineering can get a foothold and, beyond that, a greater share of the opportunities. I wonder whether the current Minister will take that up and perhaps establish such a group, which would be in the spirit of what my hon. Friend suggests.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for his work. He is a champion of women not only in engineering, but in all other spheres, and I hope that the Minister will take up that suggestion.

Redditch’s small businesses are hoping to take advantage of some of the contracts that are being awarded through HS2, both now and in the future. For example, Arrowvale Electronics makes world-leading equipment and hopes to benefit from the boost that an HS2 contract would provide. I know how hard it is for small businesses to tender for large-scale Government contracts, so I urge the Minister to say what she is doing to ensure that they can get a slice of the pie and benefit the diverse economy that we all want.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Lady makes the apt and correct argument that there ought to be opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to get government contracts. What I fail to see is the logic behind her support for both this Bill and that argument, because if there were other projects to deal with regional rail inequalities and road upgrades—other large infrastructure projects that were not HS2—such opportunities would still exist.
Sometimes that tourism benefit is lacking from our debate. How much better it would be if we could encourage holidays at home and boost the tourism—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sirs Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am trying to have the debate at least somewhere in scope, and I am sure the hon. Lady wants to get back on track—excuse the pun.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for deviating a tiny bit off the track.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said in his extremely eloquent speech, it is impossible to build a major infrastructure project in any country without it having some impact on people, but we have to make sure that it is managed sensitively, that people are treated well and that their voices and concerns are heard. I hope that the Government reassure us that that will be done properly.

Infrastructure underpins our productivity. There is a strong push in our country towards devolution, and investment in high-speed rail is critical to that. Will the Minister say how this project will link to the devolved combined authorities agenda? I am close to the West Midlands combined authority—Redditch is a constituent member—and the Mayor holds powers over transport. It is important that HS2 links to transport in the mayors’ regions so that we have an integrated solution to local transport issues. I have campaigned vigorously for better links between Birmingham and my town of Redditch, and I shall continue to do so. I hope that we see a push on that as capacity is freed up when the express trains leave the lines, thereby freeing up more scope for faster and better express services from secondary hubs into the main cities.

We in the west midlands are leading on jobs and growth. We have a booming economy. We are creating more jobs and more businesses are starting in our area than in any other part of the country. Redditch is on the edge of that, but we benefit from it and we want to harness it. We want our region to take control of our own destiny, as do, I am sure, colleagues from across the country. This high-speed rail project and other infrastructure projects will enable us to take charge of our own destiny and live our own lives and will encourage prosperity for all our constituents.

6.21 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I rise to speak in support of the Bill. It is positive that we are debating it and I very much enjoyed playing a role in its development.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said, passenger numbers on our railways have grown from just over 700 million to nearly 1.6 billion. That is a fantastic turnaround for an industry that had seen decades of decline. The industry now faces the challenge of how to cater for the growth it is experiencing. It is a completely different mindset, so it is positive that we are seeking finally to bite the bullet and construct some new capacity in the UK rail network. We have deferred this decision for far too long. Things such as small upgrades to reduce pinch points and thereby increase capacity have only deferred the big decisions. If we consider the fact that we have not built a new railway line in England north of London since the reign of Queen Victoria, we realise just how overdue HS2 is.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reason why we now face a capacity issue and need to deliver HS2 is that the frailties of the nationalised rail service caused the shutdown of so much of the capacity throughout the country?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes an insightful point. We had decades of decline when the rail industry was in public hands. The turnaround post-privatisation has been dramatic. Opposition Members take that for granted and suggest that nationalisation is a way forward, but they have forgotten the complete change we saw, with the focus on customers and growth, and how that has delivered and been a key part of the UK’s economic growth.

Christian Matheson: Will the hon. Gentleman not concede that that turnaround has taken place on the back of several hundred million pounds of public money being given to the train operators every year?

Andrew Jones: Well, the hon. Gentleman suggests that even more public money should go in, so I am not sure where his argument takes him, apart from round in a circle. We are seeing long-overdue public investment in the rail industry.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: We do not want to spend too much time on this issue, but the simple fact is that in the past, when the nationalised railway had to rely solely on the Government, the Government cut off its funding. With privatisation, it has attracted funding. The truth of the matter is that that has seen growth in the rail industry that has made something like HS2 absolutely necessary.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend is as wise as ever. Not only do we have public money going into our railways, but we are seeing private investment attracted into our railways and therefore more investment in aggregate. We have this urgent need for capacity within our network to cater for the growth both in passengers and in freight.

After years of decline, this decision has been taken to go for growth. The next question that successive Governments have faced is what form that should take. Should it be investment in the classic rail network, or should we be embracing new technology? Well, we should of course be embracing new technology. Perhaps it is again worth remembering that that has not always been the case under nationalised industries. The UK built its last steam engine in 1960, and it was only in 1964 that the Japanese introduced the bullet train. The Government are buying investment not in phone boxes, but in fibre broadband. Technology should of course be at the heart of our investment decisions.

Gareth Snell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being generous. I do not disagree with his arguments about the need for infrastructure investment or the need for additional capacity, but this Bill in particular is about the route between the west midlands and Crewe. The route that has been chosen is the most
expensive that it could be, delivering the least economic benefits for Staffordshire and causing the most ecological damage. That is what we should be discussing this evening.

Andrew Jones: That has been part of the discussion throughout the day. I have to say that I missed some of the speeches. I am sorry to hear what the hon. Gentleman had to say, but I simply do not agree with his basic premise. I have travelled the route, met local communities along the route and met local government leaders and local businesses along the route. I simply do not agree with his premise.

The issues raised by colleagues along the line of the route are of course entirely fair and legitimate, and they are right to speak up for their constituents. It is difficult delivering infrastructure—whether it is transport, digital or housing infrastructure—without causing some environmental impact. It is clearly right for the Minister to listen to the concerns raised by Members and to respond appropriately. I know that when I was part of the Transport team, we did nothing but listen and try to address those issues. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), will be in the same grain.

Despite all the sensitivities that have been raised, it is very encouraging that we have a Government who are seeking to deliver HS2 as fast as possible and have brought forward HS2 phase 2a. Views have been well articulated today. The reasons why I am so supportive of the development are that it will deliver key strategic benefits for the UK in terms of economic growth and the skills legacy. I have visited the two HS2 colleges in Doncaster and in Birmingham—only during their construction phase; not since they have progressed further—and I was incredibly impressed by what I saw. They offer great facilities for skills development for people taking apprenticeships. They will learn all the skills that we will need not just for this project, but for future high-speed rail projects.

Rachel Maclean: I hope the House will forgive me for raising this issue again, but because he has visited the college and I have not done so, will he tell me what progress he saw on the initiative for getting more women into the train and engineering industry while he was there?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very interesting point. It was reasonably hard to see that from the project in development, but the teams I met working in the colleges were absolutely clear that they will be drawing on as much talent as possible, which will obviously mean bringing more women into engineering. We have a huge shortfall in the number of engineers in the UK. Historically, we have failed to draw on as wide a talent base as possible. The more we talk about the matter in this place, the more we follow it through within the colleges were absolutely clear that they will be drawing on as much talent as possible, which will obviously mean bringing more women into engineering. We have a huge shortfall in the number of engineers in the UK. Historically, we have failed to draw on as wide a talent base as possible. The more we talk about the matter in this place, the more we follow it through within communities, and the more we offer a series of careers that can deliver high-quality jobs that solve community problems, the more women we will attract into the industry.

Mr John Hayes: Cutting-edge strategic decisions always bring with them a certain degree of contention, which is why Governments in democratic polities too rarely make such decisions. They also bring with them opportunity. One thinks of Crossrail. At the beginning, there were doubters, but Crossrail has, without doubt, led to the development of skills of the kind my hon. Friend described, the creation of opportunities, and the seeding of jobs, which have led to us being world beating. The same thing can happen in respect of HS2.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I entirely agree with him. For those who have not yet had the opportunity to go to see Crossrail, the opportunity may well occur again as Crossrail has been taking people down to have a look at its sites. What Crossrail has achieved is fantastic. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch will shortly be able to visit one of the HS2 colleges, where she will see just the difference that the project has made.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I would just say in response to the previous intervention that there would have been far fewer problems had the tunnel gone the entire way under the Chilterns. It would have been advisable to do that. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a real danger that we will not have the engineering capacity to complete these projects on budget and on time, and that, as we currently lack so many skills in engineering, it will be hard to make up that deficit?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend makes two points. We have previously discussed the issue of tunnelling in the Chilterns. I feel more optimistic about the project as a whole. I do not feel that the current skills gap will hinder the delivery of the project, and I am clear that that will not happen because of the actions taken to bring more people into the sector. The fact that we have to deliver skills via building colleges suggests that the Government have been taking seriously the issue of skills in the railways.

The key reason that phase 2a is such a positive project is that more people will benefit from HS2. Crewe is a rail hub. More passengers will be able to access the benefits that the HS2 network will deliver. I want us to go forward to further develop high-speed rail in other parts of the UK. I am particularly thinking about Northern Powerhouse Rail across the Pennines. I look forward very much to seeing the progress of the Bill and the rail line that will come from it, and how the Government will work with local communities and local government to maximise the opportunities that this line presents.

The HS2 argument has changed from whether we should have it, to how we can maximise the opportunities when it arrives. Those opportunities will be commercial, environmental and in skills. I see huge opportunity throughout the project, which is why I will support the Bill should we divide on it this evening.

6.32 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened carefully to today’s debate and thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I have heard the concerns and opportunities that the second phase of HS2 will bring. The high-speed rail journey began under the last Labour Government, who recognised the need for greater capacity and better connectivity.
The Victorian rail network has served us well, but nearly 200 years on it is overstretched. If we are to see a significant modal shift in the future—as Labour encourages—and if we want to see rail as the vehicle of choice for distance travel, we cannot stand back and do nothing, nor should we. It was from the Victorian age that our nation witnessed the foresight of a new generation of engineers to radically advance our country and the world. Yet today our trains are slow, crowded, and depend on outdated technology and infrastructure. It is therefore vital that, as a nation, we put ourselves in the driving seat again, strive to be world leaders and propagate the next generation of engineers, with both women and men taking on new careers in the sector.

Sir William Cash: Does the hon. Lady agree that it was not only the engineers of the Victorian age—great as they were—but also the capital that was provided which ensured that these schemes were actually put into effect?

Rachael Maskell: We could spend a long time talking about the shenanigans that also took place in this House over the creation of the Victorian railways.

Future capacity is vital. Although longer trains, digital signalling and infrastructure upgrades connecting with new rolling stock may get us through the current period, we will need more lines if we are to look further ahead. If we are to develop more lines, it is right that we seriously consider where they go.

HS2 gives us a real opportunity to think about the future of our country and how we connect it to address the unacceptable levels of inequality across Britain. HS2 is not just about the route itself but about freeing up capacity on the west coast main line and on our roads. This will bring benefit to current road and rail users, as well as creating new opportunities for further development of passenger and, importantly, freight paths on the west coast, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) highlighted and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) asked for.

Of course, Labour would, as always, be looking at the bigger picture, embedding HS2 at the heart of a wider rail and transport strategy. It would be absolutely nonsensical to make such significant investment in a new rail line if we were not properly upgrading the north-west to north-east routes—the HS3 routes. The Secretary of State is not in his place at the moment, but I hope that he will take heed of this. It is not too late to reverse his decision to de-electrify the plans and put power back into the northern powerhouse. The cities in the north demand it. We believe that HS2, integrated with a new, dynamic rail plan, must bring economic investment to the midlands and the north, creating good jobs for a secure future, not least with the new skills required in designing and constructing HS2 through the 30,000 jobs it will create.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) eloquently set out a strong economic case for proper connectivity through a regional rail hub at Crewe, this being at the centre of a network to feed Cheshire and the wider counties, and north Wales. That is vital for the future economy of Crewe. I can think of no better politician than my hon. Friend to speak up for her town and to make that case.

We must remember that HS2 is not an entirety in itself but a bridge to enable economic growth and industrial investment. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) made a similar point, again focusing on how to build the economies of the north-west by ensuring connectivity. It is vital that HS2 talks to the region, and we must dissect this in Committee to ensure that it does. I note his calling for the line to north Wales through Chester. We should not dismiss this opportunity for some of the communities in the UK who most need this infrastructure stimulus. My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) also stressed the need to focus on connectivity. A clear call for integration has been made—one that Labour will support.

Phase 2a is set to deliver nearly £4 billion of benefits over the 60-year appraisal period, with a cost-benefit ratio of 1:9 and wider economic impacts. This indicates upper-end medium value for money, but accelerating this phase will represent very high value for money. Around Crewe, we will see 40,000 new jobs and 7,000 homes, opening up the life chances that have not been seen in the area before and starting to address the complete economic imbalance that we have in our country. Extending this to the Constellation Partnership will deliver 100,000 new homes and 120,000 jobs—20,000 in the Cheshire science corridor alone, putting the UK on the international stage in terms of science and technology.

I assure the House that Labour will never stand in the way of providing such opportunities to communities that have been crying out for investment—a point powerfully made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill).

Jonathan Edwards: I take the point that the hon. Lady is making. However, the KPMG report that looked into the impact of HS2 on various economies across the British state indicated that south Wales would be absolutely hammered. Is the Labour party not at all concerned about the economy of south Wales?

Rachael Maskell: Of course we are deeply concerned about the economy of south Wales. That is why we electrified the line to south Wales that helped to boost the economy in that region, and also ensured that HS2 fed into north Wales, helping the whole of the Welsh economy to grow.

We have some concerns, and it is absolutely right that there is tight scrutiny of every part of the project, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) highlighted. At a time when the economy continues to fail, not least in the north, Labour understands why people are questioning the economic benefit of spending £55.7 billion on a rail route. This 36-mile section will cost £3.5 billion. At a time when our public services are crying out for investment, it is right that critical questions are asked about the project. However, the benefits are also clear, and it cannot be an either/or. This is about getting the Government’s economic strategy right. We will make sure that every decision brings maximum inward investment, as the economic opportunity is already estimated to be £92 billion across HS2.

We hear the concerns about the environment. It is vital that real consideration is given in Committee to the impact of construction and of the final network on
the environment. That cannot just be about mitigation elsewhere, and I will push for us to maximise this opportunity. I will also want to ensure in Committee that modern, advanced engineering is able to find answers to the many questions raised about the environment and how the habitats directive, no matter which side of Brexit we are on, is seen in its fullest sense.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who spoke particularly well on behalf of his constituents, highlighted how important it is to ensure that his constituents’ concerns are picked up. I assure him that in Committee, we will listen carefully to the points he has to make. The right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) spoke of her vast experience in dealing with HS2. It is really important that lessons are learned and that there is good communication, and we must certainly end corridor deals.

Sir William Cash: The hon. Lady just said that in Committee, we will do such and such. I think she may have misunderstood the nature of the procedure. It will be a hybrid Bill Select Committee, not a Committee of the House.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Gentleman. But, I do understand the process. Petitions will be brought forward, and we will listen carefully to them.

Labour will want to ensure that all opportunities for cyclists and walkers are harnessed from the HS2 route. Not much has been said about that to date. Labour is committed to cleaning up our air and our environment by cleaning up on the actions of Government when it comes to transport. Labour believes that investment in public and, I must add, publicly owned transport—we are not going back to the past, but moving forward to the future—is the way forward to deliver a rail system fit for the 21st century.

6.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is with great pleasure that I close the Second Reading debate. This is my first Bill, so there is no pressure; I will try to do it some justice.

HS2 presents a huge opportunity for the country as a whole. It is a major undertaking but an essential one. Throughout history, improving connectivity has led to innovation, economic advancement and increased productivity. HS2 is no different. This project is a significant long-term capital investment in the country’s infrastructure. It will deliver substantial economic growth and returns, creating the wealth we need to spend on all our priorities, whether those are health or education programmes.

We are ambitious for our country. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke about productivity, being ambitious and ensuring that we train engineers for the future. We are ambitious for all of our country and determined to leave no one behind. HS2 is what the Government are all about, as it will enable future generations to thrive.

HS2 is a significant investment, but it is also a necessary one, and it is important that we get it right. With that in mind, I would like to thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. There were 21 contributions in all, and I will do my best to respond to all of them.

HS2 has the potential to transform our rail network. As a brand-new line, it is the best option for creating more space on our busy railways. By freeing up space on the west coast main line between the west midlands and Crewe, phase 2a has the potential to deliver much-needed additional capacity on a constrained part of our network—reducing overcrowding and making journeys more reliable, creating the opportunity for more varied and frequent services across the region, and benefiting Nuneaton, Tamworth, Lichfield and Rugeley.

The benefits will spread well beyond the railway itself. Faster and easier travel will put more opportunities within reach of millions of people. HS2 will connect people to jobs, and businesses to suppliers. It will bring new investment, employment and regeneration to towns and cities up and down the country. HS2 has the potential to support hundreds of thousands of jobs, including 2,000 apprentices. Most importantly—this was mentioned by many Members—70% of jobs created by HS2 will be outside London. It will help to train a new generation of skilled workers, including through the National College for High Speed Rail.

Many Members—such as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill)—spoke about investment in the north. The north of England, in particular, stands to benefit from HS2. This part of the route, between Birmingham and Crewe, has been brought forward by six years so that we can deliver more of the benefits of HS2 more quickly.

We want to transform journeys for passengers and create the capacity the north needs to flourish, and delivering HS2 is an essential part of that. We are already carrying out the biggest investment in the north of England for a generation, spending £13 billion on northern transport, which is the largest such amount in Government history. This is not about the north against the south. Investing in our rail network is a key part of the Government’s plan for a connected Britain, and we are committed to improving journeys for passengers throughout the country.

HS2 will bring benefits to cities across the north before the construction of phase 2. Phase 1 will reduce journey times towards, for example, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow, and will release capacity between Birmingham and London. By shifting long-distance services on to the brand-new railway, HS2 will release capacity on existing routes and provide options for new or additional local, cross-country, commuter and freight services in many areas.

Phase 2a, between the west midlands and Crewe, will further improve journey times and bring more benefits to the north. HS2 is a key component in the delivery of Northern Powerhouse Rail, our vision for significantly improving journey times and service frequency between major cities in the north of England. This is why we have announced £300 million of funding to future-proof HS2 to accommodate future junctions. With Transport for the North and Midlands Connect, we are developing a clear set of proposals for connections that would allow Northern Powerhouse Rail and Midland Connect services to use HS2.

Several Members have spoken about Crewe and Stoke, and I hope to be able to respond to some of their questions. The HS2 business case has always included a
plan to run high-speed train services to Crewe, but I know there is a strong ambition to achieve even more. I visited Crewe just last week, and I was impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of Cheshire East Council and the Constellation Partnership to make the most of the opportunities that HS2 will bring, including jobs and homes.

I agree with the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) that a Crewe hub would generate significant opportunities not only for Crewe itself, but for the surrounding region. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) spoke very clearly in support of Stoke being served by HS2. As the Secretary of State set out in his opening speech, we are very clear about the important economic role that Stoke-on-Trent plays in the wider region, and we want it to be served by HS2.

Gareth Snell: Under the current plans, Stoke will be served by just one HS2 train an hour. Will the Minister consider upping that to two an hour to generate the economic benefit she has just committed herself to?

Ms Ghani: We are a long way from the timetables, but if the hon. Gentleman will let me continue for a moment, I will talk about how and when we will respond to the consultation undertaken on this very section.

We are looking at what would be needed for phase 2a to support a future Crewe hub, but as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich is aware, Crewe is a strategically important location on the rail network and the existing infrastructure is very complex. In our plans for HS2, we must ensure that we get things right. That is why last year we launched a consultation to look at whether we can provide an even better service to Crewe—one that could serve more destinations and allow more trains to stop. We are considering the responses, and will respond shortly. Realising the full vision would need the local council to work with us on funding, and my Department is working closely with Cheshire East on this. Some elements could be taken forward by Network Rail, under its existing permitted development rights, and we understand the whole-hub vision would require a junction north of Crewe back on to HS2, but that has to be a decision for phase 2b, as we will not build the relevant part of the HS2 line north of Crewe in phase 2a.

Laura Smith: I am wondering whether we can get some clarity as to when we will get the answer to this consultation—not a “You will get it in due course” answer. We would quite like to know when that will be.

Ms Ghani: We are working through the details. We will try and do it as quickly as we can, but it will be short—this year. I am sorry; I cannot provide more details now, but I will write to the hon. Member and let her know. This is very complicated and cannot be rushed. We need to make the decisions for the right reasons.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I welcome the passion with which the Minister is approaching her brief, but may I bring her back down to reality? The constituent I mentioned in my speech, who has been so badly affected by HS2 phase 1 and so badly let down by HS2 Ltd, which is not paying the bills it promised, and is contracted, to pay, is now on antidepressants and fears that this sort of thing is happening to many other people up and down the line. Could the Minister put some of her passion for the project into protecting the people who are so badly affected by the project?

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend has raised many issues about HS2 Ltd, its relationship with our constituents and its poor performance in communication previously, with the Secretary of State and with Ministers who have held my current position. I will indeed endeavour to hold HS2 Ltd to account. I am more than happy to take on board any cases that my right hon. Friend wishes to present to me, and I am grateful for her words in opening her speech. I will do my best to outline previous Ministers in this position.

To turn to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), the consultation on the Crewe hub that we published last year included service pattern options that will reap benefits for Chester, north and south Wales, Shrewsbury and the wider region. As I mentioned, we expect to respond to that consultation shortly.

Sir William Cash: I think I can say this on behalf of all those who are liable to petition in Staffordshire, thus representing several constituencies here: will the Minister do everything possible to help those petitioners to present their case, and show maximum understanding of what is affecting them, right the way through from one end of Staffordshire to the other?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has been a great champion for his constituents and has made his concerns known to me, the Secretary of State and previous Ministers. The Committee is the best place for him to represent his constituents and encourage them to petition the Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) raised an incident in Colne Valley. I expect HS2 Ltd and any contractors to treat everyone with respect. The reported behaviour that she mentioned is completely unacceptable and falls well below the standard that I would expect. I am happy to take up the case on her behalf.

The My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) gave a very passionate speech, which I believe is now trending on YouTube, with his walk back and forth in the Chamber. I am not quite convinced about his journey times within Birmingham, and as a proud Brummie I would not mind spending eight or 22 minutes walking around Birmingham as I think it is a great place to be, but HS2 is connected to existing rail stations up and down the network, including Euston, Manchester, Crewe, Leeds and Sheffield.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) raised a number of concerns. I know that she has spoken repeatedly to me, my predecessor and the Secretary of State, and that too she is a strong champion for her constituents. On Long Eaton, HS2 Ltd has had meetings with my hon. Friend. Valuation agents and residents to try to progress this issue. HS2 Ltd is mindful that there are elderly and vulnerable residents involved, and these cases are getting very senior attention within HS2 Ltd to try to find a resolution. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend will continue to work with me to ensure that her constituents are satisfied with the responses that they get from HS2 Ltd.
Let me turn to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield and others about ancient woodland. Of course, ancient woodland is irreplaceable, and although we cannot fully compensate for all impacts, we have committed to use best practice measures, such as enhancing links between woodland, reusing ancient woodland soils and creating new mixed deciduous woodland. More than 75 hectares of new woodland will be planted along the phase 2a scheme to partially compensate for the loss of 10.5 hectares of ancient woodland. It is unfortunate, but we are doing our very best to compensate for the woodland that is being taken.

I am unable to respond to many other Members’ comments, and I will endeavour to write to them all, but I want quickly to move on to the question of engagement. Many Members mentioned that HS2 Ltd has fallen short of expectations as to how it should communicate with Members as well as their constituents. I expect HS2 Ltd to reach extremely high standards in all its engagement activities, and I say to the House that I am sorry if in any of these cases the level of engagement has fallen short. I encourage any Members with particular concerns to meet me to discuss them. I will listen, and I will endeavour to hold HS2 Ltd to account. As a project, we will continue to learn and improve.

There have been a number of conversations about the cost of the project. To clarify, the 2015 spending review reconfirmed the Government’s commitment to HS2 and set a long-term funding envelope of £55.7 billion. The Government are determined, and are on course, to deliver HS2 within this. HS2 is a major investment but a necessary one. For every £1 of investment, it will deliver more than £2 of benefits. That is more than £92 billion of benefits to this country before we even talk about the 100,000 jobs, 70% of which are outside London.

I fear that I have run out of time, so I must come to a close. We have made the case for HS2 and we now need to get on and build it. This country invented the railways, and we should be proud of our Victorian pioneers, but we cannot continue to rely on the network that they built. Around the world, our global competitors are already investing heavily in high-speed rail. We are now catching up, and I do not want us to be part of a generation that sits back while others move forward. I was touched by what my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said: when trains were first offered from Birmingham to London, people said that canals were adequate. Let us not be that generation.

Let us make no mistake: this country can deliver major infrastructure projects, and we should have confidence that we can deliver HS2. We have already delivered the 2012 Olympics and Crossrail—two examples of what we can achieve when we are ambitious, believe in our ability as a nation to get big infrastructure projects done, and commit to investing in our country and in our future. This Government have a vision for a stronger, fairer country within an economy that works for everyone. Infrastructure is at the heart of our industrial strategy and that for the north—for a modern country with a modern transport infrastructure to match. HS2 will play a vital role in this. I therefore commend this Bill, my first Bill, to the House.
HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL (MONEY)

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the Act, and
(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Orders Nos. 15 and 41A),

That at this day’s sitting the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Business of the House may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour, and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Ordered,

That in respect of the Motions in the name of Secretary Chris Grayling relating to

(1) the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill; and
(2) Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings not later than one and a half hours after the
HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL (COMMITTAL)

Ordered.
1. That the Bill be committed to a Select Committee of five members, all of whom are to be nominated by the Selection Committee.
2. That in determining the composition of the Select Committee the Selection Committee shall nominate three members from the Government and two from the Opposition.
3. That there shall stand referred to the Select Committee—
   (a) any petition against the Bill submitted to the Private Bill Office between 30 January 2018 and 26 February 2018, and
   (b) any petition which has been submitted to the Private Bill Office and in which the petitioners complain of any amendment as proposed in the filled-up Bill or of any matter which has arisen during the progress of the Bill before the Select Committee,

   (and references in this sub-paragraph to the submission of a petition are to its submission electronically, by post or in person).
4. That, notwithstanding the practice of the House that appearances on petitions against an opposed private bill are required to be entered at the first meeting of the Select Committee on the bill, in the case of any such petitions as are mentioned in paragraph 3(a) above on which appearances are not entered at that meeting, the Select Committee shall appoint a later day or days on which it will require appearances on those petitions to be entered.
5. That any petitioners whose petitions stand referred to the Select Committee shall, subject to the rules and orders of the House, be entitled to be heard upon their petition by themselves, their counsel, representatives or parliamentary agents provided that the petition is prepared in conformity with the rules and orders of the House; and the member in charge of the Bill shall be entitled to be heard through counsel or agents in favour of the Bill against any such petition.
6. That in applying the rules of the House in relation to parliamentary agents, any reference to a petitioner in person shall be treated as including a reference to a duly authorised member or officer of an organisation, group or body.
7. That the Select Committee have power to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from day to day the minutes of evidence taken before it.
8. That the Select Committee have power to make special reports from time to time.
9. That three be the quorum of the Select Committee.---(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL (INSTRUCTION)

Ordered.
That it be an Instruction to the Select Committee to which the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill is committed to deal with the Bill as follows:
1. The Committee shall treat the principle of the Bill, as determined by the House on the Bill's Second Reading, as comprising—
   (a) the provision of a high speed railway between a junction with Phase One of High Speed 2 near Fradley Wood, in Staffordshire, and a junction with the West Coast Mainline near Crewe in Cheshire,
2. (1) The Committee shall have power to consider any amendments proposed by the member in charge of the Bill which, if the Bill were a private bill, could not be made except upon petition for additional provision.
   (2) Sub-paragraph (1) applies only so far as the amendments proposed by the member in charge of the Bill fall within the principle of the Bill as provided for by paragraph 1 above.

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Ordered.
That the following provisions shall apply to proceedings on the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill:

Suspension at end of current Session
1. Further proceedings on the Bill shall be suspended from the day on which this Session of Parliament ends (“the current Session”) until the next Session of Parliament (“the next Session”).
2. If a Bill is presented in the next Session in the same terms as those in which the Bill stood when proceedings on it were suspended in the current Session—
   (a) the Bill so presented shall be ordered to be printed and shall be deemed to have been read the first and second time;
   (b) the Standing Orders and practice of the House applicable to the Bill, so far as complied with or dispensed with in the current Session, shall be deemed to have been complied with or (as the case may be) dispensed with in the next Session; and
   (c) the Bill shall be dealt with in accordance with—
      (i) paragraph 3, if proceedings in Select Committee were not completed when proceedings on the Bill were suspended,
      (ii) paragraph 4, if proceedings in Public Bill Committee were begun but not completed when proceedings on the Bill were suspended,
      (iii) paragraph 5, if the Bill was waiting to be considered when proceedings on it were suspended,
      (iv) paragraph 6, if the Bill was waiting for proceedings in legislative grand committee when proceedings on it were suspended,
      (v) paragraph 7, if the Bill was waiting for third reading when proceedings on it were suspended, or
      (vi) paragraph 8, if the Bill has been read the third time and sent to the House of Lords.
3. If this paragraph applies—
   (a) the Bill shall stand committed to a Select Committee of such Members as were members of the Committee when proceedings on the Bill were suspended in the current Session;
   (b) any instruction of the House to the Committee in the current Session shall be an instruction to the Committee on the Bill in the next Session;
   (c) all petitions submitted in the current Session which stand referred to the Committee and which have not been withdrawn, and any petition submitted between the day on which the current Session ends and the day on which proceedings on the Bill are resumed in the next Session in accordance with this Order, shall stand referred to the Committee in the next Session;

(b) in relation to the railway set out on the plans deposited in July 2017 in connection with the Bill in the office of the Clerk of the Parliaments and the Private Bill Office of the House of Commons, its broad route alignment, and
(c) the fact that there are to be no new stations on, or additional spurs from, the railway mentioned in sub-paragraph (b);
and those matters shall accordingly not be at issue during proceedings of the Committee.

(b) any petition which has been submitted to the Private Bill Office of the House of Commons, its broad route alignment, and
(c) the fact that there are to be no new stations on, or additional spurs from, the railway mentioned in sub-paragraph (b);
any minutes of evidence taken and any papers laid before the Committee in the current Session shall stand referred to the Committee in the next Session;

e) only those petitions mentioned in sub-paragraph (c), and any petition which may be submitted to the Private Bill Office and in which the petitioners complain of any proposed additional provision or of any matter which has arisen during the progress of the Bill before the Committee in the next Session, shall stand referred to the Committee;

f) any petitioners whose petitions stand referred to the Committee in the next Session shall, subject to the rules and orders of the House, be entitled to be heard upon their petition by themselves, their counsel, representatives or parliamentary agents provided that the petition is prepared and signed in conformity with the rules and orders of the House; and the Member in charge of the Bill shall be entitled to be heard through counsel or agents in favour of the Bill against any such petition;

(g) in applying the rules of the House in relation to parliamentary agents, any reference to a petitioner in person shall be treated as including a reference to a duly authorised member or officer of an organisation, group or body;

(h) the Committee shall have power to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from day to day minutes of evidence taken before it;

(i) the Committee shall have power to make special reports from time to time;

(j) three shall be the quorum of the Committee;

(k) any person registered in the current Session as a parliamentary agent entitled to practise as such in opposing Bills only who, at the time when proceedings on the Bill were suspended in the current Session, was employed in opposing the Bill shall be deemed to have been registered as such a parliamentary agent in the next Session.

4. If this paragraph applies, the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and to have been re-committed to a Public Bill Committee.

5. If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for consideration.

6. If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee and to have been considered, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for further consideration.

7. If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee, to have been considered and to have completed any proceedings in legislative grand committee, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for third reading.

8. If this paragraph applies, the Bill shall be deemed to have passed through all its stages in this House.

Other

9. In paragraph 1 above the reference to further proceedings does not include proceedings under Standing Order 224A(8) (deposit of supplementary environmental information).

10. In paragraph 3 above references to the submission of a petition are to its submission electronically, by post or in person.

That the above Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS-CREWE) BILL: SELECT COMMITTEE (ADDITIONAL SALARIES)

Ordered,

That the Order of the House of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009) be amended, in paragraph (1)(a), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Select Committee on the High Speed Rail (West Midlands–Crewe) Bill”.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Colombia) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 14 September 2017, be approved.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.) Question agreed to.

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

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Lesotho) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 14 September 2017, be approved.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 31 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With the leave of the House, we will take motions 11 to 14 together.

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

RATING AND VALUATION

That the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 20 December 2017, be approved.

BETTING, GAMBLING AND LOTTERIES

That the draft Gambling Act 2005 (Amendment of Schedule 6) Order, which was laid before this House on 14 December 2017, be approved.

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE Levy

That the draft Community Infrastructure Levy (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2017, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Transfer of Responsibility for Relevant Children (Extension to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 7 December 2017, be approved.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.) Question agreed to.

PETITION

Universal Credit Programme

7.17 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The roll-out of universal credit continues to be a matter of concern in my constituency. Some of my constituents have been temporarily unable to pay their bills because of the long
waiting period between one benefit and another, and
the bailiffs were sent around. There is clear evidence of
discrimination against women in the way in which the
system works. People who have made national insurance
contributions and lose their jobs do not get unemployment
benefit as they used to on the basis of six months' contribu-
tions if their husbands are in work. I am very
grateful to Samantha Townsend, who has collected some
1,100 signatures.

The petition states:
The petition of residents of Bishop Auckland, Shildon,
Spennymoor and Teesdale,
Declares that the Universal Credit programme is pushing
people into poverty, debt and homelessness.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges the Department for Work and Pensions to pause and fix
Universal Credit before its rollout in Bishop Auckland, Shildon,
Spennymoor and Teesdale.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

Helen Goodman

Lorry Parking

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

7.19 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): A
few weeks ago, in the early hours of the morning, a car
carrying four men crashed into a parked lorry on the
edge of the A2 just south of Faversham. Three of the
men were killed; the other was seriously injured. We
might never know exactly what happened, and I am
absolutely not blaming the lorry driver, but that stretch
of the A2 is a well-known spot for what we call lorry
fly-parking. Fly-parking is when lorries park in lay-bys
or on slip roads, hard shoulders, pavements or verges,
often at the edge of busy roads such as the A2, the A20
and the A249 in my constituency. Sometimes they also
park up quiet country lanes or in industrial estates and
housing estates. In general, these are places where lorries
should not be parked for more than the few minutes
that might be needed for a delivery or an unexpected
stop. Sometimes they park legally, and sometimes illegally.
Sometimes they park perfectly safely, albeit inconveni-
tenly, but at other times, unfortunately, they park danger-
ously.

This was not the first fatality in my constituency
involving a parked lorry. A 74-year-old woman died
after crashing into a lorry parked on the hard shoulder
at junction 7 of the M20 a couple of years ago. Whatever
the cause of the latest crash, this horrific accident
should focus our minds on the problem, focus our
attention on the need for more lorry parking spaces,
and focus our energies on ending lorry fly-parking.
Lorry fly-parking is dangerous. There is a danger to
other motorists from lorries lined up, bumper to bumper,
in lay-bys, sometimes jutting precariously out into the
road. There is a danger to the police officers who risk
their lives walking along the hard shoulder at night with
hundreds of cars speeding by as they move alongside
illegally parked trucks. There is also a danger to the
lorry drivers themselves when they are in charge of a
heavy goods vehicle but have not had a proper rest. A
busy roadside with traffic thundering past is hardly a
good place to get a proper night’s sleep.

The haulage industry is, rightly, tightly regulated.
Drivers must record their hours on a tachograph and
take breaks every four and a half hours. When the time
comes to stop, they have to stop, but the roadside is not
only a bad place to sleep, but a pretty bad place to stop
off in general for a driver, as it has no security, no
facilities, no showers and not even toilets. That is hardly
helpful for an industry that would like to attract more
women. From the point of view of most of my constituents
—those who are not lorry drivers—they see extra litter
and pretty disgusting other stuff on the roadside, and
anyone who needs to pull into a lay-by on a main road
can forget it, because they are already full.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon.
Lady for allowing me to intervene. Northern Ireland is
heavily reliant on cargo being freighted by ship and then
by lorry, so this issue concerns us greatly. We must
ensure that there are safe and secure areas for lorry
drivers to park, not only to enable them to stay within
their hours under EU legislation, but to keep them and
those who come into contact with them safe. Does she
agree that we should look into providing parking facilities so that those living in residential areas do not have to listen to idling lorries and so that those who drive the lorries can be safe?

**Helen Whately:** I completely agree that this is about making things better for residents and ensuring that lorry drivers have the facilities that they need. I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for bringing a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate.

Lorry parking is not a new problem, but it is growing worse and it is time to fix it. So what is the answer? Everyone we speak to, including the Road Haulage Association, the Freight Transport Association, Highways England, local councillors and our constituents, will give the same common-sense answer: we must build more lorry parks. That seems deceptively simple. We know that there is demand for more truck stops. For instance, Kent County Council’s surveys show that we have around 900 lorries a night parking inappropriately. Lorry parks in Kent are turning lorries away. Ashford lorry park turned away 252 trucks in a single night last year, so the demand is clearly there. Kent County Council has been taking action by identifying possible locations for new truck stops and talking to lorry park operators to gauge their interest. Indeed, the Ashford lorry park just yesterday submitted a planning application to expand from 390 to 600 places. Those extra places will be helpful, but the number still falls far short of the 900 extra places needed in Kent. As freight volumes continue to grow with the growing economy, one can predict that that shortfall will only increase.

However, that prompts a question: given that commercial operators run service stations and lorry parks in the UK, why have more truck stops not stepped up to serve the demand? What can we do to ensure that the shortfall in parking places is met, and quickly? What conversations has the Minister had with lorry park operators about what is stopping them expanding? What investigations has he made to determine how we can encourage planning applications for truck stops that can make their way in? Applications for truck stops that can make their way in have been taking action by identifying possible locations for new truck stops and talking to lorry park operators to gauge their interest. Indeed, the Ashford lorry park just yesterday submitted a planning application to expand from 390 to 600 places. Those extra places will be helpful, but the number still falls far short of the 900 extra places needed in Kent. As freight volumes continue to grow with the growing economy, one can predict that that shortfall will only increase.

However, that prompts a question: given that commercial operators run service stations and lorry parks in the UK, why have more truck stops not stepped up to serve the demand? What can we do to ensure that the shortfall in parking places is met, and quickly? What conversations has the Minister had with lorry park operators about what is stopping them expanding? What investigations has he made to determine how we can encourage planning applications for truck stops that can make their way in? Applications for truck stops that can make their way in have been taking action by identifying possible locations for new truck stops and talking to lorry park operators to gauge their interest. Indeed, the Ashford lorry park just yesterday submitted a planning application to expand from 390 to 600 places. Those extra places will be helpful, but the number still falls far short of the 900 extra places needed in Kent. As freight volumes continue to grow with the growing economy, one can predict that that shortfall will only increase.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Just as in Faversham and Mid Kent, my constituency experiences a lot of lorry traffic and much of its economy is based on logistics. The Department for Transport focuses heavily on rail—often for good reason—but with the majority of haulage and freight travelling by road, does my hon. Friend agree that the Department needs to consider both rail and road provision? When looking at road provision, the Department needs to consider not just the infrastructure of the roads themselves, but lorry parking and good-quality facilities as a priority.

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for making the point that investing in road infrastructure, as we are doing in this country, goes hand in hand with planning for where lorries will park and the facilities that drivers will need. No major road investment should be planned without facilities for the motorists and lorry drivers who will use the roads.

As we provide more parking places, we must ensure that drivers use them, and I welcome the signals the Government have been sending about effective enforcement. For example, they have supported the enforcement pilot that is currently under way in Ashford, where lorries are being clamped the first time they park illegally. The pilot has successfully reduced reoffending and the message is getting through, because only one lorry has been clamped twice and all fines have been paid. My hon. Friend the Minister has kindly contributed to that success by allowing the local authority to increase the fines that it can charge, meaning that the council is no longer left out of pocket when lorries are clamped, and I thank him for that. If the clamping pilot continues to get results, I hope that it can be rolled out across Kent and then throughout the country. Eventually, we should have a complete ban on lorries parking for long breaks outside truck stops. However, as drivers have told me many times, it is only reasonable to enforce a ban on lorry fly-parking if there are enough legitimate places for lorries to park.

As I have said, Kent is disproportionately affected by lorry fly-parking because most of the UK’s road freight travels along the M20 and then across the channel or, alternatively, down the M2 and A2 and then down to the channel crossings in Kent. The Port of Dover handles 10,000 HGVs a day. Although we feel the problem so particularly in Kent, it is a national one, and I know from colleagues that there are lorries lining up on many trunk roads across the country. Perhaps at some point in the future we will have self-driving lorries, which I assume will not need to stop to sleep, but that is not going to happen for some years—probably some decades—so we must do something about the issue in the meantime. My hon. Friend the Minister gets that, as did his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), and I thank them for the hard work that they have put in so far.

To conclude, may I just say to the Minister that if we are to achieve the vision of a dynamic country that is fit for the future, we need the right infrastructure to keep the economy moving? The current situation is unacceptable for lorry drivers, for other motorists, and for residents who live in the places that have become improvised truck stops. It is also dangerous. We need more lorry parks, better facilities for drivers and effective enforcement. In that way, we can end lorry fly-parking and make our roads safer.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this debate about lorry parking, a subject we know from previous debates, including the one last October, is of great importance to Members who represent parts of the country and communities adversely affected by lorry fly-parking. She has been a vigorous and dogged campaigner on this issue. As I recently heard at a roundtable of road freight stakeholders—I hasten to reassure her that that was one of many regular meetings I have with the industry and its stakeholders—it is just as much a concern for trade bodies and driver unions.
My Department is, as one would expect, considering the issue not merely in relation to Kent, although that is of central importance, for reasons I will outline, but on a national basis. But it does have particular salience in Kent and we should be clear about that. The Dover strait ports handle a considerable majority of the entire country’s international road freight, thus creating a particular challenge in relation to HGV traffic in that county. Road freight plays an indispensable role in keeping our economy moving, and we must not lose sight of that fact, but we must also be mindful of the adverse effects it can have on communities, which my hon. Friend has well delineated, and do our best to mitigate them.

I understand that fly-parking can blight localities such as lay-bys, which are not intended for overnight parking and do not generally have even the most basic facilities. I want my hon. Friend to know that colleagues across the Department share that view. In addition to the environmental consequences of fly-parking, she has drawn attention to the potential road safety risks it can pose. Of course, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the particular causes of the tragic incident she referred to, but, speaking generically, I am grateful to her for highlighting, through it, the potentially devastating consequences of unsafe parking. We must be quite clear: dangerous parking is never acceptable. As is set out in the Highway Code, it is an offence to park in a dangerous position, and such behaviour is rightly the subject of active enforcement by the police. As she has noted, there are provisions in the drivers’ hours rules to enable drivers to depart from the standard limits in order to reach a safe stopping place, so these requirements are no excuse for unsafe parking. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that there is a shortage of overnight lorry parking in Kent and more widely. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) noted, facilities to enable HGV drivers to take a proper break, in a safe and secure environment and with access to welfare amenities, should be seen as a key part of our national infrastructure.

However, the situation, although complex, is far from hopeless. A number of initiatives are under way which should help to make a real difference and to address the current supply and demand mismatch. I am encouraged by plans in the private sector to bring additional parking provision to the market. In particular, as my hon. Friend suggested, planning is a major concern. Motorway service areas are also an important part of the picture, as they provide around half the 15,000 lorry parking spaces throughout the country. The Department for Transport circular that covers planning and roadside facilities on the strategic road network was changed in 2013 to help to enable applications to be considered more efficiently. Nevertheless, developers still take a significant financial risk that, at the planning stage, proposals will be turned down or suffer lengthy delays, even when those developers can be rationally certain that there is significant demand.

Some providers are keen to bring forward innovative business models—for example, by combining truck parks with other services, such as refuelling and services for general motorists. Such models can pose some challenges for planning decisions, including in respect of the need to ensure that different business models are treated fairly in the planning system and in relation to providers’ obligations to pay for the necessary highway access.

Planning permission can, then, be one of the key obstacles to development. In this context, we are examining how best to ensure that the strategic importance of adequate lorry parking is given due weight in planning decisions. However, we should acknowledge that some of the planning challenges reflect the legitimate concerns of local residents and other stakeholders, as one would expect, and each application must be considered on its merits.

This is not just a question of planning risk; it goes to the nature of the business itself. Truck parks are often low-margin businesses, and they require significant space. In that context, the commercial viability of potential truck parks can be limited by the preference of some drivers to park for free by the roadside. Enforcement against inappropriate parking must go alongside the provision of truck parks. It is an important part of the overall solution. By cracking down on the ability to park up for free in inappropriate locations, we should help to provide the market with confidence that demand for proper parking facilities will be there.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend has been so supportive of the enforcement measures that are being piloted on a stretch of the A20, including our “clamp first time”
approach. Since I last addressed the House on this subject, that trial has got under way, and we are closely monitoring the results. As my hon. Friend has noticed, I recently authorised Ashford Borough Council to use a higher clamping-release fee, to ensure that the trial remains financially viable.

Early indications are that the trial is going well. In the first few weeks of the 18-month trial, there was no identified displacement into residential areas or other industrial estates in Ashford. The initial signs are that there is a reduction in the level of illegal parking and we are hopeful that over time it will further decrease to a significant extent. I am aware that other councils would be keen to implement similar measures; that could well be a long-term outcome if the trial proves successful, and I know that my hon. Friend gave that suggestion her support in her speech.

It is important to draw well-supported conclusions from the pilot before considering any wider roll-out that may have national implications. However, the local willingness to enforce this robustly should make it clear to potential developers that public authorities can play a part in ensuring that market demand is there if additional provision is forthcoming on the supply side.

Across the country, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has recently begun to issue £300 fixed penalties to drivers caught taking their 45-hour weekly rest in inappropriate locations such as lay-bys. Almost all of those caught so far have been non-GB drivers. Records of such offending will feed into cross-border intelligence sharing about problematic operators at the corporate level.

Before wrapping up, I should take this opportunity to make it clear that we have not lost sight of the importance of the driver welfare dimension to lorry parking. As my hon. Friend highlights, this is all the more pertinent in the context of the industry’s efforts to attract young people and women into driving. Although it should be noted that there are a wide range of jobs in the industry, many of those do not entail overnight stays. In that context, we have reviewed the health and safety regulations in relation to facilities for visiting drivers at distribution centres. I am pleased to say that, as a consequence, the Health and Safety Executive has clarified that drivers must have access to welfare facilities, including toilets, in the premises they visit as part of their work. My Department is working with stakeholders to draw up a statement of rights as to facilities to help to improve the standard of facilities available to drivers at distribution centres.

In addition to the quality of driver facilities at distribution centres, there are of course issues relating to the quantity of on-site parking at some of these developments. It is important, too, to note that local planning authorities should challenge developers to ensure that there is sufficient on-site parking to avoid the displacement of waiting lorries to the surrounding area.

We know that the quality of facilities could be better at some overnight lorry parks, including some motorway service areas—of that there can be no doubt. In this context, I am encouraged by market initiatives to increase the transparency around the facilities available, which should help to drive up standards over time.

Let us be clear that the Government are considering the issue of lorry parking with the importance that it deserves. We will continue to seek out opportunities to facilitate more and better quality provision alongside our industry and local government partners.

Question put and agreed to.

7.41 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—
Cross-border Economic Opportunities

2. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps he is taking to support cross-border economic opportunities.

9. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support cross-border economic opportunities.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Last week, I hosted the first cross-border Severn growth summit in Newport. More than 350 people attended the event, all looking to strengthen the economic links between south Wales and the south-west. Through our industrial strategy, we want to build on this cross-border collaboration and help create prosperous communities throughout the whole of Wales.

Daniel Kawczynski: Shrewsbury, the county town of Shropshire, relies very heavily on trade with our friends and neighbours across the border in Wales. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his counterparts in the Welsh Assembly about dualling the A5, which crosses the border between England and Wales? Will he join me in paying tribute to my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who has campaigned assiduously, but who has been very badly injured in a riding accident and is recuperating at home?

Mr Speaker: We wish the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) a full and speedy recovery, but the fullness of the recovery is more important than its speed.

Alun Cairns: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). Both are assiduous and relentless in their pursuit of the dualling of the A5. I would point them to the second road investment strategy for England. I liaise with the Welsh Government Minister Ken Skates regularly to pursue the issue, because it works for much better co-operation if we bring together investment priorities. My hon. Friend’s efforts are paying significant dividends in the negotiations.

Sir David Amess: Every “Gavin and Stacey” fan knows that the journey from Essex to Wales involves the most expensive toll bridge charges in the country, so I am delighted that this Conservative Government have removed the burden of crossing the border for tourists, businesses and commuters generally. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how he intends to capitalise on that wonderful news?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us of that iconic “Gavin and Stacey” scene where Smithy is struggling to get into Wales because he has to pay the £6.70 toll charge to cross the bridge. I would point out to my hon. Friend that tolls have been reduced by 20% in the interim, and by the end of the year they will be abolished. That will be one of the biggest stimuli for the Welsh economy in decades. It will provide the opportunity for more and better-paid jobs, and a £100 million boost to the Welsh economy. This is an opportunity for the south-west of England and south Wales to come together as an economic powerhouse to provide better opportunities in the western side of the UK.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My constituents who work in Bristol and beyond have to put up with chronically overcrowded rail services as fares increase. Will the Secretary of State talk to UK Government Transport Ministers—rail services are not devolved—to sort this out?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady makes an important point about public transport in general. The Great Western franchise is out for consultation as we speak, and I encourage her, her constituents and south Wales Members to make representations about the improvements they would like. She talked about overcrowding, but one of the most overcrowded roads in the UK is around the Brynglas tunnels in Newport. I hope the Welsh Government get on with building that road sooner rather than later. After all, the UK Government made money available more than three years ago, and we are frustrated by the lack of response and reaction in building it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Since assuming office, the Secretary of State has broken a promise to electrify the main line to Swansea; vetoed devolving airport taxes to Wales because he does not want to upset Bristol airport; and not delivered on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Is not the reality that his record on the economy is failure, failure, failure?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed with the hon. Gentleman’s tone. I would point to significant wins for Wales over recent years, the most important of which is the fair funding settlement, which provided a 5% uplift—it will be a £67 million uplift in the next financial year and similar sums in subsequent years. Thirteen years of underfunding by the Labour party have been corrected in the first year of a Conservative Administration.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for inviting my district council and my tourism industry to his Severn growth summit. I am also grateful that the tolls will be removed, given that the old Severn bridge is half in my constituency...
and the gateway to Gloucestershire, not just Wales. May I urge him, as he continues these cross-border opportunities, fully to involve business and industry in my constituency so that we can take full advantage of growth in the western part of our country?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s support for the call to abolish the Severn tolls, because that really will be a major boost to his constituency and constituencies across the whole of south Wales. After all, can he imagine a £6.70 charge to do any business between Cardiff and Newport and the impact that that would have? Well, that is really what has been in place between his constituency and the south Wales economy for more than 50 years. Abolishing the tolls is a commitment on which I am pleased to be able to deliver.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), to his place. They say the first time is always the worst. I understand that he was born on Ynys Môn and that he was a member of the Labour party. We would like to welcome him back, but we might be full.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I would like to congratulate the Welsh Assembly: there was an announcement by Stonewall this morning that it is the No. 1 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employer in the UK. I will not mention that Swansea City beat Arsenal 3-1 last night.

Manufacturers across the UK consider the world-leading tidal lagoon industry a lifeline for their businesses. Thousands of skilled jobs in cross-border factories are earmarked to supply the lagoons, and they are at risk because the UK Government cannot make a decision. The Secretary of State has said many times that he would love it to happen. The Welsh Labour Government have pledged millions to the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Hendry says, “It’s a no regrets decision.” Has the Secretary of State anything constructive to report? In the words of Gavin and Stacey, “What’s occurring?”

Alun Cairns: I join the hon. Lady in recognising the Welsh Assembly for its recognition by Stonewall; that is something to be accepted, underlined and recognised. I also recognise, as a City supporter, the success that Swansea had last night. She raises an important point about the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. As I have said previously, I really would like this to happen, as would the whole of the UK Government. After all, we gave planning permission for it after the 2015 general election. We would like to see progress on it, but, clearly, it must be value for money. The Welsh Government have communicated with the UK Government about something that they call “an offer”. Last week, officials from my office, the Welsh Government, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy met to establish what this offer amounts to. We will continue discussions. I point out to her that she needs to look at the jobs that will be created in the long term, and not those thousands of jobs that she talked about, because the project itself will deliver 40 or more jobs.

Christina Rees: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the jobs, because these cross-border jobs include local government apprenticeships for 16 and 17-year-olds. They are now at risk because of the UK Government’s dithering. Now that the Welsh Labour Government are introducing votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in local government elections in Wales, are the UK Government worried that Welsh young people will be able to vote on their future, vote for apprenticeships and vote for tidal lagoons?

Alun Cairns: Apprenticeships are part of the UK Government’s manifesto, and we are grateful to the Welsh Government and recognise that they have followed the ambition that we set out for apprenticeships. I also point out and pay tribute to the Welsh Government for their action over changing the voting structures, but remind the hon. Lady about who gave them the power to do that in the first place, after it was refused for 13 years by Labour.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Is the Minister aware that the Welsh Affairs Committee has invited the First Minister of Wales to come before us and spell out exactly what the offer is and that, so far, he has refused to do so? If there is a serious offer from Welsh Labour to support tidal lagoons, does he agree that the Welsh First Minister should reconsider, come before the Committee and tell us exactly what it is that he is offering us?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend as Chair of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs—a position in which he has been vociferous in pursuing these sorts of issues and the case for value for money. He has invited the First Minister to give evidence to his Committee. I would have thought that the First Minister would want to respond positively to that invitation, if he wants to be seen to be doing everything—and, indeed, to do everything—to make this project come about and to prove the value-for-money case that we seek.

**Universal Credit**

3. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing the time taken to make universal credit payments in Wales.

6. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing the time taken to make universal credit payments in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llefarydd. Rwyn ddiolechgar i’r cydweithwyr am y croeso cynnes.

At the Budget, the Chancellor announced that all claimants will be eligible for universal credit from the first day that they claim it, removing the seven waiting days.

Hugh Gaffney: Och aye the noo! The Opposition welcomed the U-turn by the Chancellor, increasing the waiting time for universal credit from six weeks to five weeks, but this does not go far enough. Household claimants in Wales and across the country are still suffering from rising debts, housing arrears and...
evictions. Will the Minister stand up for universal credit claimants in Wales by asking his Cabinet colleagues to reduce the waiting time further?

**Stuart Andrew:** I loved the hon. Gentleman's introduction. The need for reform was absolutely clear. Under the old system, people had to go to the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the local housing authority and, potentially, more organisations. We are now simplifying the process so that we have a system that encourages people into work. Surely, we should all welcome that. We are rolling the scheme out slowly to ensure that we are learning lessons, and that is exactly what we have done. The Chancellor made the announcement in the Budget so that we improve the system to ensure that people have the money they need when they apply.

**Gerald Jones:** The DWP's own analysis shows that half those with rent arrears under universal credit said that they had gone into arrears after making a claim. Is the Minister content with the fact that more Welsh families who were not previously in arrears have begun 2018 in debt following their claim for universal credit?

**Stuart Andrew:** That is exactly why we made the announcements in the Budget. Now, households who already claim housing benefit will automatically receive an additional two weeks of housing benefit when they claim universal credit. We are responding to the lessons that we are learning, and we will continue to do so as we roll out the project.

**Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con):** I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. May I urge him, in looking at the administrative changes to universal credit, not to lose sight of the overarching goal, which is to have a simpler welfare system that actually encourages people into work—a far cry from the old system that it is replacing?

**Stuart Andrew:** I am delighted to take a question from my hon. Friend, and I mean that in the sincerest sense. He is absolutely right. Unemployment in Wales is currently 73,000, which represents a decrease of 52,000 since 2010. People are going back into work because universal credit is encouraging that. Under the old system, people who worked a minute over 16 hours would lose their whole jobseeker’s allowance. There was no incentive to get into work, which is why we have introduced this new system.

**Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab):** I too offer my congratulations to the Minister on his elevation to his new position—llongyfarchiadau.

Waiting times are important to all claimants, but none more so than the terminally ill—those who the DWP expects to live for less than six months. The DWP's own data shows that personal independence payment claimants who are terminally ill have their claims reassessed at the rate of seven in 100 in the south-east and 17 in 100 in Wales, which is the highest rate in the country. Why is there such a huge variance, and will the Minister join me in requesting a meeting with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to discuss these issues?

**Stuart Andrew:** First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the warm welcome, which I much appreciate. It is important to recognise that, with PIP, we are bringing in a system to try to help people live with the conditions they have. If we compare the systems, 29% of PIP claimants are receiving the highest possible support, compared with just 15% for disability living allowance. I have only been in this job a few weeks, but I will be taking this up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and will report back.

**Mr Speaker:** We need to speed up a bit, because we have a lot of questions to get through. What we need now is pithy questions without excessively demonstrative behaviour.

### Broadband: Rural Areas

4. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What progress has been made on the roll-out of high-speed broadband in rural Wales; and if he will make a statement. [903564]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew):** Superfast broadband is now available to more than 19 out of 20 UK homes and businesses, including 95% of premises in Wales. That underlines the progress made in recent years thanks to our investment of £69 million in Wales, plus an additional £56 million gainshare to be reinvested.

**Michael Fabricant:** That investment is working. In Gwynedd, for example, it was previously only possible to get a download speed of 0.9 megabits per second. In Merionethshire, Openreach has now given fibre to the home that delivers at least 75 megabits per second. That is great, but what can the Government do to provide a legal obligation for everyone to have a right to broadband?

**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the importance of good connectivity through broadband, particularly in our rural areas, if we are to maximise the economic benefits. We have decided that regulation is the best way to ensure that everyone in the UK has a decent broadband connection. A regulatory universal service obligation will give everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 megabits per second by 2020.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): May I genuinely welcome the Anglesey-born Under-Secretary to his place? The last Anglesey-born Tory Minister was Sir Wyn Roberts, so he has very big shoes to fill. The success of the broadband roll-out in Wales is due to the partnership between the European Union, Government here in Westminster and Government in Wales, working with BT. Will the Minister assure us that in 2020 there will not be a cliff edge and that we will have transitional money from Europe, so that we can roll out to 100%?

**Stuart Andrew:** I am grateful to have such a welcome from someone I have known for many years. I am very grateful. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): You were a young socialist then!
Stuart Andrew: No, actually I was a member of the Young Conservatives then. We are determined to roll out broadband and to achieve the 2020 target. It will be incumbent on us, as the UK Government, to work with the Welsh Government to ensure that broadband is rolled out to every part.

Ben Lake: Ceredigion has among the slowest broadband speeds in the UK. Despite that, indeed the whole of Wales was left out of the UK Government programme to provide full fibre broadband to six areas across England and Scotland. Will the Minister confirm that representations were made to his Government to ensure that Wales was included in that programme? What explanation was he given for its omission?

Stuart Andrew: Let us not forget that the roll-out of broadband is the responsibility of the Welsh Government. As the hon. Gentleman will know, because we have already had a conversation about this, this could form an important part of the mid-Wales growth deal. That will be incredibly important in making a successful growth deal for the area.

Stephen Crabb: For the households in Pembrokeshire in my constituency, broadband is the responsibility of the Welsh Government. Will the Minister provide assurance that he will keep working with colleagues in the UK Government and Welsh Government to see that we connect up the whole of Wales?

Stuart Andrew: I absolutely accept that we have to ensure that broadband is rolled out to every part of Wales. Pembrokeshire is equally important, and my right hon. Friend is a big champion of his constituency and area. I am a little bit disappointed in the Welsh Government’s roll-out priorities, but we will continue to work to ensure that we deliver the roll-out that we have promised and envisaged.

Cross-border Transport

5. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on improving cross-border transport links between Wales and England.

Mike Amesbury: If providing funding to remove the tolls from the Severn bridge is good enough for the people of Wales, why not extend such a generous Government offer to the people of Chester and Merseyside and do away with the tolls on the Mersey Gateway?

Alun Cairns: The tolls on the Severn crossing have been there for more than 50 years, and the Mersey Gateway bridge has very different levels of tolls from those that were levied on the Severn crossing. Locals will not have to pay on the Mersey Gateway bridge, other than the £10 administration fee; locals around the Severn tolls have had to pay the full charge for 50 years.

Justin Madders: My constituents were pleased to see a commitment to fund a business case to improve the Wrexham to Bidston line in the autumn Budget, but we have not actually had any progress since then. We would really like to see some improvements in both efficiency and frequency on that line, so can the Secretary of State update us on what progress has been made with respect to that?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who has highlighted the importance of the Wrexham to Bidston line. It forms part of our cross-border growth strategy and is reflected in the UK’s industrial strategy. I spoke with the Welsh Government’s Transport Minister on Monday to discuss the project and we will be updating the hon. Gentleman and the House in due course.

Christian Matheson: The industrial areas around my constituency, which include Airbus in Broughton and Deeside Industrial Park, absolutely depend on the M56 running smoothly. Has the Secretary of State had any conversations with Highways England, or his counterparts in the Transport Department, about when we shall get that motorway unclogged and running smoothly?

Alun Cairns: Again, the hon. Gentleman highlights the importance of cross-border connectivity. I would point him to the second road investment strategy for England, which will provide an opportunity to highlight the priority. A million people a week cross that border between north Wales and the north-west of England; 2,000 go to Airbus alone.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK Government’s investment in the Halton curve significantly improves rail services between my constituency and north Wales, and that there was a missed opportunity with the Welsh Labour Government in the failure to include that train line in the TEN-T network in the last round of European funding?

Alun Cairns: The Halton curve, which is approaching £18 million in terms of the spending cap, is an exciting project because it is a relatively simple, straightforward investment that will bring direct services to Liverpool again, improving cross-border connectivity, and releasing new opportunities for economic growth and development. We want to integrate it into both the north-west of England and the Wales and borders franchises.
Welsh EU Continuity Bill

7. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on proposals for a Welsh EU continuity Bill. [903567]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): We continue to have constructive discussions with the Welsh Government on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, with a view to securing the National Assembly’s support for the legislation. The Welsh Government have not discussed with us their proposals for an EU continuity Bill, but we do believe that such legislation will be unnecessary.

David Linden: So bad has the Westminster power grab become that on 17 January the National Assembly unanimously, including the Conservatives, supported a motion on Plaid Cymru’s continuity Bill. Both sitting devolved Administrations have now rejected this constitutional embezzlement. Can the Minister confirm that Ministers will not meddle any further in respect of devolved Administrations?

Stuart Andrew: First, I do not believe that the continuity Bill is actually needed. We are engaging heavily, at every level of government, with the devolved Administrations to ensure that we go through the EU (Withdrawal) Bill to ensure that the clauses that we want to amend in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill is actually needed. We are engaging heavily, at every level of government, with the devolved Administrations.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very short of time. I will call the hon. Gentleman if it is a single short sentence; otherwise, we won’t bother. Blurt it out, man.

Stephen Kerr: When will the Government publish their framework analysis and their proposed wording for the amendment to clause 11 of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill?

Stuart Andrew: We are continually engaging. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are going to Wales tomorrow to meet the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly, so that we can get the further detail of those discussions and bring forward the amendments as soon as possible.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Hoffwn gymryd y cyfle i groesawr’r Gweinidog i’w barchus, arswydus swydd. The Minister will recall the Scottish Secretary claiming there to be a Scotland-specific economic impact assessment, only to contradict himself a week later. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady should not be disquieted in any way. I think the robin is keenly attending to her words.

Liz Saville Roberts: It appears now that regional assessments do exist. Which road will the Minister take? Will he confirm that a Welsh assessment has been produced, or will he concede that the Government are so heedless of Wales’s future that there is no such assessment?

Stuart Andrew: I know that Bristol City’s emblem is a robin, so maybe it is trying to interfere with Welsh questions.

We have many assessments as we go through this process. We will look at all of them in great detail and ensure that we come up with an effective resolution that suits every single part of the United Kingdom, because having a statute book that is fit for purpose is incredibly important once we leave the European Union.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister in that case ensure that he shares those assessments, not by Twitter, but also with all Members and all members of the Welsh public?

Stuart Andrew: Obviously, we will make things available at the appropriate time, but I can assure the hon. Lady that I will not be sharing things like that on Twitter.

Mr Speaker: I am going to allow a little injury time, because I do not want the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) to feel left out.

Leaving the EU: Welsh Economy

8. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on the Welsh economy of the UK leaving the EU. [903569]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on new opportunities that leaving the European Union brings to Wales and the UK. Wales was the fastest-growing nation in the UK in 2016 and is well placed to seize the opportunities presented.

Bambos Charalambous: Will the Minister reassure the House and businesses across Wales by confirming that arrangements will be put in place to ensure that new trade deals negotiated after leaving the European Union do not undermine devolved policies?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman points to the opportunities for new trade deals, which are exciting for every part of the United Kingdom. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has re-established the UK’s Board of Trade. We have the privilege of having Lord Rowe-Beddoe, a former chairman of the Welsh Development Agency, as well as Heather Stevens, a very successful business lady, who is part of the Board of Trade and will be looking after Welsh interests on all occasions.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): How will the Secretary of State guarantee that integrated supply chains with the EU will be preserved when Britain leaves the European Union?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are working to deliver a trade agreement that leads to frictionless trade between the UK and the European Union, but I would also point out that, as 80% of Welsh exports go to the rest of the UK, maintaining the integrity of the UK market should be our first priority.
Q1. [903646] Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 31 January.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply. Mr right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in China, building on the existing strong ties between our two countries, and she is accompanied by the largest business delegation that this Government have yet led.

Ian Mearns: A number of Carillion employees and former employees live in my constituency; indeed, the company has an apprenticeship training centre in Gateshead. They all still face an uncertain future. Will the Government act now to prevent similar corporate theft, whereby pirate directors have syphoned off what should have been hundreds of millions of pounds in pension contributions to pay bogus dividends and unearned corporate bonuses to themselves? Exactly what action do the Government propose to take?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the anxiety that must be affecting the apprentices and their families in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. He probably heard me say during last week’s debates that the Construction Industry Training Board has taken responsibility for finding alternative employers to enable all those apprentices who were with Carillion to continue and complete their qualifications. It is making good progress in that work, but I shall ensure that the particular concern that he has expressed about Gateshead is brought to its attention.

On the broader question, the House will understand that it would be wrong for me to pre-empt findings by an independent inquiry by the official receiver, but we have already made it clear that we will be publishing proposals later this year to stop directors being able to siphon off pension funds in the way the hon. Gentleman described.

Q2. [903647] Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the country faces significant cyber-threats from other countries and from non-state actors. He will also be aware that we are protected from those by our security and intelligence services, including the men and women at GCHQ in my county of Gloucestershire. When the Government publish the results of the security review, will he confirm that we will continue, as we have since 2010, to invest in those capabilities to keep our country safe?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct and I am happy to give him that assurance on behalf of the Government. The sad truth is that, in this country, we face a growing threat of cyber-attacks from serious crime gangs and from hacking groups. We do have a robust national cyber-security strategy to protect critical services, including our democratic processes, and that is underpinned by nearly £2 billion of Government investment.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me start by welcoming the Minister back to his role deputising for the Prime Minister. The last time he did so was in December 2016, when the Conservative party was 17 points ahead in the polls, and he told the House that the Labour party was “quarrelling like” in the film “Mutiny on the Bounty” as re-shot by the ‘Carry On’ team.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2016: Vol. 618, c. 208.]

Well, what a difference a year makes.

But I am not going to intrude further on the Government’s public grief, because I genuinely hope that we can reach consensus across this House today on a very important issue. Next Tuesday will be the centenary of women gaining the right to vote in Britain; that was followed later in 1918 by a second right, to stand for Parliament. I am sure that the Minister will agree that we have a long way to go with regard to the second right; after all, I am the only Emily elected since 1918, and he is one of 155 Davids. The women behind me on the Labour Benches represent one quarter of all the women elected in the last 100 years, but it is still not good enough. Will the Minister tell us how we can best increase female representation in this House?

Mr Lidington: May I first thank the right hon. Lady for her words of welcome? Clearly, my previous remarks struck a chord with her, to have been treasured in the way that they have. It is a delight to me to see the right hon. Lady still in her place, when no fewer than 97 members of her Front Bench have either been sacked or have resigned since the Leader of the Opposition took office. I pay credit to her sticking power, although she must sometimes whisper to herself, “Surely, I’m a celebrity. Please get me out of here!”

The point that the right hon. Lady raised is a serious one. I think that all political parties represented here—she is right to seek to make this consensual—want to encourage more women candidates to come forward. I am pleased that the Conservative party, since I was first elected 25 years ago, has made very considerable progress, but I also accept that there is more to be done. I hope that she, for her part, will accept that we have now had two women leaders and Prime Ministers, so the Labour party has a bit of catching up to do.

Emily Thornberry: If the Conservative party is so proud of having a female leader, why are so many of them trying to get rid of her and why has she had to run away to China to get away from them? However, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer and I totally agree with his sentiments. Let me ask him about the first right that I mentioned, a right that millions of women received 100 years ago this week: the basic right to vote. It was originally restricted to women with property over the age of 30. Then 90 years ago, it was extended to all women over 21. Almost 50 years ago, it was extended to all men and women over the age of 18. I ask the right hon. Gentleman a simple question: how many more years do we have to wait until the vote is extended to everyone over 16?

Mr Lidington: The age of 18, rather than 16, is widely recognised as the age at which one becomes an adult and that is when full citizenship rights are attained. Only a handful of countries have a nationwide voting
age below 18 and we believe that it is right that the age of majority—18—should continue to be the age at which people become eligible to vote.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman makes international comparisons, but I have to say to him that it was this country and a Labour Government that led the way in Europe and the English-speaking world in reducing the voting age to 18 in 1969. Where we led, others followed, and it will be the same here.

Let me move on to a second question that I would like to ask the right hon. Gentleman. I have listened carefully to his answer, but I did not hear any logical explanation for the different rights that we give to 16-year-olds in this country. At 16, we are free from parental control, we can leave home, we can start a family, we can get married, we can start work, we can pay taxes and we can join the forces, so can he give us a logical explanation of why a 16-year-old should not have the right to vote?

Mr Lidington: I am slightly baffled by the right hon. Lady’s comments when compared with what her party did in office, because it was the last Labour Government who raised the legal age for buying cigarettes to 18, raised the age for sales of knives to 18, raised the age for buying fireworks to 18 and raised the age for using a sunbed to 18. If she wants a lesson in inconsistency, she might like to examine the mirror.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman mentions a range of restrictions that we have until the age of 18, but those are for the most part to do with public health, public safety and the prevention of crime. They are not the same as the basic right to vote on issues that affect your life once you are considered old enough to make other independent decisions about your life, such as leaving school, leaving home and getting married. Let me give him a specific example—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that it will not have escaped public notice, and it is rather a sad irony, that when a woman is addressing the House, quite a lot of noisy, boorish and, in one case rather stupid, individuals are trying to shout the right hon. Lady down. Cut it out!

Emily Thornberry: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

I want to give the right hon. Gentleman a specific example to illustrate what I am talking about. According to the Government's own figures, the number of 16 and 17-year-olds receiving carer’s allowance for looking after disabled relatives at home has risen by more than 50% over the past four years, so last year, over 2,000 16 and 17-year-olds gave up their youth and often their schooling to care for relatives at home. How can it be fair and how can it be logical to expect them to take on that responsibility because of failures of the state and then to deny them a say on how that very state is run?

Mr Lidington: The logic of the right hon. Lady’s argument is that she wishes to lower the age of majority from 18 to 16. She listed a number of areas in which she supported the age at which activity should be allowed to 18, on the grounds that only then could people be expected to have sufficient maturity and responsibility to have those rights. My argument to her is that the age of majority should be set matching both rights and responsibilities. I think that it is perfectly reasonable to say that, from the age of 18, we entrust young men and women to exercise those rights and responsibilities in full. On the final point she made, it is right that sensible local authorities have particular care for the role of young carers. In my experience, local authorities, whichever party runs them, make every effort to do that.

Emily Thornberry: I am genuinely surprised at the Minister’s response. This is what he said two years ago, speaking to the Youth Parliament:

“When the voice and the vote of young people is absent, decisions are taken that affect young people’s lives that they have not always chosen”.

Not for the first time in these exchanges, I have to say that I agree with him—all of us on the Labour Benches agree with him. Why does he no longer agree with himself?

Mr Lidington: If the right hon. Lady had been with me at the Youth Parliament, which was indeed both a memorable and an enjoyable occasion, she would have discovered that a significant number of the young men and women there were actually over the voting age. I fully support the role that the Youth Parliament plays, the role that its members play throughout the country and the role that organisations such as school councils play in getting young people used to the idea of exercising democratic responsibility. That seems to me to be excellent training for the full adult responsibilities they will inherit when they turn 18, and I hope that it will encourage more young people to go out and vote.

Emily Thornberry: The Minister says that he was only talking about 18 year olds, but you were there, Mr Speaker; he was talking to 370 under-18s. These discussions have revealed that there is no logical principled objection to votes at 16. That is why the Welsh and Scottish Governments support it and why every single political party in the House supports it, except, of course, the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party—joined, once again, in opposition to change. They are not the coalition of chaos; they are the coalition of cavemen. [Interruption.] Does he not realise—

Mr Speaker: Order. One Member who thinks he knows what he is talking about is gesticulating at me. The answer is that it is a matter of taste, not of order. It is blindingly obvious and should not really escape somebody of great intelligence.

Emily Thornberry: I was talking about cavemen, Mr Speaker. Why does the Minister not realise the lesson that we women taught his predecessors 100 years ago? When change is right it cannot be resisted forever, and this is a change whose time has come.

Mr Lidington: My advice to the right hon. Lady is to wean herself off the habit of watching old versions of “The Flintstones” on the relevant cartoon channel.

We ought to salute the fact that not just the Youth Parliament but many schools and other youth organisations throughout the country are working hard to get young people used to the idea that, as they grow up, they
should take an interest in current affairs and then, when they reach the relevant age, exercise the full rights and responsibilities of an adult by participating in elections and political campaigning. The situation here, with the national voting age at 18, is one that is followed by 26 out of the 27 other members of the EU and by the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Unless she is going to denounce all of those countries as somehow inadequate by her own particular standards, she ought to grow up and treat this subject with greater seriousness.

Q3. [903648] Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The Government’s policy on tax has made the UK one of the most competitive places to do business, as was confirmed by the recent growth figures. Does my right hon. Friend agree, therefore, that raising tax would damage the UK economy, as we have seen in Scotland, where growth has fallen behind the rest of the UK?

Mr Lidington: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend. We devolved new powers from this House to Holyrood, and it is obviously for the Scottish Government to determine how to use them. It is a matter of great regret, however, that they have chosen to use those powers to break their promises and penalise aspiration in Scotland. In our Budget, we increased the Scottish Government’s spending power by £2 billion, so the SNP has no excuse for hiking the taxes of hard-working people, including public servants, and penalising businesses. The leader of the Scottish nationalists in Westminster used to champion wealth creation and free enterprise. I hope he will ask the First Minister of Scotland to think again.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place. If the reports are true, he may be auditioning for a new role. I wonder if he is sending a “round robin” letter.

The Minister has previously said that “the Single Market is essential to this government’s agenda for trade and competitiveness.”

Since BuzzFeed published the leaked Brexit analysis, has the Minister recognised that the single market is essential to jobs and prosperity?

Mr Lidington: When we leave the European Union in March next year, we will, as a matter of legality, leave the single market and the EU customs union. The Prime Minister and the entire Government have also made it clear, in both the Lancaster House speech and the Florence speech, that we are seeking a new partnership with our neighbours in the European Union that will ensure that we continue to have frictionless trade, which is in the interest of not just our people but the people of every one of the 27 other EU countries.

Ian Blackford: I must say that I am surprised at the Minister, because it is not a question of legality. We are going to be in a transitional deal, so we will still be in the single market when we leave the EU.

This is a Government who are in crisis, and an international embarrassment. The Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Scottish Conservatives and the Home Secretary have all supported membership of the single market, but despite that, the Government are still prepared to make everyone poorer. Where is the leadership?

Mr Lidington: The leadership that the right hon. Gentleman wants was set out very clearly at Lancaster House and then again in Florence, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making further speeches on these issues in the weeks and months to come. Let me point out to him, however, that the single market that is most important to the people of Scotland is the single market of the United Kingdom, which is worth nearly £50 billion every year to the Scottish economy—four times more than trade with the European Union. It is our deep and special partnership with the EU in the future, not the separatist policies pursued by the Scottish National party, that will help to deliver prosperity to Scotland.

Q5. [903650] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend shares my passion for ensuring that all children have opportunities to succeed, regardless of who they are or where they come from. Can he tell us what progress the Government have made in reducing the attainment gap between less well off secondary school pupils and their peers, and—given their positive impact—when the round of free school applications will open?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government’s clear ambition and purpose is to ensure that our school system works for every child in every community in this country. Our reforms have already raised school standards. Nearly 2 million more children are attending good and outstanding schools, and since 2011 the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has shrunk by 10% at GCSE and by 10.5% at key stage 2. I know that Education Ministers will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about their plans to further improve standards in schools.

Q4. [903649] Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Last Sunday in my constituency, Reece Oduleye-Waters, who was just 17, was stabbed, with life-changing results.

The knife crime that is happening across our country is not being driven by minors and young people; it is being driven by gangsters, organised criminals, and dirty money. Cocaine alone is worth £12 billion to the market in this country, with 100 tonnes of it crossing our borders. So I ask the Minister this: why are we cutting our border force, why are we cutting our police, and why has London been offered, in the violence reduction strategy, a community fund of only half a million pounds? No one could buy a house for half a million in London.

Mr Lidington: I, like every other Member of this House, have nothing but the most heartfelt sympathy for Reece and his family and friends for the most appalling experience that they have endured and are still living through. The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that there are complex causes of the knife crime we are seeing. I agree that there is no doubt that organised crime is contributing to this, and is exploiting young people; organised criminals try to groom young people and attract them into criminal gangs. The Government will publish later this year a violent crime strategy.
looking not just at the criminal justice system, but at how we can work effectively with all other agencies to ensure that young people are diverted away from that sort of activity in the first place. But it is also true that those carrying a knife can now expect to end up in jail; we have toughened the sentences. And despite what the right hon. Gentleman said, we have also protected police budgets; a quarter of all police are in London.

Q8. [903653] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Demand for school places in the London Borough of Bromley is forecast to grow by some 20% over coming years, but repeatedly proposals for much needed schools have been delayed, in no small measure because of concerns at the way the Education and Skills Funding Agency has handled the planning application process. On behalf of the Prime Minister, will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to discuss the very real concerns of local parents as to the competency of the agency?

Mr Lidington: Either I or my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend. The purpose of the ESFA, formed at the start of this financial year, is to provide a more joined-up approach to funding, covering both schools and colleges and other providers. I note that Bromley has increased both primary and secondary school capacity by more than 6,300 places since 2010, and the ESFA is delivering nine schools in Bromley, but there is clearly more work to be done, and Ministers will gladly talk to my hon. Friend about that.

Q6. [903651] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Recent research shows that international students are worth a staggering £20 billion to the UK economy; that research was commissioned by Nick Hillman, Conservative parliamentary candidate in Cambridge in 2010 and a former adviser to Lord Willetts. Yet the policies of the Prime Minister have stopped that steady increase in the number of international students coming to our country. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is a touch careless of the Prime Minister to have squandered billions of pounds of assets that could have been available to our schools and hospitals?

Mr Lidington: The facts say that we are the second most popular destination in the world for students and university-sponsored visa applications are up by nearly one fifth since 2010, so I would argue that, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman alleges, we are doing a good job in attracting international students.

Q10. [903655] Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): South Dorset is the most beautiful constituency in the whole of the United Kingdom, so improving the infrastructure to create jobs and prosperity is difficult. What we can do is improve our rail links on the Salisbury line and at Yeovil Junction to get faster trains to Weymouth. Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents and me that the Government are behind this scheme, to do exactly what the Government want: create more wealth and prosperity in South Dorset?

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend will know, the Chancellor last year set aside very considerable sums of money—more than £20 billion—to finance infrastructure improvements in rail, road and broadband, in order to generate growth around the country and facilitate housing developments; my hon. Friend’s constituency has seen considerable new housing development in recent years.

Q7. [903652] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On 25 January 1985, the Conservative Government promised that no nuclear waste would be dumped in the Billingham anhydrite mine. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirmed that that promise still stands?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me, but my memory for statements that were given in 1985 is a little bit rusty. That was seven years before I was first elected to this House. I will look into the point that he has raised and write to him to set out the position.

Q13. [903658] Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): To secure our future prosperity and to meet the employment challenge posed by artificial intelligence, this country has an urgent need to improve its digital skills base. Will my right hon. Friend therefore congratulate the Open University in my constituency on securing a leading role in the Government’s Institute of Coding?

Mr Lidington: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Open University on securing that lead role in the Institute of Coding, which is an important new initiative to get universities to work closely with business to develop specialist coding skills. The Government are investing £84 million to deliver a comprehensive programme to improve the teaching of the computing curriculum, and we look forward to working closely with the university and the institute.

Q9. [903654] Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): After 10 years in this country, one of my constituents missed out on the right to claim indefinite leave to remain by 22 days when she left the country to attend her father’s funeral and broke her leg, making her unable to return. The Home Secretary is aware of this case, and my constituent has been told that she will have to wait a further 10 years to reapply. This will mean that she will be unable to adopt a child, which could be the only way in which she can start a family in this country. Will the right hon. Gentleman raise this issue with the Prime Minister when she returns, and may we have a meeting to discuss the issue?

Mr Lidington: Obviously I know no more details of the case than those that the hon. Gentleman has just described, but, like many Members, I have immigration casework in my constituency, so I am familiar with the type of problem that he describes. If he would like to write to me after these exchanges to set out the details, I will discuss the matter with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, and the relevant Minister will certainly meet him.

Q14. [903659] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last week, I visited RNAS Culdrose as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and was delighted to see the great outreach programme that the sailors are using to promote science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—skills and innovation in the local...
community. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this initiative to inspire the skills that our armed forces and our country will need to succeed in the future is a huge credit to the forward thinking of the team at Culdrose and that its approach should be highly commended?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know about the important role that Culdrose plays in the life of Cornwall, but he has highlighted the fact that its work deserves to be in the national spotlight as well. We want and need to build the science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills that we will need in a growing and rapidly changing economy, as we highlighted in the Government’s industrial strategy, and the initiative at Culdrose will contribute to the success of those objectives.

Q11. [903658] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): It is an extraordinary fact that this year, last year and every year for more than a decade, one London borough, the London Borough of Islington, has received more Arts Council funding than all the midlands and northern ex-coalfield communities combined. Who is going to be brave enough to reverse that inequity so that my constituents, especially my young constituents, can have fair and equitable access to arts funding?

Mr Lidington: I am not sure whether that was meant as an attack on the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) or the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), but I can say to the hon. Gentleman that if there is a fact that its work deserves to be in the national spotlight, but he has highlighted the importance of building the science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills that we will need in a growing and rapidly changing economy, as we highlighted in the Government’s industrial strategy, and the initiative at Culdrose will contribute to the success of those objectives.

Q15. [903660] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Holiday homes in Cornwall are a mixed blessing. They provide important support to our local economy, but they also take up valuable housing stock and push up house prices beyond the reach of many local people. In addition, many people avoid paying council tax on them by switching to business use and then enjoying the benefits of small business rates relief. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that unacceptable? Will he use his good offices to help the Government to find a way of closing the loophole?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend raises a valid point, and it is right that holiday home owners should pay the correct tax. Obviously, individual decisions on whether a property should pay council tax or business rates rests with the Valuation Office Agency, which rightly operates independently of Ministers. However, if a property is available for rent for 140 days or a more a year, it will be subject to business rates. If it does not meet that test, council tax will be due. If an individual provides false information in order to seek business rates relief, that person is liable to summary conviction or a fine or both.

Q12. [903657] Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Prime Minister wants to bring forward legislation to tackle domestic violence and abuse, but her Government are currently taxing the same survivors for using the Child Maintenance Service. For survivors of domestic abuse, using the collect and pay service is not a matter of choice; it is a matter of safety. Will the right hon. Gentleman urge the Prime Minister to commit to using legislation to scrap the tax for survivors of domestic violence?

Mr Lidington: A Government consultation on this matter is imminent, and I urge the hon. Lady to make her representations to that consultation and also directly to the relevant Minister.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Following last year’s terrorist attack in Manchester, the Government committed £24 million to the city. With the effects still being felt across the area, including in my constituency, will the Government provide an assurance that they will continue to support Manchester?

Mr Lidington: We will certainly continue to support Manchester right across Government through the various agencies and spending programmes that the Government have available. My right hon. Friend has been active on Bombardier’s behalf. We are pleased with the outcome. The right hon. Gentleman demonstrated its resilience and its strong sense of community identity and purpose last year, and they will serve it well both economically and socially in the years to come.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The whole House will warmly welcome the fantastic news that has saved thousands of jobs at Bombardier in Northern Ireland. We should pay tribute to Bombardier’s management, both in Belfast and in Canada, the workforce and the unions, which worked well together, hon. Members on the Democratic Unionist party Bench, including my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and the Government, which rode in strongly to support the company. I urge the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to get behind improving manufacturing in Northern Ireland, because vital decisions are outstanding. I also gently urge the Government, who always listen very carefully, to get on with it.

Mr Lidington: May I first thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words? Although it is now a few years since I had the opportunity to visit Bombardier in Belfast, I still remember how important that enterprise is for the provision of high-quality, well-paid skilled work both in the city and more widely in Northern Ireland. He is right to say that the Government worked closely with Northern Ireland leaders and politicians. The Prime Minister raised the matter personally more than once with President Trump and with Prime Minister Trudeau, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has also been active on Bombardier’s behalf. We are pleased by the outcome. The right hon. Gentleman can rest assured that the Government will remain a strong supporter of business in Northern Ireland, but the sooner that we can get back to devolved government in Northern Ireland, the easier it will be to ensure that practical benefits flow back to Northern Ireland.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): A vibrant high street is critical in traditional market towns such as Knaresborough, which has had a market since 1310. In this age of internet shopping, will my
right hon. Friend confirm the Government’s support for traditional markets and for policies that will boost our high streets?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to speak up on behalf of his constituents, and I know he is a tireless campaigner for Harrogate and Knaresborough. Markets like the one in Knaresborough are part of the local fabric and tradition of towns right across this country. The Government want to help those markets and town centres to prosper in a rapidly changing retail environment. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will be happy to write to him with further details.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Lincoln’s walk-in centre will close in a few weeks, despite there being inconsistent and insufficient service provision in place to mitigate the closure. Will the Minister pass on to the Prime Minister my request for her to meet me both to discuss and review that closure?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady would like to provide a bit more detail than she has had the time to set out today, I will ensure that a Minister sees her about this.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Next Wednesday we will be assessing and voting on the local government finance settlement. A group of us from the shire counties are very concerned that there is not enough money for rural counties like ours, where adult social care costs are spiralling out of control. My own county is facing a black hole of £10 million because of adult social care costs. What message should I take back to the leader of my council?

Mr Lidington: One message is that the Government have made an extra £2 billion of funding available to local authorities for social care. Obviously, local authorities are currently deciding whether to use the more flexible precepting powers they have in respect of social care. My hon. Friend met my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary a few days ago, and I would encourage him to continue talking to the Communities Secretary and other Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the particular circumstances in Shropshire.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The current edition of The Economist carries an article that says the hostile takeover bid for GKN by Melrose “casts doubt not only on the survival of GKN, Britain’s third-largest independent aerospace and defence firm, but on much of the rest of the industry, too.”

The right hon. Gentleman knows that, where national security issues are involved, Ministers have the power to intervene to protect the public interest. Will they do so in this case?

Mr Lidington: As I understand it, the bid for GKN is being examined by the relevant independent authorities. Clearly this is also something that the appropriate Ministers in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be monitoring very closely. For now, it would be wrong of me to speculate about this case in more detail.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My constituency of Chelmsford is a very popular place to live, and this week we have had the very good news that more first-time buyers are getting on the housing ladder than at any time in the past decade. Will my right hon. Friend update us on the Government’s progress on helping people to buy a house?

Mr Lidington: I am pleased to be able to say that the number of first-time buyers is now at the highest level for about 10 years, which is a tribute to the various initiatives that both the Communities Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have put in place to encourage first-time buyers—the cut in stamp duty, for example, will benefit about 95% of first-time buyers—but we also need to improve housing supply. Constituencies like hers and mine are showing the way to much of the rest of the country on the need to build houses to meet the legitimate demands and expectations of young people who are working incredibly hard and want to get a foot on the housing ladder.
Point of Order

12.45 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, in the National Assembly for Wales, when my constituency colleague Adam Price asked for a vote on the Labour Welsh Government’s plans to potentially close hospitals in Carmarthenshire, the First Minister misled the Assembly and Assembly Members, and in doing so provided details of correspondence between the local health board and my constituency office. He claimed that our office has made no effort to engage with the health board over this issue.

I first became aware of the proposed closure plans on 18 January this year, following a panic email from Mr Steve Moore, chief executive of the Hywel Dda University Health Board, in which he explained that the closure plans had been leaked and were due to appear in the local press imminently. Our office replied on 19 January, asking for an urgent meeting. Although I do not expect you to comment on health policy in Wales, Mr Speaker, or indeed the manner in which the Labour Government of my country harvest information from public bodies in order to smear opponents, I would be grateful if you could say what advice you would give MPs who may find their data protection rights breached by a public body and how I could put on the record a correction of the comments by the First Minister.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise this point of order. It is not my role, I am very pleased to say, to pass judgment on matters before the National Assembly for Wales. That said—the hon. Gentleman in in pursuit of advice—if he believes that there has been a breach of data protection requirements, he should most certainly raise the matter with the Information Commissioner. We will leave that matter there for now.

Freedom of Information (Amendment)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.47 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the disclosure of information held by public authorities or by persons contracted to provide services for them or on their behalf; to amend the Freedom of Information Act 2000; and for connected purposes.

Nearly 20 years on from the revolution of the Freedom of Information Act, this Bill would extend its parameters into the unaccountable outsourced state. It would also enhance the existing powers available to private citizens, investigative journalists and concerned communities so that they are not forced to wade through a swamp of bureaucracy before getting answers about the decisions that are made in their name.

I would first like to pay tribute to the many other Members who have campaigned on this issue for many years, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has a very similar Bill in this Session and has focused particularly on housing associations, which I will come to shortly. Those in power have had a long and difficult relationship with freedom of information, and, like much that challenges government, it has met resistance every step of the way. The Thatcher Government were so concerned in the 1980s that they warned that FOI would reduce the sovereignty of Parliament itself.

In that context, it was remarkable that the last Labour Government, who had been out of power for 18 years, committed themselves to shining a light on the shadows cast by decisions made behind closed doors. Tony Blair said at the time that the Act “is fundamental to changing the way we do politics in this country...there is still far too much an addiction to secrecy and wish to conduct Government business behind closed doors”. Tony Blair, of course, came to regret the revolution that followed, but it was nothing short of revolutionary. Literally thousands of cases, on every topic imaginable, saw information drawn into the public domain—expenses, bonuses, stop-and-search figures and child sexual exploitation were all exposed and brought to light because of this Act. That was a Labour achievement and it is one we should be proud of.

That is why the last two Labour manifestos pledged to extend FOI to private contractors performing public services. We propose extending this Act because we recognise the climate in which FOI operates has changed, as the Government’s addiction to outsourcing has exploded.

The collapse of Carillion is just one recent example of an ever-growing shadow state in which some of the Government’s more dubious policy priorities are outsourced for private profit, leaving citizens in the dark about what is happening in their name. Under the coalition, outsourcing almost doubled to £120 billion. Never before has shareholder interest over the public interest had such a large stake in the functioning of our state. Transparency and accountability have diminished in consequence, and the limited scope of the Freedom of Information Act allows too many of those who are performing public functions with public money none the less to hide behind a cloak of secrecy.
Bad decisions, targets missed, warnings ignored—the result time and again is similar to the scandal exposed in the past fortnight, which should have been predictable. Carillion was not an isolated example of incompetence and indifference from one individual contractor; it was a symptom of a much broader problem—private contractors providing public services that should never be driven by profit. In the welfare system, we see contracts structured by Government farmed out to the private sector, and the consequences only truly exposed when things fall apart.

We saw that in the last Parliament, when we were pursuing Concentrix, the firm contracted to identify fraud in the tax credit system. That multinational corporation was ruthlessly pursuing single parents and families, on the instruction of the Treasury, and treating them as guilty until proven innocent. It accused them of living with people they had never met, or told them they were to have their tax credits arbitrarily cut because they did not respond to a letter they had never received. One single mum, who worked two jobs for little pay, said to me, “I feel as if I am being treated as a criminal.”

The scandal was not just the treatment of these parents, or the pursuit of profit at their expense. The scandal was the Government’s absolute failure to manage the contract effectively, and then the denial of information to Members of this House who were demanding to know what went wrong. A similar case is that of Cygnet, a private provider of mental health services. Its hospital in my constituency was judged unsafe owing to some very severe shortcomings, but even something as basic as the action plan agreed by the regulator, the NHS and the provider has been withheld from public scrutiny as it is deemed to be the property of the private provider.

It should not take public exposure for decent people to be treated with dignity, or for information to be put into the public domain as a matter of course. The current situation is allowing private contractors to withhold information that is very clearly in the public interest. Maurice Frankel and Katherine Gundersen, from the fantastic Campaign for Freedom of Information, have pulled together examples of the type of request private contractors have refused. They include: the number of prison staff at HMP Birmingham and the number of attacks at the prison—information currently held only by G4S—whistleblowing policies applying to Virgin Care staff providing NHS services, and the number of employees providing outsourced services for a local council employed on zero-hours contracts.

Extending the Act into areas that used to be overseen by the state and were therefore subject to FOI is not only the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. When institutions or private providers are permitted to withhold information, bad decisions are made and mistrust builds among communities. The Grenfell Tower fire has highlighted the desperate need for public access to information held by the providers of social housing. Housing associations, which own or run many former council estates, are completely outside the scope of the Act, and residents are denied information that they have a right to know. In one instance, a housing association refused to reveal information to residents about the cause of a fire in one of their flats, and whether potentially toxic lead pipes were used for the water supply to a property. Making contractors accountable to the public they serve for the decisions they make will lead to better, safer, clearer decisions.

The original Act still gives too much power to authorities to delay and obstruct an individual’s right to information. In 2015, the Government commissioned an independent review of FOI, which made several recommendations to improve the functioning of the Act. This Bill takes up those recommendations. It includes strictures on the delaying tactics available to authorities and a statutory time limit for internal reviews, and provides that an offence under the Act should be triable either way rather than being summary only. There has never been a prosecution under section 77 of the FOI Act, in large part because there is a six-month deadline for bringing prosecutions, which is long gone by the time the public authority has made a decision and the commissioner has received and investigated a complaint. Extending the offence to be triable either way gives authorities a chance to bring prosecutions and ensure that the Act is enforced.

Sunshine is the best disinfectant—advice from their former leader that the Government may wish to remember. Ultimately, few could disagree with the need for parity for public and private providers when they are delivering public services. Whether it is Concentrix, Carillion or Cygnet, why would we hold private providers to a lower standard of transparency and accountability than their public competitors? If sunlight really is the best disinfectant, here today is the chance to clean up the murky world of our outsourced state, to drive up standards, to improve trust and to ensure that it is always citizens, not shareholders, who are the ultimate authority for our public services.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Louise Haigh, Tommy Sheppard, Andy Slaughter, Paula Sherriff, Jo Stevens, Ian C. Lucas, Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods, Nic Dakin, Alex Sobel, Diana Johnson, Anna Turley and Clive Efford present the Bill.

Louise Haigh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 15 June 2018, and to be printed (Bill 159).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (OPPOSITION DAY)

Ordered.

That at today’s sitting, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motion in the name of Jeremy Corbyn as if the day were an Opposition Day; and proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours after commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Rebecca Harris.)
Opposition Day
UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY

Government’s EU Exit Analysis

12.57 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the EU exit analysis which was referred to in his response to an Urgent Question in the House on 30 January by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee and made available to all Members on a confidential basis as a matter of urgency.

The saga of the Brexit impact assessment rolls on. This all started back in December 2016, when the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union first told the Brexit Committee that the Government were working on “sectoral impact analysis” in 57 areas—later, one was added to make it 58. In October last year, he got rather carried away with the idea and elaborated, saying that the analyses were “excruciating detail”, throwing in for good measure that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet had read the summaries. When various right hon. and hon. Members sought disclosure of the impact assessments, they were met with a flat refusal.

Things moved on. In November last year, we presented and won a Humble Address requiring the Government to disclose the impact assessments arising from the Government’s analysis—an important statement of principle. So far, so good. Some documents were made available, and I was one of those who went to the Treasury to see them. I was escorted to a room, where I had to pass over my phone and sign a document on confidentiality. I sat down, and two files were solemnly brought to me; I was allowed to read them and take some notes. We now know that those documents contained a description of the sector that could have been found in any House of Lords or Select Committee report, a summary of the EU law and policy—surprising that I had to give up my phone to read that—and then a very generalised view from the sector. I went through the footnotes to that third section and struggled to find one that did not relate to open-source material. Press releases and evidence given to Select Committees were there, all of which I solemnly noted before I handed the files back, got my phone back and left the premises. Those documents are now available online, minus the sector analysis and therefore the open-source material.

In September, when questioned by the Exiting the European Union Committee about the rest of the documents, the Secretary of State said that the Department had not done any impact assessments on any sector of the British economy. He made the point that the use of the word “impact” did not mean that an impact assessment had been done within the formal definition used by the civil service. As a former defence lawyer, I was struck by that defence. It was technically right that someone cannot be censured for contempt for failing to hand over impact assessments because they have not done any, but I was never sure which was worse: relying on that technical defence, or not doing the impact assessments in the first place.

Roll on one month, and in the past two days it was leaked that an assessment called the “EU Exit Analysis – Cross Whitehall Briefing” does in fact exist. It is reported that that document looks at three of the most plausible Brexit scenarios based on current EU arrangements with the range of predictions. Consistent with the principle established back in November 2017, the Opposition yesterday called on the Government to release that analysis. In true groundhog fashion, the Government said no, as they did last year.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman had a distinguished career in law before he came to this place. Does he condemn the leak of a Government document? To what extent are any Government documents to be regarded as confidential? Will he condemn the leak?

Keir Starmer: Before I was in this place, I held the post of Director of Public Prosecutions. We took leaks from our department or any other civil service department very seriously. I can only assume that an inquiry is in place in relation to this leak, and in the circumstances we should say nothing more about it.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): I have repeatedly raised concerns that the north-east and other regions will be hard hit by the very obvious risks of Brexit. It seems from the leak that the Government share that view. Does my right hon. and learned Friend share my view that it is completely unacceptable that the Government think it is okay to keep businesses and people in regions such as mine in the dark?

Keir Starmer: My hon. Friend demonstrates that hon. Members have been trying on behalf of their constituencies and regions to get a proper analysis of the impact of Brexit on the individuals, businesses and communities they represent. That is why it is so important to have that information. It will mean that we can have an informed debate and hold the Government properly to account.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman described his experience of dealing with leaks. Does he accept that we have a curious cult of secrecy across Government today and have had for some years? A leak is a serious matter and I deplore leaks when documents are revealed whose contents compromise the national interest or are loaded with party political or other significance, but it is impossible to see how an objective analysis of the economic consequences of the various options that the Government are considering compromises the national interest. A properly open Government should make such information freely available to all those who have a legitimate interest in the subject, including MPs.

Keir Starmer: I agree. It is significant that the original documents that were requested last year were initially refused on freedom of information grounds, only then to be made available in the form I described, and then to be put in the public domain in any event, which demonstrates the point that many Governments—this Government are doing the same—put their arms around information that ought to be in the public domain to inform the debate. It is the wrong way of doing business.

Several hon. Members rose—
Keir Starmer: I will give way one more time and then make progress.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the Government are eventually forced to release the impact assessments, as I suspect they will be—I am sure the right hon. and learned Gentleman suspects the same—and if they confirm that any deal the Government strike will be worse than the one we have with the European Union, will he and the leader of the Labour party change their position and campaign much more vigorously to keep us in the European Union?

Keir Starmer: We will look at information when it is put into the public domain. We have been looking at analysis and data for months, and have been visiting businesses and communities for months, to inform our position.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I have taken a number of interventions and will make progress. I will allow interventions later; otherwise I will not get very far.

Yesterday, standing at the Dispatch Box, I asked the Government to release the documents referred to in the leak. As I have said, the Government said no. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who is in his place, advanced three defences for that position, none of which withstand scrutiny. His first defence—that the analysis is rubbish—was astonishing. He was asked whether he could name a single civil service forecast that was accurate. He glibly replied: “They are always wrong”. He may have forgotten that he is now part of the Government, and yesterday transposed himself back to being spokesperson for Vote Leave. Ministers and the Government commissioned those papers, and it is frankly ridiculous to attempt to rubbish them as an excuse for not publishing them.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) rose—

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind) rose—

Keir Starmer: I will complete this point and then give way.

There is a serious point. Is it seriously Government policy that impact assessments are so inherently unreliable that it is better to proceed without them? That is the logic of the position described yesterday. Is it not better to adopt the approach tweeted last night by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who said:

“The next phase of Brexit has to be all about the evidence. We can’t just dismiss this and move on. If there is evidence to the contrary, we need to see and consider that too”? 

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: Before I give way, I will make one further point about the line of defence of rubbishing the analysis. It is deeply discourteous and disrespectful to the civil servants who have worked on those papers and are presumably continuing to work on them, often in difficult circumstances. In my experience, having been a civil servant, and having had civil servants as staff, they do a very good job whether or not they agree with the instructions given to them. To glibly answer that they are always wrong was deeply disrespectful to them. I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who will speak for the Government today, will take the opportunity formally to apologise to the civil servants who prepared those papers in good faith, and assure them of the support we all have for the work they are trying to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and then to the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend makes the good point that, yesterday, we saw a pretty grim approach to economic forecasting, which was full of jokes and did not address the seriousness of the situation. Does he agree that an opportunity presents itself? The Conservative Government created the Office for Budget Responsibility—indeed forecasters who could do the job of providing the public with the facts if only the Government would tell them what their policy is.

Keir Starmer: I do agree, and that is a very important point. Essentially, the OBR is saying that it cannot do its job because it does not have the information to do it. That is why it is far better to proceed on the basis of assessments of risk and impact, and to allow the OBR to do its job.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way in one minute, but may I just finish this point?

Having been a civil servant for five years and having engaged in risk assessments, I can say that the purpose of the exercise is to identify the risk, the size of the risk, and the likelihood of the risk. The fourth column, which is always the really important one, is what the Government will do to mitigate the risk. That is why these risk assessments are so important.

Vicky Ford: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way. I agree with him on the important work of the civil service. Many real stakeholders, including the digital industry, the banking industry and the legal services industry, have come to me this week to say what a good job our civil service is doing in preparing for the Brexit negotiations. My understanding of this paper is that it suggests that the no-deal scenario is not very attractive and that cutting and pasting the Canada or the Norway suggestions that the no-deal scenario is not very attractive and that cutting and pasting the Canada or the Norway deal is also not very attractive, but that is not what the Government are proposing. Does he not agree that it would be better if our Ministers got out of this House and on with their work to deliver a better deal?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. The hon. Lady will remember that one question I asked of the Minister yesterday was whether the model that the Government are pursuing has also been subjected to an impact assessment. I did not actually get any of the questions that I asked—about six—answered or even addressed by the Minister yesterday. I hope that some of them might be addressed later on today.
Anna Soubry: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Can he help us with this: has he established the status of these documents? From what I gather, these were not some loosely put together drafts of a document. Has he been able to establish whether these are the documents that were to be made available to members of the Cabinet—next week, I think, if not this week—under lock and key and subject to them not making notes? This is really important. Are these documents the ones that were deemed to be of such importance that the Cabinet should see them?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I will answer it, and make a second point as I do so. This is a really important point. The second line of defence that was deployed yesterday for not releasing these documents was that they are not complete, they are at an early stage, and they are just evolving. As I recall it, that was exactly what was said about the first set of documents that we were trying to have released last year. We have had that one before. I have not yet ascertained the status of the documents, but, as I understand it, they were being shown to key Ministers ahead of an important Cabinet Brexit Sub-Committee meeting next week. No doubt, the Minister will be able to confirm that. If those documents are in such a form that they can be shown to Ministers to brief them for an important meeting next week, they are certainly not complete—on the stage of an early script that has not been approved.

Hywel Williams rose—

Keir Starmer: I promised that I would give way, and I will.

Hywel Williams: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Is he aware that, this morning at Welsh questions, the Wales Office Minister, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), said “We have many assessments as we go through this process”, so it is not just the one, but many? Will it not be essential that the Government release those assessments when they become available as we go through the process?

Keir Starmer: I think that it is, because, otherwise, all that is available are the increasingly stale assessments that were put—eventually—into the public domain last December.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way once more, and then I will get on to the third point.

Charlie Elphicke rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way once more, and then I will get on to the third point.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Is it his party’s policy to remain in the European Union’s customs union—yes or no?

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, I rather thought that the point of interventions was to engage in the debate that was going on, rather than to make a completely different point. Our position on the customs union has been made clear very, very many times, and I do not see that that is an intervention on the point that I am making, so I will press on.

The third line of defence that was advanced by the Minister, who now seeks instructions from the civil servants he disparaged yesterday, was that any disclosure might harm or undermine the negotiations. Again, we have heard that one before. We have always accepted that anything that genuinely undermines the negotiations should not be put into the public domain, but there is a difference between that and something that is simply embarrassing to the Government, a point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) yesterday afternoon. This motion provides for confidentiality. That defence was immediately undermined by the Minister himself yesterday. When there is a leak, Governments usually say that they will not comment on the leak, and that they do not rely on the information in the leak, because if it is not to be in the public domain, nobody should rely on it. But the Minister not only commented on it, but sought to rely on the leak to advance his own case. When challenged by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) about the customs union, he prayed in aid the figures, saying that “there is economic growth under all the scenarios in the economic assessment.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 683.]

One cannot simply say, “I will rely on the figures to advance my own case, but I won’t publish the full figures so that anyone can question me properly on what I am saying.” We now need to go back to first principles.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con) rose—
Keir Starmer: I will press on, but I will give way again in a minute.

As I have said, only question was asked on 23 June 2016, which was whether we should leave the EU—not how and not what the future relationship should be. These are incredibly important questions. We need an informed debate, including on the likely economic impact of different approaches. Publication is needed in the name of transparency; publication is needed in the name of scrutiny. There has been an indication that the Government will accept this motion, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister. When he does so, may I caution him, because his fellow Minister, the hon. Member for Wycombe, yesterday found himself saying, at the beginning of his answer that “this economic analysis is not what is formally known as an impact assessment.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 680.]

Let us not go there again—where a motion is accepted only for later there to be a quibble as to whether the precise wording was sufficient to release the documents. If the motion is being accepted, it needs to be accepted in spirit, in form and in full. Secondly, let there be no confusion about editing or redacting. That is not provided for in this motion, just as it was not provided for last time.

Finally I ask the Minister, if the motion is to be accepted, when do the Government intend to release the documents? I remind the Minister that when this question arose at the end of our first Humble Address, Mr Speaker was asked what he considered to be a reasonable timeframe for the Government to respond. On that occasion, Mr Speaker said:

“One can take a view about this, one can consult “Erskine May” and one should reflect in a sober and considered fashion, but if the hon. Lady is asking me whether I envisage this being

Mr Walker: I personally have not yet seen such requests. We do intend to make this information available to the devolved Administrations, as we did with the previous reports that we made available to this House. It is then a matter for the devolved Administrations to ensure that such documents are handled with appropriate confidentiality; we have no objection in principle to their being shared with Members of the devolved legislatures on the same basis of confidentiality.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As the Minister is a former economist, can he persuade me that it will be worth my while to visit this reading room, given that every economic forecast that I have ever seen has been wildly inaccurate?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I would like to turn to the analysis itself, so he pre-empts some of the caveats that are important to mention.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way in one moment.

The document is preliminary, unfinished and has only very recently been presented to Ministers in any form at all. It contains a large number of caveats, and sets out on every single page that this is “draft analytical thinking with preliminary results”.

The analysis has not been led by my Department or, for that matter, by any single Department. This next stage of analysis has been a cross-Whitehall effort to support our negotiating priorities. It is not yet anywhere near being approved by Ministers, and it has only been brought together in a draft paper for them to review this month. Even the ministerial team in my Department have only just been consulted on this particular paper in recent days, and have made it clear that it requires significant further work. It does not yet reflect this Government’s policy approaches and does not represent an accurate reflection of the expected outcome of the negotiations.

It would not be right to describe the figures as Government numbers, as they have not had formal Government approval or sign-off as most analysis or policy would. The primary purpose of analysis at this stage was a preliminary attempt to improve on the much criticised analysis published around the time of the EU referendum. It is there to test ideas and to design a viable framework for the analysis of our exit from the European Union.
Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Since the Conservative party governs with the support of the 10 Democratic Unionist party Members—of whom I am not one—I am very curious to know whether any Member of the DUP will have advance notice of this economic analysis ahead of the Select Committee or, indeed, in addition to the Select Committee.

Mr Walker: The simple answer is no. We would make this information available to the whole House on the same basis, while responding to the points on confidentiality that are covered in the Opposition motion.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Lady will give me one moment, I will give way. I just want to complete my point about the caveats to the analysis.

At this very early stage, the analysis only considers the off-the-shelf arrangements that currently exist, and we have been clear these are not what we are seeking in the negotiations. It does not consider our desired outcome, which is the most ambitious relationship possible with the European Union, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech—such an agreement is in the interests of both the UK and the EU—and, to be crystal clear, it does not consider a comprehensive free trade agreement scenario as some reports have suggested, but simply an average FTA. We believe that we can do much better, given our unique starting point and shared history. Therefore, the scenarios in this analysis continue to suffer from the flaws that we have seen in previous analyses of this type.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will give way to the hon. and learned Lady after I have given way to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

Yesterday, a number of Members of this House spoke eloquently about the challenges of modelling uncertain outcomes over an extended period. The analysis presented by many organisations prior to the referendum is a clear example of those challenges. To date, we have seen outcomes that are quite different from some of those that were set out.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I find this conspiracy theory so absurd. The Treasury published very clear and totally wrong short-term forecasts for the referendum debate, and it published very clear and, I think, equally wrong long-term forecasts before the referendum debate, so that the whole nation could engage with these wrong forecasts. The latest lot of leaks looks very much like the wrong long-term forecasts that the Treasury previously published. I look forward to the Minister getting some more common sense into the thing, because there is absolutely no reason at all to suppose that leaving the EU will cause any hit to the long-term growth rate of the UK.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes his point well. I think that the point on which we would all agree is that there have to be caveats to any form of modelling. As Members will see when they look at the analysis, it sets out the caveats very clearly.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am so grateful to the Minister for being very patient and giving way to me, but I must press him on this point. It is curious to think that the Government are at this moment planning their negotiating strategy without having considered adequate impact assessments. I went to the so-called reading room in December. It was laughable that I had to sign a piece of paper, a copy of which I was not allowed to remove, in order to promise that I would not reveal what was in the documents. If there is going to be another reading room, I will do exactly what I did last time and reveal what is not in them, which is quite a lot. When will the Government work out that they need these impact assessments to have a decent negotiating strategy?

Mr Walker: As we have said many times, the Government are informed by a wide range of analyses, but I am responding to the motion from the hon. Lady’s Front Benchers that respects the importance of confidentiality in this case.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) in a little while. I just want to finish my point about the nature of the analysis and the caveats that are contained in the document, as Members will see when they view it. Economies of all sorts face an uncertain future in the face of new technologies and the next phase of globalisation, which presents both challenges and opportunities.

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: Not right now.

Of course, there is a specific role for this sort of modelling, but it must be deployed carefully and appropriately alongside a full range of policy work in our EU exit plans. On its own, no model or analysis will be sufficient to provide us with the full picture of the various benefits and costs of different versions of Britain’s future relationship with the EU. Such models cannot predict the future. It is the Government’s job to use these sorts of models appropriately and to develop them as best they can. Despite this—and, in many cases, because of it—the analysis remains extremely sensitive.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Surely the million dollar question is this: if the Government have not yet assessed the model agreement that they want, when are they going to tell the British people what it is that they want, cost it and publish the results?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has set out a very clear strategy for developing an FTA between the UK and the EU that goes much further than previous models. As I am explaining, the analysis under discussion looks at the existing models and compares some of them, which is not the same as what the hon. and learned Lady sets out.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for announcing that the common-sense decision has been made overnight to stop trying to withhold these documents. I accept what he says about the caveats attached to all forecasts, although the idea that they are all rubbish is a new and sensational claim made by some of his colleagues.
Just to be clear about the status, is it not the case that the perfectly responsible Government Departments that produced these papers have reached the stage of briefing and informing Cabinet Ministers as they go to the next stage of discussions to try to create a policy for where we are going in the negotiations with the European Union? That status is the same as that for forecasts put to a Chancellor before making a Budget. Does my hon. Friend therefore accept that, although his words about caveats in economic forecasts are wise, we should not be tempted to drift into the rubbishing of the whole thing, which his colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), rather unwisely embarked on yesterday?

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend knows a lot from his own experience as Chancellor about the confidential information presented to Ministers ahead of Budgets, but that process has to go through a number of stages. As I have said, this information, which is preliminary and not yet finished, was presented to Ministers for the first time in recent days. It is, therefore, not in a form that is approved to go forward in the way he describes.

Despite, and in many cases because of, the points I have made, the analysis remains sensitive. Let me stress that the only reason we do not oppose the Opposition motion is that it makes clear that the analysis is to be shared with the Select Committee and Members on a confidential basis. We are about to embark on exploratory talks with the European Union regarding our future relationship and will be in formal negotiations over the coming months. Having an incomplete analysis such as this in the public domain would not serve the national interest in the upcoming negotiations. I cannot imagine that any reasonable Member of this House genuinely believes that it is in the national interest for the Government to have to publish at the start of the negotiation unfinished, developing analysis of scenarios that we are clear we do not want.

There is, however, another equally important reason why this analysis should not be put in the public domain, and it is simple: the functioning of Government—by which I mean any Government—about which my right hon. and learned Friend knows a great deal. I ask hon. Members who have been Ministers, who aspire to be Ministers or who have ever held a position of responsibility how they would feel about having to publish their team’s work in progress partway through a project. I am sure they would agree that publishing unfinished initial findings can be extremely misleading, and I am confident that they would join me in ensuring that that does not happen on a routine basis.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): There is another reason why this set of analyses is peculiar and quite different. I listened carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), but he is wrong on this count. This is not like advice to a Chancellor. This analysis, as I understand it, comes out of the back of the reality that all the previous forecasts, heavily reliant as they were on a gravity model of economics, have proved so wildly wrong that a variety of ways are being looked at to try to rectify that. There is, therefore, an experimental nature even to the economics, not just to the straight analysis, and that is why it does not have a massive bearing on the Government’s negotiating strategy at this point—because they themselves are questioning whether it is feasible to make a serious analysis or forecast that may be even slightly correct.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point and I will leave it to Members to consider it when they see the actual information under discussion.

Throughout this process I have been impressed—and the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has been clear repeatedly that he has been very impressed—by officials across Departments and the way in which they are rising to the challenge of delivery of our exit from the European Union. To do that, however, we need to have the space to undertake internal work and to challenge preconceptions.

Vicky Ford: I thank the Minister for giving way and for saying that the information will be made available to all Members in a confidential room. I remember making that suggestion when speaking about the sector-by-sector reports, which I have been to see and some of which are extremely useful. How many Members of this House have actually been to see them? I believe that the figure is probably fewer than one in 10, and I sometimes wonder whether Opposition Members are having a huge fight but not bothering to follow up on the real details that matter to real jobs in this country.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes her point very well. I do not have the answer to her question, but we can certainly look into it and perhaps write to her in response.

Keir Starmer rose—

Mr Walker: I want to complete my remarks and give other hon. Members a chance to speak, but of course I give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Keir Starmer: I assure the House that I and many of my colleagues have been to see the documents and discussed what I thought was not in them.

Mr Walker: Returning to the hard work of our officials, if every time any element of their work leaked we were forced to present unfinished work for the scrutiny of Parliament, the public and the press, there would be a very real chance that the quality of that work would suffer. It is simply not conducive to an open, honest and iterative process of policy making in government. That is as true for all the Government’s work as it is for EU exit. I do not believe that a single Member of this House believes that that would be in the national interest, so I urge the Select Committee, whose Chairman is here, to provide some assurances, in good faith, that, for those reasons and reflecting on the words of the motion, which recognise the confidential nature of the document, this preliminary analysis will not be made public.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I have to say that, of all the Ministers, I think he does an outstanding job in exceptionally difficult circumstances. I thank him for the work he does. However, with bucket loads of respect, the Government cannot
have it both ways. Either these are rather meaningless analysis documents that have not been done on any proper modelling and cannot be relied on and all the rest of it—in which case, publish the wretched things, because they are not of any value to right hon. and hon. Members—or they are indeed of great value and must be kept secret and highly confidential. Which one is it, because at the moment we do not know?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, as always, for her kind praise, but I think I have already answered the challenge she sets as to the reasons why some of the information in the report should be kept confidential. That is something on which the two Front-Bench teams clearly agree, because it is in the Opposition motion. I also just want to emphasise that the misrepresentation in some of the press reporting of this leak makes this an exceptional request that the Government agree to on an exceptional basis. They do not accept a precedent for future action.

Finally, it is also for those reasons that I believe that forcing the release of partial and preliminary analysis risks undermining the functioning of Government at a vital moment.

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: Not now. The public have voted through a referendum to leave the European Union. We must deliver on that result, in the national interest. I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras that we should work together to ensure that, and that must include scrutiny.

Only yesterday the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe committed to ensuring that Parliament has the appropriate analysis on the terms of our exit from the European Union ahead of the vote on the final deal we agree with the European Union. That is entirely right and we will deliver on it. However, delivering on the referendum result, in the national interest, does mean being able to have a stable and secure policy-making process inside Government. It means Government taking seriously their obligation to preserve the security of our analysis and the work underpinning our negotiations, and receiving that analysis means Parliament sharing in that responsibility and obligation. As all Members of this House come together to deliver for the people the best possible outcome of the referendum result, it is with that sentiment that we will comply with the motion.

1.39 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate and I commend the main Opposition party for securing it.

I am wondering why we are here because, yesterday, the Minister’s colleague beside him on the Front Bench, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), spent over an hour valiantly, loyally and completely unsuccessfully trying to persuade the House that the sky would fall down if this information were shared with anybody. Now we are being told that it can be shared at the very least with 650 people.

Incidentally, part of the reason why relatively few MPs—certainly those in the Scottish National party—went along to the “Kremlin” reading room to look at the sectoral analysis is that, having seen part of the papers, I told a lot of my colleagues not to bother. It simply was not worth their time to go through the security checks to read stuff that they could get by looking online.

Again, we are seeing a symptom of the fact that, despite all the assurances we get that Brexit will restore “sovereignty” to Parliament, this is really about trying to restore the alleged sovereignty of a minority Government over the will of Parliament. Parliament is supposed to tell Government what to do, but every time it looks as if Parliament is going to tell the Government to do something they do not want to do, it causes absolute panic on the Government Front Bench. It also causes a headache for civil servants, as one of their main responsibilities is supposed to be to prevent Ministers from doing anything that causes political embarrassment to the Government—good luck to them. If they can achieve that, they must be quite remarkable people.

Stephen Kerr: May I ask the hon. Gentleman a very simple question? Does he condone or condemn the leaking of Government papers? It is an important question.

Peter Grant: At this point, the answer is no: I neither condone nor condemn because I do not know what the circumstances were.

I walked away from a potentially successful career in NHS financial management. I wrestled for six months with my own conscience, seeing things that I knew had to be brought to public attention but knowing there was no way I could do that, and knowing that the public were being deliberately misled about what was going on in the health board that I worked in. The only way I could bring it to public attention was to resign and walk away from the job. So I will never, ever condemn anyone who believes they are acting in the public interest by doing something that they are not supposed to do.

I would be very surprised if there is a single Member in the Chamber today who is not at this very moment considering an important constituency case that has been brought to them by someone who technically was breaking the rules by raising it with a Member of Parliament. There are times when the public interest has to outweigh all other considerations, and until I have seen the full circumstances of why this information was disclosed, I am not going to condone or condemn, and I do not think anyone else should prejudice the case by commenting on it now.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a distinction between a leak and whistleblowing? Whistleblowing is in the public interest. The provisional evaluation of the economic impacts, be it incomplete or imperfect, and given that good is not the enemy of perfect, should be in the public arena. This is a whistle blow, not a leak.

Peter Grant: I am grateful for that intervention. We have to be careful about language. There is whistleblowing as defined in the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and it is not clear whether this incident would comply with that.
The Government’s behaviour demonstrates again the fallacy of the argument that Parliament holds the Government to account. In effect, we do not have an electoral system designed to produce one winner and one loser. We have an electoral system for this place that is designed to produce one winner and one loser, and it does not like it if there is more than one party on the alleged losing side, because the system cannot cope with having more than one big Opposition party. It does not like it if it is unclear who the overall winner is. This place is always in turmoil if a coalition has to be formed and there is a minority Government. The whole procedure of Parliament—the way that Bills are produced, the way that time is allocated and so on—is based on the assumption that the Government decide and just every once in a while Parliament tries to tell the Government that they should have decided something different.

In the discussion we had about the first batch of Brexit papers before Christmas—there have been elements of it again today—we heard that it is disloyal to the country and to our constituents for any Member of Parliament to suggest that the Government have got it wrong and should be doing something different. Whether it is in relation to publishing or not publishing the papers, to handing them over in secret to a Committee or not, to the decision to take us out of the customs union in the first place or to any other decision that the Government take and announce without having the full mandate of the people, it must be open to any Member of Parliament to criticise and seek to change it.

When I keep hearing Members—not so much those on my Benches, because we have a clear mandate from our constituents—on either the Government Benches or other Opposition Benches being denounced as traitors and enemies of the people simply for standing up in this place for what they believe in, we have to ask ourselves what is going on with democracy in these four nations. In some ways, that is even more fundamental than our membership of the EU and its related institutions. We have to get a grip.

It was disappointing to hear comments yesterday from Government Back Benchers about London-based elite remainers. I think I heard him say that he had told other colleagues not to bother to go and read them. My understanding is that we need a trade deal that works for all sectors of the economy and especially for areas such as food, agriculture and farming. My memory of those sector-by-sector reports is that that is an area that is enormously detailed, so perhaps he will think again about encouraging other Members to go and look at this detailed information.

Vicky Ford: I listened to what the hon. Gentleman said earlier about the sector-by-sector reports and I think I heard him say that he had told other colleagues not to bother to go and read them. My understanding is that we need a trade deal that works for all sectors of the economy and especially for areas such as food, agriculture and farming. My memory of those sector-by-sector reports is that that is an area that is enormously detailed, so perhaps he will think again about encouraging other Members to go and look at this detailed information.

Peter Grant: Part of the Government’s response earlier today to the disclosure of these documents was that the quotation or citation was selective and incomplete. I am afraid that is what we have just heard from the hon. Lady.
Joanna Cherry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Grant: May I deal with the first intervention first, please?

What I said was that the reason I had told my colleagues that it was not really worth while for them to hand over their phones, make appointments and so on to go and see the documents, was that there was nothing in there that they could not have got quite easily on the internet. Is it really a good use of a Member’s time to go through a security check more severe than an airport, in order to read in a classified document that Airbus and Boeing make aeroplanes? To read in a classified document that gambling legislation in Northern Ireland is devolved but not elsewhere? These are all things that were in the documents that the Government said they could not disclose. To read in the sectoral report on the electricity industry that lots of people in the United Kingdom rely on electricity for domestic and commercial purposes?

Come on, Madam Deputy Speaker: there may well be information in the latest batch of documents that there is good reason for wanting to keep classified and confidential, but the Government’s attitude is that they tell the people and Parliament as little as they can possibly get away with. We all know that the reason for the change of heart from yesterday to today is nothing to do with the Government’s having decided that, because part of the documents had been published, they might as well give Parliament everything. The Government are not opposing the motion today because they know they would go down badly if they forced it to a Division. They do not have the support of their own Back Benchers; I doubt if they even have the support of their own Front Benchers. Their culture of excessive secrecy no longer has the support of their own people. They are not forcing the matter to a vote today because they know they would not only lose, but lose so badly that it would call into question the continuation of the Government in its entirety.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Peter Grant: I did say I would give way to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

Joanna Cherry: As usual, my hon. Friend is being modest. He is not explaining to the House that he is a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee and has been part of the project to produce detailed reports of sectoral analysis, so he knows, like anyone who has bothered to read the reports—I see the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) is still sitting beside the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr)—that all the information in these top-secret documents is already in the public domain.

Peter Grant: I am grateful for that intervention. I am aware of the time, and I do not want to impinge too much on other people’s—

Stephen Kerr rose—

Peter Grant: I will give way once more, but I hope the intervention is a bit more relevant than the earlier one.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for his gracious approach to my intervention. It is just that he is contradicting himself. He says that the Government are not responsive to Parliament—that Parliament is some kind of constitutional eunuch—and in the next breath he says that the reason there will not be a vote today is that the Government cannot control their own side. He cannot have it both ways. This Parliament is very successfully holding the Government to account and is being very thorough in its scrutiny. In defence of the honour of this Parliament, I needed to intervene to say that.

Peter Grant: The reason why Conservative Back Benchers will abstain in this debate is that the Government Whips have told them to abstain. The reason why the earlier motion on the main Brexit sectoral analysis was not opposed was that the Government told their Back Benchers not to oppose it. Since then a number of Back Benchers, sitting in this Chamber, have said that they would have been quite happy to lead a move against that Humble Address before Christmas but the Government Whips told them not to. The fact of the matter is that all too often the Government hold Parliament to account, not the other way around.

We shall not fix that today, but if we appreciate that that is the background against which this fiasco has developed, it is easier to understand how it is that, as soon as there is a Government who do not command a substantial majority in the House, there are problems. The British electoral system has a phobia against minority Governments or coalition Governments, despite the fact that in numerous other places—some of them not too far north of here—there are examples of Governments operating very successfully indeed, either in coalition or as a minority Government.

The Minister, as part of his argument to try to discredit his own Government’s analysis, points out that it is based on average free trade agreements, as opposed to the all-singing, all-dancing with bells and whistles free trade agreement that the Government keep telling us they will achieve within the next year or two. What is that assurance based on? What grounds does this Parliament have to believe that the Government have a snowball in hell’s chance of finding anyone to give the United Kingdom on its own a better trade agreement than they are willing to give to the 500 million people of the European Union single market? Have the Government done an analysis to tell them that they are going to get better trade deals? I hope not, because if they have done such an analysis, that analysis is quite clearly rubbish as well.

Given that analyses that come out of Her Majesty’s Treasury are no longer to be trusted, may we now take it as the Government’s official position that we can no longer believe what was said in the 16 analyses that were done by Government Departments in 2013–14, showing what a disaster a yes result in the Scottish referendum would be? And can we just cut to the chase, and save everybody a lot of time, by getting the Government to admit now that the bucketful of analysis that they are going to produce next time around are also worthless and incomplete and selective, so they can just not bother producing them and save us all a lot of time?

Madam Deputy Speaker, when you get a Government who have to defend their own excessive secrecy by telling the people of these islands that they cannot rely on information that comes out from the Government, whether it was meant to come out or not—when the
Government tell us we cannot rely on information that the Government themselves are producing—that is what undermines Britain’s negotiating position with the European Union. It is not the fact that information might be published that the EU could have put together itself quite easily; it is that the Government’s action in attempting to conceal that information and then seeking to discredit it demonstrates to our EU partners what they probably knew—that they are negotiating with a disorganised, disunited, shambolic and incompetent Government. That weakens Britain’s negotiating position more than any release of Brexit analysis papers could ever do.

1.56 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), although obviously I did not agree with much of what he said at the end of his speech.

I am delighted that the Government have had the good sense to agree to the motion. I am concerned about the circumstances in which these documents will now be made available, in some sort of secrecy, despite the fact that they can clearly be read on the internet. Why we are going through that farce, I do not know.

May I gently say to my Government, this madness has to stop. If we were in the middle of the summer, I might say that it was overexposure to a hot sun that seems to have caused a collective outbreak in the Government of a form of madness. Their inability to grasp Brexit and do the right thing, frankly, is now at a point where, as I say, it has got to stop. We have to start to do the right thing; and the right thing is to get this Brexit sorted out, to form a consensus in this place and within the country, and deliver—deliver not just on the referendum result, but on the hopes and aspirations of our people that we will have an economic future out of the European Union that will be safe and secure for generations to come.

Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: In a moment.

The reality of these documents, of course, is that finally it seems that our Government have decided they are actually going to make some choices; they are actually going to form a view in Cabinet. It has only taken 19 months since the referendum to work out what they want from Brexit.

The Prime Minister told us, in her Lancaster House speech, what she did not want, but what nobody in the Government—in the Cabinet—has told us is what this Government do want by way of Brexit. And if I am agitated—and I am—I can assure the Front Bench that whilst I think most of the people of this country are just fed up with the back teeth, the people of this country are also agitated, because they are worried and they are nervous. And being blunt, there are millions and millions of people in this country who do not believe that either of the two political parties in this country represent their views, and indeed will forward their views.

I see it in these terms. I think there is a group of people—the hard Brexiteers—and you are not going to change them. In my party, my Government believe that somehow they can “manage” the 35 hard Brexiteers, who for decades have been hanging on about Europe in a way that I think is not, at times, particularly good for their mental health—and they think they can “manage” them. They cannot be managed. Even if they were given what they wanted yesterday, they would not compromise. They had not been done yesterday. For many of them it is a battle to the death, and they will not hesitate to destroy this party or our Prime Minister to get what they want. They can see the prize and they will be damned if anybody is going to get in their way. The Government need to wake up to that reality. So we have that problem to cope with, and that is the way to deal with it: see it off, build a consensus, and jump into the middle ground and put this country’s interests before anything else. As the CBI said, “Goodbye ideology; wake up to the interests of our country.”

Over on the other side is a group of people who still want to fight the battle of the referendum—they are remainers, they are angry and they will not accept that we are leaving the European Union—but here in the middle is the majority of people. They are like corks, bobbing around in a sea. They feel queasy and uneasy, and they are worried about their own futures and their children and grandchildren’s futures, yet there is nobody for them—no thing, no vehicle coming along upon which they can jump; a big, warm ship that says to them, “Come on board. You’ve got a great captain at the wheel and we can see the land of our destination over there.” It might be Norway; it could be the European Free Trade Association; actually, it should like it to be the single market and the customs union, but hell, I will compromise. I will take EFTA. Why? Because I want to form a consensus to get the best thing for our country.

That is there, but at the moment there is nothing for people to get into that will save them from what, unless this madness stops, will undoubtedly be a catastrophe. Call it what you will—“walking off a plank” is how I think a noble Lord quite properly described it yesterday. Others have described it as “sleepwalking to a Brexit disaster” or “jumping over the cliff”. Whatever metaphor one wants to use, if this Government—and it can only be this Government—do not get a grip on the situation at the top, we will indeed walk into a Brexit nightmare.

Sir Desmond Swayne: My right hon. Friend said that the Prime Minister had not set out what she wanted. I contend that she has done precisely that. Of course it is arguable whether she will get it, but as for the boat that my right hon. Friend wants to welcome everybody on to, the Prime Minister has set that out.

Anna Soubry: With great respect to my right hon. Friend, that is absolute nonsense, and the good people of this country now require honesty and transparency. Some of us have been over to Brussels. Many people—right hon. and hon. Members, some of whom I can see on the Opposition Benches—have spoken to people at all levels of the 27 nations and to ambassadors from other countries. They have been over to Brussels and spoken to all manner of people, and no, we are not pleased. Don’t patronise; we are not stupid; we know when we are getting a line. We have spoken to disparate people, and every single one of them says, “Wake up, Britain. You’re not going to get a bespoke deal. You’re probably going to get Canada.”
I do not want us to be like Canada. That is not what people in my constituency voted for. They did not vote to be poorer—and they would be poorer, God help us if we got a Canadian deal. People have a right to know what the consequences of the various options are. The problem with the Prime Minister’s position is that she has told us what she does not want—the customs union, the single market and the European Court of Justice—and that has seriously reduced the options available to our country. By drawing those red lines and refusing to move, she puts the EU in a position whereby it is limited in what it can offer us. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that we are deluding people if we continue to peddle this nonsense.

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** The right hon. Lady is giving a passionate speech. The one thing that the Prime Minister has said she wants is to keep frictionless trade in Northern Ireland. The problem is that that is utterly irreconcilable with what she said she does not want, which is the single market and customs union. Therein lies the fundamental confusion that is causing so much difficulty in the country right now.

**Anna Soubry:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman—I nearly called him my Friend, although on this he is, because he is absolutely right. The agreement made in December between the European Union and ourselves is such a fudge that it is impossible to put it into a text that could become a treaty. It is a superb fudge, and it has delivered the political outcome, but the reality, which has been accepted by this Government, is that in order to solve the problem in Ireland we are staying in the—not “a”, but “the”—customs union and single market. That is what the Government basically agreed to do in December.

**Alison McGovern:** The right hon. Lady has hit on the heart of the problem, which is that the Government will not say what they want. However, turning to this issue, does she agree that the reason why the public are in the dark is that we have excellent independent economic forecasters in the Office for Budget Responsibility who say that they simply cannot do their job because we are all in the dark about what the Government actually want? Ought they not to rectify that?

**Anna Soubry:** The hon. Lady is quite right—she can be my Friend in this debate, because she makes an important point. What responsible Governments do, quite properly, is to say to impartial, objective officials, “Right, these are the options. Cost them out, or assess them, and so on and so forth,” and yet bizarrely the Government did not put forward their own preferred option. What on earth does that say about our Government? What responsible Governments do is to phase 1 was actually quite good, so I am certainly not going to undermine it, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

Many hon. Members sat through the many hours of debate during the Committee stage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and, at the end of it, one thing on which those of us who take a sensible approach to this all agreed was that we had had some terrific debates. The dreadful irony was this: if only we had had those bloomin’ debates before the European Union referendum. What is undoubtedly happening is that people are becoming better informed. They understand now the huge complexity that Brexit is. They realise that there are serious consequences to our decision to leave the European Union, and that is why they are darned worried, not just for themselves but for their children and their grandchildren. People have a right to know. My constituents who work at Boots have a right to know the consequences for them and the pharmaceutical sector, based on the different models and choices that are still available to our country. The people who own and run Freshcut Foods have a

**Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab):** I have huge respect for the right hon. Lady on this issue. Does she agree that we would not be hearing any of this stuff about the reports being negotiation-sensitive if the Government could lay their hands on a single report that said there would be economic benefits to Brexit, rather than economic costs?

**Anna Soubry:** This is an astonishing idea. The right hon. Gentleman—he is definitely my Friend today—seems to be saying that if there was a report saying that going off the cliff or some other madness would be beneficial to our economy, the Government might publish it, because it would help in their dealings with the hard Brexiteers. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

What the Government have done, to their credit, is to ask the objective analysts to go away and look at the options, albeit apparently not their preferred option—although we have made that point, so I will move swiftly on—and they have come back, having no doubt done their job, as they always do, thoroughly, openly, honestly and exceptionally well. We now know that these reports were prepared, and apparently some Ministers have already seen them. According to reports, I think in The Times, Cabinet Ministers were to go and see them under lock and key. They were to read them, they were not to take in their phones and most certainly not to make any notes, and they were to inform themselves, so that finally our Cabinet could perhaps come to a conclusion about what we want from Brexit. Yet apparently these very same reports are so useless and flawed—they are based on weird modelling and cannot be trusted—that they have to remain top secret. They were not good enough—or were they?—to inform Cabinet members. It is nonsense.

**Geraint Davies:** The Minister said that these analyses are provisional, incomplete and not fit for purpose, so is the right hon. Lady as amazed as I am that the Prime Minister should conduct phase 1 of the negotiations with no economic analysis? No wonder we are the laughing stock of Europe.

**Anna Soubry:** Well, no, because I thought the conclusion to phase 1 was actually quite good, so I am certainly not going to undermine it, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point.
right to know about the consequences of, say, duties on imported fruit and vegetables from European countries and what those will mean to them, in the real world, doing the job that they do.

That is at the heart of all that is happening now. People want to know, because they are finding out about the promises they were made. The £350 million for the NHS is all gone; they were lied to—they were conned—on that. They were told this was going to be the quickest trade deal—I think I am right in saying they were told it would take a day and a half to do a trade deal.

We are nowhere near doing that trade deal, and we will be nowhere near doing it, because the other Brexit reality is this: we are not going to have a meaningful vote in this place—we are not—because there will not be anything meaningful to vote on. What is going to happen, unless the Government get into the right place, is that, yes, we will have an agreement on the divorce—that will be there in the withdrawal agreement—but in terms of the actual relationship we will have with the European Union once we have left, we will have a few woolly heads of agreement. That will mean pretty much nothing—not even to those of us who have spent what feels like a lifetime now looking at these options. We will have a series of heads of agreement. That is not meaningful; that does not give us the ability to decide whether this is in the interests of our constituents and our country. It will have no meaning whatever. Again, people—my Government and everybody else—have to wake up to the reality of what we are going to get in October.

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way, and I am hoping that she might say that I can be her Friend as well, but maybe the question I am about to ask will not allow that to happen. Does she think that we can have a meaningful vote in this House if that does not include the option of voting to stay in the European Union?

Anna Soubry: The right hon. Gentleman and I used to be Friends, because we used to be in coalition, so he can be my Friend today. [Interruption.] Actually, I am very proud to have served in the coalition, because it was one of the best Governments we ever had, but in any event, we will move swiftly on.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a really good point, because the other danger is that we sleepwalk into some trap that will be set—that if we do not vote for this woolly agreement, the alternative will be “off the cliff”, and, of course, there are alternatives. It would be wrong to say to the European Union, “Can we come back and negotiate?”—the EU is amazing in the way it has put up with so much nonsense and with still not knowing what our country wants—but I do not think we will be in that position. However, the EU has already made it clear that if we want to remain in the European Union, that option is still open to this country; indeed, if we want to remain a member of the single market or the customs union, that option, too, is available to our country. So, in that sense, it should be a meaningful vote.

However, let me just say this. Such is my concern as events have developed that I have come round to the very firm view that it is not just in this place that we should have a meaningful vote; the people of this country, too, are entitled to a meaningful vote. We had a referendum, and I have always respected the result and will continue to do. However, as this Brexit reality unwinds, and as people and even Members of this House—we know that some did not even know what the customs union was—[Interruption.] Oh, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure I speak on behalf of everybody when I say it is wonderful to have you back. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] We know your pain, and we all love and have great affection for you and, indeed, your family. We wish you all well.

That is the view I have come to. It is not for us to undo this EU referendum result, and we cannot; it has to be the people, and this has to be led by the people. The people are entitled not just to know the facts about Brexit but to have a say. I am forming the view, based on conversations I have had with my constituents, that many of them are now saying, “I did not realise how complex this was. I did not realise and appreciate how many cons and tricks had been played on me and how many untruths had been told. As I think about my future and my children’s future, I now want a real, meaningful say in this.”

Joanna Cherry: I will quickly give way before the bird lands.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. She is making a truly outstanding speech, and I really commend her for it. On the point she made earlier about the ability of the United Kingdom to change its mind, does she agree that the olive branch extended by Donald Tusk and Emmanuel Macron means that it is open to this country unilaterally to change its mind and revoke the article 50 notice?

Anna Soubry: The hon. and learned Lady is right—she, too, could become my Friend for the day. In all seriousness, she is absolutely right. I am sure that it was a pure coincidence that, the day after certain members of the all-party parliamentary group on EU relations went over to Brussels, Tusk and Juncker—I am not sure whether it was Juncker, but, anyway, Members know who I mean—tweeted in the way that they did. They made it very clear that if the people—and it has to come from the people—want to change their mind, we can stay in the European Union, and if the people want to retain membership of the single market and the customs union, that option, too, will be open to us in October.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We are starting to have that very important discussion about the fact that, as I put it, the people must finish what the people have started. That is by no means a disrespectful way of looking at the first decision; the two decisions are separate, and we are talking about a review and an update or a confirmation. This is by no means about talking down to people who voted one way or the other; it is about being very mature about the fact that we have all learned a great deal in the last 18 months.

Anna Soubry: I agree with most of what the hon. Lady says. The point in all of this is that this has to come from the people. Arguably, we—as politicians and Members of Parliament—are one of the reasons why the 52% who voted to leave voted in the way they did,
because they feel so disconnected from us and feel that we do not represent them. Actually, they always think their own MP is rather good; it is just that all the others are not, which is always interesting. It does not quite make sense, does it?

It is really, really important that we get this right. This has to come from the people. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, they started this. We gave them the power, and we must let them still have that power and exercise it. However, as I say, my real message today is to my Government and my Prime Minister: get a grip, and let us start leading on this. They should see off those people who do not run this country and who do not represent Conservative voters or the people of this country. They should park them to one side and build a consensus, never forgetting that, if there was a free vote in this House tomorrow or next week, I believe that the majority of hon. and right hon. Members would vote certainly for EFTA, and also for the customs union. So let us now be big and brave and do the right thing by the people of this country and the generations to come.

2.18 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and I echo what she said to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on behalf of all of us in the Chamber about seeing you back in your place. We feel for you enormously.

Such is the interest in our debate today that we have been joined by a robin—[Interruption. / Not that Robin—I was thinking of the other one, which has been hopping around the Gallery.

Well, well, well, this is all rather familiar. However, as well as the despair expressed by the right hon. Lady, I feel a growing sense of puzzlement. Let me give Members just a little history. We were led to believe in the first instance that the Government had been carrying out assessments of the impact of Brexit on different sectors of the economy. Then we were assured by the Secretary of State that they had not. Now we discover that, in fact, they have, although clearly those are not the same assessments we had mistakenly been asking for before. If I understand it correctly, they are now the assessments of the impact of Brexit on different sectors of the economy. Then we were assured by the Secretary of State that they had not. Now we discover that, in fact, they have, although clearly those are not the same assessments we had mistakenly been asking for before. If I understand it correctly, they are now the assessments that will be shown to Cabinet Ministers in the locked room over the next week or so.

I want to say something about what the Minister’s hon. Friend—the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—said yesterday. We on the remain side need to be honest and acknowledge that forecasts have been made that have proved to be spectacularly wrong. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe just referred to a forecast by the International Trade Secretary, whose precise words were that a post-Brexit free trade deal with the EU should be the “easiest in human history”. In 2016, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union forecast that by September this year, the UK “can negotiate a free trade area massively larger than the EU.” Well, that forecast was wrong too, and then there has been the repeated assertion by many Ministers, including the Prime Minister, that no deal is better than a bad deal. All of us know that is nonsense, because no deal is the worst possible deal of all, which merely proves that when it comes to talking about inaccurate forecasts, some Ministers live in very, very vulnerable greenhouses.

If Ministers in the Department do not trust any of the forecasts, it prompts the question: why did they bother to commission them in the first place? I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe, has tried today to soothe the no doubt ruffled feathers of his civil servants with a tweet—I do not habitually follow his tweets, but they were drawn to my attention—saying that

“I still love them and my critique is of economic method, not individuals.”

I am sure that will be of great reassurance to hard-working and professional civil servants.

Then there is the very perplexing question that it would be good to hear an answer to. What confidence should we have when the Minister said yesterday from the Dispatch Box that we do not need to worry about the gloomy forecasts, because the very same analysis shows that under every one of them, the British economy would continue to grow? How do we know that that forecast is true if it is being produced by the same people whom the Minister said from the Dispatch Box always get their forecasts wrong? It is a farce—it is a Whitehall farce.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend just pointed to the extraordinary circumstance whereby we see Ministers against civil servants, and I have never seen that situation in my lifetime. Does he not agree that at the heart of this is honesty and transparency for Parliament and the public in the most important debate that we will have for generations?

Hilary Benn: I agree absolutely. Indeed, I made the point yesterday about the importance of transparency and about a lack of transparency not being in the national interest. I gently say to Ministers that trying to have a go at people who are asking questions about what analysis has been done and what it shows, and attempting to suggest that all of them are trying to undo the referendum result, is an unwise approach. I think it reveals a great defensiveness and a lack of confidence on the part of Ministers about the position that they have put the Government in.

Tom Brake: I bring the right hon. Gentleman back to the issue of growth. Yesterday, the Minister said that all the forecasts suggest there would be some growth. Does he remember, as I do, how keen the Government were to claim that the UK was until recently the fastest-growing economy? Now, Ministers are clearly saying that if there is some growth—however small that is—it is excellent news for the United Kingdom economy.

Hilary Benn: Indeed, that is the case. Ministers have made those arguments and, of course, when the growth is better than that in any other countries, they would. However, what the analysis appears to show cannot be avoided: in all the options that it looked at, the country would be less well off than we would otherwise be.
We are told that the analysis is preliminary. Nineteen months after the referendum, how on earth can it still be preliminary—really? We are told that the people who are meant to be in charge had not seen it until two nights ago, when it is about to be shown in a locked room to members of the Cabinet. We are told, as has been said, that it does not include modelling of the Government’s preferred option. Why on earth not? The answer is a simple one: the Government do not know what their preferred option consists of. Therefore, they cannot model it.

Apart from anything else, the Government said that they really hoped with the Florence speech last October to get the European Council to move on to phase 2 of the negotiations, but we clearly were not ready then, because we now know that they had not done the modelling, and we are still not ready now, in view of what we have been told. As any teacher would understand, there are only so many times that the family dog’s eating habits can be offered as an excuse for not producing homework.

Being told graciously, as we all were yesterday, “We will give it to you eventually, when the deal has been done,” was not on. I very much welcome—I say this to the Minister in all sincerity—the fact that overnight Ministers have had a rethink and will accept the resolution. I say on behalf of the Exiting the European Union Committee—because we are buying some more lever arch files—that we will handle the material when it is given to us in the same, I hope, professional way that we are used to. We are told, as has already been said, that we will handle the last lot of information, in line with the commitments I gave to the Secretary of State.

This shambles—I use the word deliberately—is a symptom of a fundamental problem that the country faces. First, the Government took decisions early on, such as leaving the customs union, leaving the single market, having nothing to do with the European Court of Justice and no free movement, without having made any assessment of what impact that would have on the British economy—none. The decisions were taken for ideological reasons, without looking at any evidence.

Anna Soubry: May I take the right hon. Gentleman one step back? Does he now share the view of many right hon. and hon. Members on the Government side that the other mistake was to trigger article 50 too early as well, and that has not helped us in our negotiations either?

Hilary Benn: In retrospect, there is force in the right hon. Lady’s argument, but since the Government chose the date on which to trigger it, we would have expected them to plan how they would be in a position to be able to negotiate what was required.

The second thing that the Government have done is to demonstrate their complete inability thus far to set out what they would like in phase 2 negotiations—that deep and special partnership. Why? It is an open secret that the Cabinet is in disagreement about the right way forward—that is not just among 35 Government Back Benchers, but inside the Cabinet. Every day we open the newspapers to find the symptoms of that inability to reach agreement spread all over the pages. Heaven knows what the people we are supposed to be negotiating with make of all this. As a result, neither this House nor the 27 other member states are any the wiser about what we or they will be asked to consider when the Government finally reaches a decision.

What is the task now? The Government need to tell us what they will be seeking. Much more importantly, they need to indicate what trade-offs they are prepared to make to achieve the things they say they want, because the choices have consequences that cannot be avoided. It is clear that the Government face, apparently with equanimity, the prospect of going into a negotiation from which, whatever they achieve, we will come away with less than we currently enjoy. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) absolutely hit the nail on the head when she said that if there was any evidence to the contrary, boy, would we have read about it already.

The Government need to face up to the consequences of their own red lines for the border in Northern Ireland. I reinforce the point that has been made, including by my hon. Friend, because the Select Committee was in Dublin last week, and we went to look at the border in December. It is not just a fudge. We could describe it as an attempt at alchemy, because the Government are hoping that they can turn the base metal of full alignment into the gold of an open border, when nobody knows how that extraordinary achievement can be brought about, given the utter contradiction between the two positions that they have set out.

The Government also continue to insist—I hope at some point they will stop, because it does not add to their credibility—that between now and the end of October this year, we can negotiate and reach agreement on all these things: trade in goods and services; security and foreign policy co-operation; policing; information sharing to fight terrorism; the regulation of medicines, aircraft and food safety; the transfer of data; the mutual recognition of qualifications; and our future role in the 30 trade agreements that the EU has negotiated on our behalf—and everything else—the Minister sitting there knows better anyone what a long list it is—and that we are going to get a final agreement by October, and by the way, even if things go well, the negotiations will not even start until March! That is why we do not know—the right hon. Member for Broxtowe was right—what will be on offer by the time we get to the end of the article 50 negotiations.

I conclude with the issue that the House is going to have to confront—and we had better start thinking now about how we are going to deal with it, because the House is going to have the final say: we are going to vote on the draft agreement. Before it does so, however, the House needs to make it clear that we will expect to know what our future relationship, when it comes to trade in goods and services, is going to be. The vague offer, come October, of a possible post-dated cheque for an unspecified agreement simply will not do. Ministers should not rely—I say this with all the force I can offer—on the House of Commons just accepting whatever they come up with, on the grounds that the alternative is no deal at all; it is not the only alternative, and if Ministers do not start exploring those alternatives pretty quickly and doing the analysis to support what the implications of those alternatives will be, they may well find that Parliament ultimately decides it will have to do it for them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con) rose—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Rachel Maclean.

Mr Kenneth Clarke rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Oops. I call Mr Kenneth Clarke.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You were not on my list, but you have just been added.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Speaker got an ambiguous reply from me, and I will explain why in a moment, but first may I add my sympathies to the House, David Cameron and George Osborne, I am afraid, who are both friends of mine—grossly exaggerated the material they had, such that the arguments on the remain side in the national media, at times, were almost as silly as those on the leave side—on the question of the Bank of England in response to the vote are very poorly understood, which creates an even worse impression of the forecasts made beforehand?

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. The Governor actually lessened the impact that the Bank forecast by taking very prompt action to minimise the consequences. He would still agree with me, however, and has done publicly, that there has still be damage to the economy already, and he has tried to quantify the effect on GDP as a whole.

I will conclude with one last point—I said I would be short—about these forecasts. I hope we get more full information from the Government as events unfold and some impact assessments of their policy, once they have decided what it is, but it is almost inevitable that the impact will be detrimental to some extent. I know of very few economists who believe in market economics anything other than, to some degree, detrimental. I look forward to someone such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), with whom I often agree on economic policy, trying to explain to me how leaving the single market and customs union can have anything but a negative impact on the economy. How on earth can tariffs and customs barriers between us and our major market on the continent—the planning permission for those lorry parks, the recruiting of those thousands of staff—have a positive effect? How can regulatory divergence, which will damage trade, particularly in goods and services, have a positive effect? Whatever the best efforts of economists in these and future papers, they will be trying to measure the detrimental effects on the British economy that this step is bound to have. The country will be poorer if it pulls out of its present economic and trading relationships with the EU. It is our duty in this House, on a cross-party basis, to do what we can to minimise the damage.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is now a six-minute speaking limit. I call Emma Reynolds.

2.39 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): As ever, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke).

In the referendum, people were asked to decide whether or not we should leave the European Union. They were not asked about the form that Brexit should take; that was not on the ballot paper. However, as was pointed out by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the choice now is about how we are to leave the European Union. There are many different options and models. We need to secure the best possible deal to protect people’s jobs and livelihoods, and we therefore need to pursue policies based on evidence, not ideology.

Let me say gently to Ministers that the debate which took place in our country about the EU referendum was one of the most divisive that I can remember. It divided the country pretty much straight down the middle. It divided cities, regions, rural areas and towns. It divided generations, and in some cases it divided families. I will admit that it divided my family: close family members voted to leave the EU, and we had many robust debates about it, although thankfully we did not fall out over it in the end.

Surely the role of the Government in the 19 months since the referendum should have been to try to unite the country again, to bring the country together, and to stand above the fray and do the right thing, rather than getting their hands dirty in the fray and levelling accusations at Members. I say to Ministers—not the thoughtful Minister from whom we heard today, but perhaps the Minister who spoke yesterday, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—that they should not question the integrity of Members of this House. I see it as my duty, in representing the people of Wolverhampton North East, to ensure that leaving the European Union does not make them poorer. I will hold to that very firmly, and I will not be cowed by Ministers or any other Members who tell me that I am not acting in the national interest.

Some of the extremists—or Brextremists—on the Conservative Benches advance the same arguments day after day, week after week. If any of us dares to question the mess that the Government are in, we are told that we are betraying the will of the people. Ah—the other Minister, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—that they should not question the integrity of Members of this House. I see it as my duty, in representing the people of Wolverhampton North East, to ensure that leaving the European Union does not make them poorer. I will hold to that very firmly, and I will not be cowed by Ministers or any other Members who tell me that I am not acting in the national interest.

If economists, or any other trade experts, warn about the consequences of leaving the customs union or the single market, they are told that they are always wrong and it is rubbish. I am afraid that we are descending into a position in which a Government are making decisions solely on the basis of ideology, and not on the basis of evidence.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and passionate speech. The report appears to highlight the fact that the biggest negative impact comes from the UK’s decision both to leave the customs union and to leave the single market, neither of which we have to do if we leave the European Union, and the fact is that both decisions were made without proper debate, scrutiny and the presenting of evidence in the House. Is that not interesting?

Emma Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said earlier, those options were taken off the table soon after the referendum result. They were not debated very much in the House. There were no impact assessments, or economic analyses, whatever the difference between those may be. There was no discussion about the impact of leaving the customs union and leaving the single market. What will be the impact on the car industry in our country? What will be the impact on Jaguar Land Rover, which employs thousands of people in my constituency, and on Honda, whose representatives gave evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee? They said that if we left the customs union, the delays at the border would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, and could lead to job losses. Why are we not listening to those people?

When the Secretary of State appeared before the Exiting the European Union Committee, we asked him about the automotive sector, and about the evidence presented to us by businesses. He said that “existing trade associations tend to reflect the existing interests of existing factories, businesses and so on. They tend to be small-c conservative. In other words, they support the existing trade and do not think too much about future trade.”

Wow. Gosh. So we should not even bother to listen to the existing factories and existing businesses that employ tens of thousands of people throughout the country. Ideology will see the position in its own way. That is what we have been reduced to. If we follow the argument to its logical conclusion—my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) made this point—why should we bother to have the Treasury? Why should we bother to have a Budget? Why should we bother to set up the independent Office for Budget Responsibility? If we are going to rubbish all the experts all the time, we do not need to listen to anyone; we can simply follow our own ideology to its logical conclusion. I cannot believe that we have come to this, but we have.

Let me say this to the Government. We need a better analysis from them—a proper analysis—of the impact on the car industry of leaving the customs union. I am also very concerned to read in the leaked reports about the impact on my own constituency and my own region, the west midlands. This is a serious point. I want to know what more is behind the analysis that suggests that the midlands, Northern Ireland and parts of the north will be hardest hit, and I also want to know what exactly is the solution to keeping the border invisible between Northern Ireland and the Republic. When the Select Committee was in Dublin last week, we were told that the Government proposed that regulatory alignment, as agreed in December, would apply to 142 areas, not six, as the Secretary of State told the Committee.

I am afraid that the Government need to take this issue much more seriously. I am sick of the blunder. I am sick of the arrogance that tells us that everything will be okay. Where is the evidence that the trade agreements that the Government want to forge with
other countries around the world will replace the jobs and the other benefits of the trade that we already have with our nearest neighbours in the European Union?

2.47 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Let me begin, Mr Deputy Speaker, by associating myself with what has been said by Members in all parts of the House. We are so glad to see you back in your place.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House and agreeing to publish the statements. I think that, on the whole, transparency is a good thing. I also join in the praise that has been given to the civil servants. In my experience, they are fantastic. My daughter is a civil servant and I know how hard they work.

It is a shame that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who has just left the Chamber, was unable to say, when pressed: whatever the results of those statements were, what would be the position of the official Opposition? I think we all accept that forecasts vary: they have a range of outcomes and a considerable degree of uncertainty is built into them. However, the official Opposition have been unable to say today what their position would be on the basis of the figures that appeared in any statement, whether the implications for the country were negative or positive. They are unable to tell the millions of people who voted for their party, including those in their constituencies, whether they would change their position. Would they, as a Liberal Democrat asked earlier, call for a second referendum? Would they call for us to go back into the European Union? They have been unable to say. I think that they are letting down their voters and I think that that is a shame.

I am a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. We have spent considerable time looking in detail at economic analysis covering a range of sectors. Let me say at the outset that I am not an ideologue. Indeed, I do not think that there is a label that describes me. I am definitely not a Brexiteer. I did not campaign on either side of the referendum and I was not in the House then. I ran a small business for more than 20 years before I came here. I spent my entire career working with other small businesses in Birmingham and the west midlands. I can say to Members in all parts of the House that, when running a business, there is no such thing as certainty. Certainty in business is an illusory concept. We are trying to get certainty from economic forecasts for the Government to set out a negotiating position. That is an inherently impossible position. There is no such thing as certainty—as any entrepreneur or small businessperson will say, if asked.

When my business went bust and we had to start it all over again, I did not expect the Government to give me certainty to start my business again. I just got on and did it because I had to pay the mortgage and feed my children. That is what businesses up and down this country do. They deal with ambiguity and make contingency plans.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Businesses always look at forecasts, do modelling, look at outcomes and then make investments accordingly and choose which option to take. What we are seeing from the Government is a lot of muddling and not much modelling.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is right that businesses create forecasts, but they also understand and accept that in any forecast and in any market there is uncertainty and they have to develop contingency plans—alternative plans in order to make their business successful. If he were doing business with the United States under Donald Trump and wanted to export, does the hon. Gentleman think there would be certainty in that? I would argue that there is not, but many successful businesses trade with the United States.

Anna Soubry: The one thing businesses want—this is the message I and others have received for a very long time now—is certainty. Of course they know that things can change. Does my hon. Friend not accept that we are in a situation at the moment where British business is going to want to know absolutely that the transition arrangements are firm and will be met to give them that certainty by March? It is in March that they start to make their plans.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. Absolutely: when we have spoken to businesses in the Select Committee hearings, of course they want certainty, but the point I am making is that it cannot be provided, whether it is Brexit or not, in any economic situation to the extent that some people seem to want.

Seema Malhotra: Does the hon. Lady not agree, however, that there is a difference between uncertainty in a macroeconomic climate and legal certainty about how we may be trading with our neighbours?

Rachel Maclean: I agree that there are various areas where uncertainty can exist, but there is legal uncertainty when a business enters any new market or develops any new product. That always exists and businesses need to take that into account. The debate today seems to be about the need to provide certainty for businesses. It would be very desirable to provide certainty, but it cannot ever be done in quite the way suggested by forecasts and economic analysis.

Wera Hobhouse: I think it is agreed across the Chamber that we cannot create absolute certainty for absolutely every situation. This is why we have modelling, where uncertainties are already built in, and that is what we are talking about: different scenarios with different built-in possibilities and uncertainties. But that at least needs to be done, with the work published.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I think the Government and the Minister have agreed to publish this, so businesses can look at it and form their own view. However, I am certain that every single business I know—small growing businesses—will look at that but not take it as being handed down on tablets of stone. They will seek a range of outcomes and make their plans based on that.

We clearly have a difficult task in these negotiations. It is a negotiation—it depends on both sides. There are calls in this House for the Government to set out
exact what is going to be achieved. Again, that cannot be done because so much depends on what the other side will do. It is a negotiation that involves two parties—two sides.

I started by saying that there is no label that comfortably sits on me. I am not driven by ideology. What I am driven by is, genuinely, the wisdom of our voters and constituents—the wisdom of crowds and the wisdom of democracy. We might not like it. It might make it very difficult for our Prime Minister and Government. They definitely have a difficult and extremely challenging task to deliver in the best interests of this country. My personal view is that I would like to back them to get on with it and deliver in the best interests of our constituents.

2.55 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): First, may I add to the earlier comments about how good it is to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker? It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

The debate has been conducted in a cordial and respectful manner. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of previous debates about the impact assessments and many of our Brexit debates, when Members on the Government Benches have repeatedly impugned the motives and questioned the patriotism of Members not only on my side of the House, but on their own Back Benches. This kind of conduct has to stop because debate in this Chamber cannot function on that basis.

When we take our Oath of Allegiance of office, we swear to act in the national interest, in faithful service to those who elected us, and we do so on the understanding that everyone else in this place does the same. Although I may believe that other Members err in what they hold, I would never impugn their motives and I would never impugn their motives.

The contest of ideas that illuminates and enlivens this Chamber is one of different solutions, predicated on a common understanding that we all place the interests of our country first, even if we differ over what best serves those interests. Without that common understanding, our democracy breaks down.

That is just one part of a worrying shift in our political culture, however: one where parliamentarians simply trying to do our job are dismissed as traitors or saboteurs; and where the civil service is told, “We’ve had enough of experts,” because they do not give Ministers the answers they want. The job of civil servants is not to tell Ministers what they want to hear. It is to tell them what they need to hear—to speak truth to power.

Parliamentarians requesting information are not betraying our country. We are simply trying to do our job and stand up for our constituents. So when we call for the release of these documents, it is not about undermining the process; it is about improving the process. Parliamentary government requires an informed legislature. That means we must have access to this information. It is not good enough to tell us to wait until October, because by then it will be too late, as we are entering a crunch-point in the negotiations right now.

Earlier this week, we saw the EU agree its transition negotiating guidelines in just two minutes and, as we have seen, once Mr Barnier gets his marching orders he does not deviate from them. In about six weeks the EU will agree the negotiating directives for the final trade deal phase of the withdrawal talks. We should let that sink in for a moment: in six weeks, we will be asked to make the most important choice in our post-war history.

We talk of the fantasy Canada plus plus plus, but these leaked reports give the game away. They do not have anything on a Canada plus plus plus scenario, because such a scenario does not exist. It cannot exist. The “plus plus plus” is presumably supposed to mean the services sector, which accounts for over 80% of the British economy, but just two weeks ago at the Brexit Committee we heard from Christophe Bondy, the lead Canadian negotiator on CETA—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—who said there is no way for services to be part of a CETA-type deal. The fact is that a Canada-style deal would be about as much use to this country as a chocolate teapot.

It is crystal-clear that the most seamless and secure Brexit—the Brexit that is best for Britain—is an EFTA-a EEA-based Brexit. That is the only Brexit that protects jobs and opportunities, while also delivering control and influence. An EEA-EFTA Brexit ensures maximal access to the single market, being an internal market with the majority of the single market. It therefore protects jobs and investment, strengthens our hand in taking on multinationals such as Google and Amazon when they fail to pay their fair share, and protects vital workplace rights.

Peter Grant: Given the hon. Gentleman’s desire to retain access to the single market, can he explain why he does not want to just stay in the single market? Would not that provide the best possible access?

Stephen Kinnock: One of the key issues in the referendum was the free movement of labour and, as I shall go on to explain, there is an important provision in the EEA agreement that enables the application of an emergency brake on free movement. That is an important distinction between the EEA and the single market and it is one that we should look at seriously.

An EEA-EFTA-based Brexit would let us take back more control. It would end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and direct effect, ensuring that British courts had sovereignty. It would also allow us to shape the rules of the internal market through the EEA joint committees and veto those that did not work, with the right of reservation as enshrined in the EEA agreement. An EEA-EFTA Brexit would allow us to reform free movement by triggering articles 112 and 113, following the protocol 15 precedent, potentially allowing us to introduce a quota-based system to manage the inward flow of labour.

Above all else, an EEA-EFTA Brexit would allow us to reunite our deeply divided country. The Brexit referendum was won on a narrow margin, but the result was clear, and that was why I voted to trigger article 50. The Prime Minister then called an election, hoping to secure a mandate for a hard Brexit, but she had her majority cut substantially. The country said no to a hard Brexit. Any rational Government would accept that decision and commit to a sensible Brexit, rather than ploughing on through this fantasy hard Brexit land of rainbows and unicorns. The country said no to a hard Brexit. It said yes to a Brexit that bridges the divide. Our future...
relationship with our most important commercial, diplomatic and political partner is on a burning platform, and we have only until the end of March to put out those fires. I therefore urge the Prime Minister and her Cabinet to show some leadership, get off the fence and commit unequivocally to an EEA-EFTA Brexit.

3.2 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I also welcome you back to your place? You are much loved in this Chamber, and you have been deeply missed.

The best thing to do with these forecasts is not to hand them to the Brexit Committee but to put them in the nearest waste bin. I will explain why. I backed remain in the referendum, partly on account of the Treasury’s forecasts in April 2016 setting out what it thought would happen in the case of a vote to leave the European Union. It provided two scenarios: “shock” and “severe shock”. There were no categories entitled “success” or “continued economic brilliance for our country”. The “shock” scenario predicted recession and a sharp rise in unemployment. It also predicted that GDP would be 3.6% lower and that unemployment would be 500,000 higher, with 74,000 jobs being lost in the south-east alone. It wanted to ensure that everyone understood how badly every single region of the country would fare.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am looking at the forecast of 500,000 more unemployed, and it relates to the beginning of 2018. The Treasury produced a little chart showing just how bad it would be, how joblessness would rise and how if people did not vote the right way they would lose their jobs and be visited by recession.

Under the second category—“severe shock”—it was forecast that GDP would be 6% lower and that unemployment would increase by 800,000. Those forecasts made me think that there was a big risk involved, and that we ought to back remain. I advised my constituents to back remain, but they advised me that they did not agree and that they wanted to leave, by a margin of about two thirds. So I thought, “Well, we will make do, and try to secure the economy as best we can, because things are obviously going to be really dreadful and I am really worried about the employment situation.”

But what has actually happened? I have not seen a recession. In fact, growth has continued in this country. There are 32.2 million people in employment, and 1.4 million unemployed. That is an unemployment rate of 4.3%, and unemployment is at a 42-year low. Rather than going up by 500,000 or 800,000, it has in fact fallen by 250,000.

We do not hear about that from Opposition Members, do we? We do not hear them saying, “Well, wasn’t that Treasury forecast completely and utterly wrong?” All we hear them saying is, “Don’t be mean to civil servants who come up with forecasts that are hopelessly wrong.” We do not hear them asking why those forecasts were wrong. There has been no recession, and GDP and employment have continued to grow. It is hard to think of any part of that dossier that was correct. Indeed, it is now notorious as the “Project Fear” dossier.

I have asked questions about this in the Treasury Committee, of which I am a member, and every time I ask a Bank of England official or a Treasury official about it, they shuffle nervously and sometimes give a little cough. Sometimes they say, “The reason we did not have a massive rise in unemployment and a recession was that the Bank of England cut interest rates by 0.25%.” Interest rate cuts can be assimilative, but I am not sure that a 0.25% cut really made that much difference to 500,000 jobs. I think that the Treasury’s predictions in April 2016 were wrong, and if they were wrong before, the chances are that they could well be wrong again.

Andrew Bridgen: I, too, was worried about “Project Fear”, and I wrote to the Treasury after the referendum asking it to name and shame the 80% of economists who had claimed that there would be absolute meltdown if we voted to leave the European Union. The Treasury refused to name and shame them. I wanted their names because I wanted to ensure that they never got a job anywhere near government because their predictions were so bad, but the reason that the Treasury would not name and shame them was that they were already working there. They are the architects of this latest report.

Charlie Elphicke: Again, my hon. Friend makes a forceful point, and these people are not just in the Treasury.

The shadow Secretary of State—a knight of the realm, I should add—was kind enough to come down from St Pancras to see us in Dover recently. Grandly, he came down to tell the people of Dover that we ought to retain the benefits of the single market and the customs union. Everyone understood what he meant. He meant that we should stay in the single market and the customs union, that we should continue to have a trade policy made in Brussels rather than in Britain, and that we should continue to have uncontrolled EU immigration into this country with completely open borders. My constituents are very clear on one thing: they do not want uncontrolled immigration into this country. It has not helped them or their families, and they do not feel that it is helped their prosperity. They do not want trade policy to be made in Brussels. They want it to be made in Britain. That is why this Government are right to be leaving the single market and the customs union.

This is not a question of forecasting; it is a question of a mandate. That mandate was handed to us by our electors when they voted to leave the European Union. I understand that there are those on the other side who wanted to remain and who still want that. I respect that. I do not really respect their constantly re-fighting the referendum, but I respect the fact that they feel passionately that we should be back in Europe. However, that is not my mandate from my constituents, and it is not the mandate given to a lot of Opposition Members who represent constituencies in Wales and in the north of this country, who ought to spend a bit more time...
talking to their electors on the doorstep and a bit less time at grand dinner parties enjoying elite establishment-type conversation about how terrible it is all going to be.

Let me move on from Hampstead to the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). She was absolutely right that we cannot predict the future, so why is it that the EU-funded CBI so passionately wants Britain to stay within the single market and within the customs union and says that businesses do, too? The answer is that it loves the regulation produced by Brussels, which helps to keep things in their place, but we need to become more competitive as a country. If we become more competitive, we will grow more quickly.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Charlie Elphicke: I will not give way as I have given way twice already.

The Treasury analysis was wrong in the first place. The Treasury did not predict containerisation or innovations such as the internet. We are about to have an automation revolution, with cars driving themselves, and a revolution in solar power, which will reduce our unit energy bills, and this country is well placed to become much more competitive than any Treasury forecast would predict, but we can all see that that kind of future is coming down the road. To make sure that we embrace that future, this country needs maximum freedom, maximum discretion and the maximum ability to diverge from the policies and laws of the European Union and to embrace the wider world.

In the future, 90% of global economic growth will not come from the European Union, but from the world outside the EU. Over the past 40 years, it is an historical fact that the EU’s share of global GDP has fallen from 30% to just 15%. That is relative decline. We do not need to see relative decline. The future for this nation is global.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. This has been such a heated debate that we must now reduce the time limit to five minutes.

3.12 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be in this debate under your chairship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I normally find it a pleasure to debate the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), but being referred to as an “elite” by a representative of the Conservative party sticks in my craw. Coming from an ordinary background and having fought to get here to speak on the behalf of my constituents, who take all kinds of views on the economy, it pains me to be attacked and accused of being part of some kind of elite that is unconnected from my constituents. That is a disgraceful way to conduct this debate.

I want to make two simple points. The idea that all forecasts are wrong is wrong, and that everything will be all right in the end is a myth. It is the easiest thing in the world to stand up here and say, “Blame the economists. Blame the forecasters. This is all crystal ball stuff,” and the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), gave us an excellent example of that kind of nonsense yesterday. An economic forecast is a set of assumptions and a set of data for the current state of the world and then a long sum that allows us to make some conclusions about what particular circumstances might mean for GDP, employment and a range of other economic variables. It is just maths.

Andrew Bridgen: Has the hon. Lady ever heard the phrase “garbage in, garbage out”? If we use garbage figures and make garbage assumptions, we will get garbage out of the other end.

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman just made my point for me. It is just maths. It is clear and transparent. There is a set of assumptions, a set of data and a set of conclusions. If he thinks that some of those assumptions or some of the data are garbage, it is up to him and those who agree with him to show their working. All that they have to do is do the maths better than the forecasters. We do not have to have a stupid row about whether forecasters get everything wrong all the time, with people saying that we should not believe them anyway. We just have to be transparent and show our working and then we can disagree honourably and openly, rather than making constant ad hominem attacks against people who are not here to defend themselves.

To be frank, I have criticised how economics has been conducted in the past, and I agree with some criticisms of the traditional assumptions made in economics, but this debate is not about that. This is about whether we need to consider not just the “it will be all right in the end” point of view, but the damage done in the meantime. The past shows us that we cannot just wait forever. If a regional economy is de-industrialised and damaged, we know how long it takes to recover. Economists call it hysteresis—the act of scarring. If a factory in a town is shut down, that town may never recover economically. That is why this is not just about the long term. Brexiteers have the capacity to exacerbate inequality severely and significantly, so we cannot accept that things will be all right in the end.

We need proper modelling of not just the global effect on GDP or the effect on employment, but of the effect of the Brexit proposals on each and every town in our country. The OBR has asked the Government on
numerous occasions for a statement of policy so that it can make a forecast and model it. The spring statement is coming up, so I say to the Minister, as I said yesterday, that he should do the decent thing—do what George Osborne would have wanted—and give the OBR a statement of policy and let it be modelled. Then we can all see what the Government’s Brexit has in store for our country.

3.17 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I want to make a few points about the politics of all this and what that says about our politics. I do not need to go over the pantomime of the Government saying that there were economic assessments in excruciating detail, then that there were none at all, and then that there were two lever arch files. That has all been well documented. We then saw this week’s report, and what has the response been? Yesterday, the Minister turned up at the Dispatch Box to rubbish the Government’s own document and to attack the civil service and the Bank of England in tones more hostile than I have ever heard a Minister use. He capped it all by telling us that discussing such things was really not in the national interest and that it would undermine our negotiating position. The first thing that we can learn from this saga is that winging it has become a point of principle for those in charge. I do not know whether we reached this point through carelessness, a tendency to busk or something worse, but the way that things have been handled has been extremely corrosive of trust in the Government and has left people asking not only about what is known, but what is being hidden.

The documents say that in every scenario modelled, the country will be poorer than it would otherwise be, with the effect being felt most keenly in sectors such as chemicals, clothing, manufacturing, food and drink, cars and retail, and felt most deeply in the west midlands, the north-east and Northern Ireland. Those sectors and those parts of the country collectively employ millions of people and generate billions in tax receipts for our public services. If the lower growth depicted in the documents transpired, we would have lower incomes and a lower standard of living than would otherwise be the case.

How should we react to this? My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) is correct. If the Government had a forecast showing economic benefits from Brexit, we would not hear these arguments about negotiation sensitivity. It has been said far too much that those who ask questions are somehow undermining the national interest. Ministers are trying to create a world in which they are the sole owners of information, and in which the public and Parliament are allowed to see that information only when Ministers decide.

This is not just a conventional political argument; it is an attempt to downgrade the role of representative democracy. The irony is not hard to see, because the real danger to the national interest comes not from asking questions about the economics of Brexit but from pursuing a policy that we know will make the country poorer than it otherwise would have been, in order to satisfy the nationalist ideology driving the project. It comes from putting the appeasement of a faction within a political party above the leadership task of securing the greatest prosperity for the greatest number of people. The Government are governed not by the analysis but by those political imperatives, which is the real point.

Those of us who want to see the information do not want to see it because we are necessarily saying that the forecasts are correct to every decimal point. That is not really why Ministers do not want to publish the forecasts or do not want us to see them. The exam question for them is not the economic consequences of Brexit but how to keep the right wing of the Conservative party happy.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who is no longer in her place, told us the other day that there are 35 “hard Brexiteers”. The reason why the Government rubbish the economics is that, for them, it is not about the economics. My plea is for honesty and for Ministers to say, and to admit, that they actually do not care, first and foremost, about the economics of Brexit. This is about putting politics above the economics. It is about keeping the Tory party together and, in particular, it is about appeasing the right wing of the Tory party. I cannot think of anything that downgrades the national interest more than that.

3.22 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This has been an interesting debate, and I appreciate the intent behind it, but we have to be a bit more basic in our expectations. Everybody with any sense of how the world works, or even the tiniest ability to listen to experts, knows that leaving the EU is a disaster in slow motion. It is an omnishambles.

Like a train in a spaghetti western running on to a half-collapsed bridge, we know that the plunge is coming, but the people driving the train are shovelling more coal into the boiler—they have never looked over the side and they are fairly sure the train can make the jump to safety on the other side. Frankly, the blank refusal to look at what is actually happening makes blind faith look like scepticism.

The assertion that we will trade jam with China and scones with Brazil to make up for loss of access to the world’s biggest barrier-free marketplace, and the claim that 27 countries will be crippled without our expertise, is madness, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who is no longer in the Chamber, said.

I do not know what is in the tea in Whitehall, but it is pretty strong. If the analysis is anything like as rubbish as the policy position, its value, as has already been said, will be questionable, but I agree with Labour that it should be published. I am happy to hear that we will get to see the analysis, but it should go further. The people who put us here, and who pay for everything that gets done here and in our names elsewhere, are entitled to know just how much ignorance is at the heart of Government strategy and what the Government’s best forecast is of just how much disaster we are facing.

We all know there is a cliff edge, but none of us knows how high the cliff is. We have seen some analysis, most pertinently from the Scottish Government, and no one is predicting benefits. The best that anyone says is that there might be some way to ameliorate the worst effects, some way to make the pain a little less.
Leaving the EU is bad; walking away from the customs union and the single market is worse. Voters had many reasons for voting to leave. I have heard people offer different reasons, but none of them reckoned that we would end up with better trading relations. The people who will have to suffer the blunt trauma of this exit deserve the scant respect of having these forecasts opened up to scrutiny.

Labour’s motion calls for Members to be allowed to see the forecasts, and I acknowledge the Government’s movement, but I regard that movement as only a good first step on the way to everyone having sight of the forecasts. Frankly, I do not understand why the Labour motion is so narrowly drawn. In fact, I cannot for the life of me understand why there is so little opposition to exiting the EU, the single market and the customs union among Labour Members.

I appreciate there was a substantial leave vote in many of the seats that Labour worries about, and that there was a bit of a UKIP vote against a fair number of Labour MPs, but I cannot understand why an entire party would abdicate the responsibility of leading. Contrary to the Tony Blair doctrine, politics is not always about finding out where people are already heading in order to try to lead them there; sometimes we have to stand and say, “It is this way.” Sometimes we have to say that we believe something is the right thing to do, and the right thing to do now is surely to seek to protect, to the greatest extent possible, our membership of the single market and the customs union.

As we are where we are—heading down a track that comes to an abrupt and uncompromising end—the Government should at least have the courtesy of letting us see what they think are the best-case and worst-case scenarios. On courteous behaviour, I ask the Government to confirm that the analysis will be sent to the devolved Administrations at the same time as it goes to the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee.

The public should also be offered the courtesy of a glance at the research. We are told by the Brexit Department that everything is going swimmingly and will be all right if we just have enough faith and patience, so I cannot see why there would be any reluctance to publish the intellectual musings of the Brexit Secretary and the underpinning, in-depth research that I am sure went into those musings.

All might be for the best in the best of all possible Brexits, but we have no way of knowing what kind of Brexit is heading our way, what the great vision of the Government is or what kind of economic disaster zone is heading our way. I have seen nothing plausible to counter those who say that the economic outlook is almost apocalyptic—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Geraint Davies.

3.27 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Being Welsh, I enjoy a leak, but when does a leak become a whistleblower? Although we have to take precautions, I would contend that the information is in the public interest and should be in the public arena. The Government say this information is unreliable because they have not finished their economic analysis, so I wonder why we have ended up in a situation in which the Prime Minister appears to be going into a negotiation with no idea of the economic impact of different scenarios even in phase 1, particularly in relation to the Irish border.

It appears that the Government are intent on keeping secret any information that is put together, which reminds us all of what Keynes said: “When the facts change, I change my mind.” The Government want to conceal the facts so that people do not see the awful truth of Brexit and of what it will mean to the economy.

Of course, people can see with their own eyes the damage that has already been done. Every family will have to pay £1,000 for the divorce bill. The London School of Economics has said that inflation is 2.7% instead of 1.7%, because of devaluation, which is costing every worker a week’s pay each year. We are now at the bottom of the G7 for growth, having once been at the top, and we have growth only because there is global growth. What is more, people and businesses know there will be a two-year transition period. People and businesses around the country want to know what the sectoral analysis is. In Wales, where 70% of exports are to the EU and where there are 25,000 jobs in Swansea bay, there is great concern. If we face a cliff edge and no deal, the steel in south Wales will be decimated by the Chinese, and the agricultural industry will be decimated by any trade deal with New Zealand. We therefore need to know the facts and to have a vote in this place in October. People should have the final say on the deal on the table, and the sooner we get this information, the better.

There are benefits and opportunities outlined in this paper, contrary to what people have said. Those opportunities have been identified as the opportunities to deregulate environmental, worker and other standards. People in my constituency and elsewhere are worried about the fact that workers’ rights will be reduced to the laws of the United States. This is not what people voted for. People want to have on the table in front of them precisely what this will mean for their families, regions and countries. The Government are intent on denying us that information. They expect us all to go into closed rooms and not to disclose outside them what they have already said is not reliable data. It is time for them to come clean, and for us to have clarity of where we are going and the data on which we are basing our decisions.

The reality is that the Government do not know where they are going. We are told that in conversations between the Prime Minister and Mrs Merkel the latter asks, “What do you want?” and our Prime Minister says, “What can you offer me?” There is a circular dialogue, with nobody knowing what they want. We know that the EU27 will defend their interests, and defend the integrity of the single market and the customs union. We have a choice before us. It is my considered opinion that as the facts emerge we should think again.
This is not what people voted for when they voted to leave; they have a right now to have a look at the deal on the table and they should have the opportunity to have the option of staying in the EU if they do not like what they see. If someone orders a steak in a restaurant and gets a bit of chewed up bacon, which is the best we can hope for from this Government, they should have the right to send it back. People should have the final say and the Government should come clean.

3.32 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up this debate. It is one of a series that reflect the historic period this is for our country. In the decisions we are making, we are shaping the future of this country for generations to come. Nobody in this House should underestimate that responsibility. It is unfortunate that today’s debate appears to have been largely boycotted by both the mainstream Conservative party and, unusually, by the ideologues of the European Research Group, with the exception of its two former chairs, who were careful to flank the Minister in his opening remarks.

I guess that we had much of the real debate yesterday, in response to the urgent question tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), so I want to make reference to some of those comments, too. There have been moments during the past couple of days when the debate has risen to meet the responsibility that we have to the country, but too often it has fallen short. Accusing Members of being saboteurs or mutineers, or of thwarting the will of the British people, for wanting information released is as unhelpful as it is dishonest; this is a little ironic coming from people who have spent much of the past 43 years seeking to overturn the will of the British people as expressed even more strongly in 1975. Releasing information is not about whether we leave the EU, as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester, in opening the debate, described the papers as “work in progress”. In order that we do not have to keep repeating this farce, will Ministers commit to releasing the final versions of the papers following the discussions with members of the Cabinet, which, apparently, they were prepared for? Will they also commit to releasing future analyses as they are completed, so that this Parliament can fulfil our responsibility to make informed decisions?

In yesterday’s discussion, it was said that we would weaken our negotiating hand by sharing assessments and that the EU27 would never do such a foolish thing. Oddly, the EU does not seem to see it that way: the European Parliament has published dozens of impact assessments, on a range of sectors and areas; and a number of departments of the Commission have made their Brexit readiness documents available. With a quick search, I was able to find on the internet the Swedish Government’s assessment of the impact on borders and trade, the Danish Government’s report on the fishing industry, the German Economic Ministry’s assessment of the impact of a hard Brexit on German GDP and the Irish Finance Minister’s “Getting Ireland Brexit Ready” document. The transparency that other Parliaments and other Governments are giving to their people should therefore be replicated by our Government.

Without wanting to add to the discomfort of the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester, at the praise heaped on him by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, I want to welcome the different approach taken today by him in his opening remarks. It marked a sharp contrast with that adopted by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe yesterday. Denouncing the work of his own civil servants is both unacceptable and dangerous. Does he suggest that the Government should adopt the same approach to all economic assessments? Should we disregard the work of the Department for Transport on infrastructure investment or the modelling done by the Department for Work and Pensions? Should we just reject any economic analysis that suggests there may be post-Brexit options that might not offer the upside that he promised in a previous life? I have to say that, yesterday, it sometimes looked as if he was not certain whether he was speaking for the Government, or from where his heart is as a former chair of the European Research Group.

The hon. Member for Worcester said today that the end relationship that the Government want has not been modelled. Clearly, that needs to be done, but there is a crucial first step: they need to say where they want to be. As a former DExEU Minister said in another place yesterday, “there are still no clear answers to those basic, critical questions. All we hear day after day are conflicting, confusing voices.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 30 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1423.]

That option needs to be realistic and honest. In today’s debate and yesterday, there was lots of talk about respecting the British people, and that is absolutely right, but it is about more than respecting the outcome of the referendum. We fulfilled that responsibility by triggering article 50. It is about being honest with the British people about the journey on which we have now embarked, consequent to triggering article 50. It is about setting out the options—realistic options—and...
sharing the consequences of the different choices available. And there are different choices. There is no evidence that the British people want the extreme Brexit favoured by the Leave Means Leave group, and quite a lot of evidence to the contrary.

Those who campaigned so hard for a referendum on our membership of the European Union said that we should trust the people. Now, they should trust them with the information on the consequences of the options before us. They also argued for the importance of parliamentary sovereignty. Now, they should accept that too. The British people have a right to know, and we as their representatives have a duty to know. As the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), said yesterday:

“It’s time for evidence, not dogma, to show the way. We must act for our country’s best interests, not ideology & populism, or history will judge us harshly. Our country deserves no less”.

He is right. The Government need to respond to our motion today not just by accepting it, but by honouring it in full.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): This has been a great debate, and I am grateful to all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part. I apologise to those whose speeches I was not able to hear today; I know they were listened to closely, and I look forward to reading them in Hansard.

I am sure that we are all proud to be part of one of the world’s oldest parliamentary democracies. It is right that Parliament holds the Government to account for the decisions they make, but Parliament should be careful not to pursue a course of action that would harm Britain’s national interest, or one that would jeopardise the UK’s prospects during this crucial period in her history.

In drafting their motion, hon. Members have highlighted the need for material to be kept strictly confidential and unpublished during the negotiations, and we are grateful for that; but I cannot emphasise enough the importance of maintaining that position, in the national interest. In seeing the analysis, Members of the House will be sharing in the responsibility and obligation that the Government have to ensure the security of negotiation-sensitive materials.

We have reiterated many times that the publication of negotiation-sensitive information would be fundamentally detrimental to the UK’s negotiating position. We would risk undermining the hard work of our talented officials, applying themselves to the task at hand irrespective of how they voted at the referendum. To pick up on the themes explored by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) about the conduct of the debate, I wish to state on the record, in the light of today’s press coverage, my admiration both for the Cabinet Secretary and for the Prime Minister’s Europe adviser, who I am absolutely sure are carrying forward the Government’s policy diligently and properly. They do not deserve the criticism they have received in the press.

In making the critique I made yesterday, I relied on three things: the caveats that Members will see on the face of the analysis itself, historical experience, and my own long-held beliefs, which I believe are well founded—if I do say so myself. I relied on arguments that I have made in this House throughout my years here, whether in the Chamber or in the Treasury Committee, and I certainly do not reside from what I have said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) picked up on the theme of uncertainty. The point here is not to rubbish all analysis, but to do what I suggested at the end of my remarks yesterday—to ensure that we have a healthy scepticism in this Chamber for reports and for analysis of economics based on the things to which I have referred. Parliament has rightly agreed in this House that Ministers have a duty not to publish anything that could risk exposing our negotiating position. We have an obligation to the people of this country to ensure that we strive to achieve the best possible deal for the UK. Forcing the publication of this analysis would put that at risk. Despite the repeated assertions of Members of this House, this draft document is not an impact assessment or a statement of Government policy; it is a very preliminary draft only seen by DExEU Ministers this week and does not constitute a meaningful commentary on the expected outcome of the negotiations.

As I attested to yesterday, the document has been circulated only to test ideas and design a viable framework for the analysis of our exit from the European Union. As we have said repeatedly, this work is constantly evolving. The report does not consider our desired outcome—the most ambitious relationship possible with the European Union, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech. All Members must surely agree that the Government cannot be expected to put such analysis into the public domain before it has been completed, particularly when it is sensitive. As I have said before, this Government will not provide a continuing commentary of the analysis we are undertaking. It would be speculative and damaging, especially as the analysis does not reflect the UK’s preferred outcome in the negotiations.

I wish to emphasise that it is the Government’s view that this is an exceptional request today given the misrepresentation in the press of the reporting of this leak. This motion will therefore be agreed to on an exceptional basis, and it does not set any precedent for future action.

Deidre Brock: Could the Minister confirm, as I asked previously, that he will undertake to release the analysis, at the same time as releasing it to the Select Committee, to the devolved Administrations?

Mr Baker: The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has just told me that he has
already given that assurance, but what I will say is that we will work with the Chair of the Select Committee to ensure that we comply scrupulously with the motion. In particular, we will need to discuss the requirements for confidentiality to which the House will be agreeing today.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good friend for allowing me to intervene. I take it from what I have heard in the Chamber that this is a sort of evolving document. It is more like an aide-mémoire to help the negotiators. It is not something set in stone and it will change during the negotiation. Is that the sort of document to which we are referring?

Mr Baker: As we have said many times, we conduct a wide range of analysis to support our negotiating position as we proceed through this process.

To reply to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), I reassure him that we will comply scrupulously with the motion, working with the Chair of the Select Committee. We will ensure that we comply with the confidentiality requirements of the motion and that the House is satisfied. He asked me about future analysis and the reassurance that I gave yesterday stands. We will ensure that, at the time of the meaningful vote, the House is appropriately equipped with the analysis that it needs to make a decision.

Paul Blomfield: I just want to be absolutely clear: the papers that we are talking about today are a work in progress and, in discussion with the Chair of the Select Committee, they will be released in full. And given that they are a work in progress and the suggestion is that we should therefore be looking to the final documents as the crucial guidance to this House, will they be released when they are completed?

Mr Baker: I heard what the hon. Gentleman said. The House is appropriately equipped with the analysis that it needs to make a decision.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his point of order. The answer is twofold. First, yes, the motion is binding. I think that the Government are clear about that, and the Minister has indicated the intention of the Government to comply with it. Secondly, if memory serves me correctly, the motion refers to “a matter of urgency.” Therefore, the expectation must be that the report that is the subject of the debate will be released, published or made available to those persons mentioned in the motion as a matter of urgency.

I have now to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day. In respect of the Question relating to capital gains tax, the Ayes were 306 and the Noes were 240, so the Ayes have it.

The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (RESTORATION AND RENEWAL)

Ordered,

That at today’s sitting:—

(1) proceedings on the motions relating to Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster in the name of Andrea Leadsom may continue, though opposed, for up to three hours at which time proceedings on the Motion on Restoration and Renewal (Report of the Joint Committee) shall lapse if not previously disposed of;

(2) the Speaker shall then put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Restoration and Renewal (No. 1), should it be moved by a Minister of the Crown;

(3) should that Motion be disagreed to, the Speaker shall then put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Restoration and Renewal (No. 2), should it be moved by a Minister of the Crown;

outcome for the British people. We are accepting this motion today on the exceptional basis of the poor reporting of a leak.

Mr Speaker: Is the Minister giving way or has he concluded his oration?

Mr Baker: I have concluded.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has concluded his oration, and we are grateful to him.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the EU exit analysis which was referred to in his response to an Urgent Question in the House on 30 January by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee and made available to all Members on a confidential basis as a matter of urgency.
the Questions referred to in paragraphs (2) and (3) shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved;

(5) proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption, and

(6) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply in respect of proceedings specified in this Order.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the debate on restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. Before I ask the Leader of the House to open the debate, it might be helpful if I explain the meaning of what is on the Order Paper and the implications of particular votes, so that there is clarity at the outset and no one is under any misapprehension.

Motions 5, 6 and 7 on the Order Paper will be debated together. I inform the House that I have selected the amendments that are listed on the Order Paper. I will shortly invite the Leader of the House to move motion 5 on Restoration and Renewal (Report of the Joint Committee). Debate may continue for up to three hours. At the end of the debate on motion 5, it is expected that the Leader of the House will move formally the Restoration and Renewal (No. 1) motion. I will then call Members to move the selected amendments for decision without any further debate.

If the Restoration and Renewal (No. 1) motion is not agreed to, I expect the Leader of the House to move formally the Restoration and Renewal (No. 2) motion. I will then call Members to move the selected amendments for decision without further debate. If the Restoration and Renewal (No. 1) motion is agreed to, the Restoration and Renewal (No. 2) motion will fall and neither it nor the amendments to it will be moved.

I think that, among my perspicacious and highly intelligent colleagues, there is no need for puzzlement. It is all pretty clear if they look at the Order Paper, but if any right hon. or hon. Member proclaims ignorance of the meaning of these matters, that Member can always beetle along to the Chair at a suitable moment and seek enlightenment. I am sure, however, that they are all far too sagacious to require that.

3.55 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move motion 5,

That this House has considered the report of the Joint Committee on Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster (HL Paper 41, HC 659 of Session 2016-17).

Mr Speaker: With this we shall consider the following:

Motion 6—Restoration and Renewal (No. 1)—

That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster and its unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Royal Palace and home of our Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster ‘Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster’, HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) accepts that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure in this Parliament, whilst acknowledging the demand and burden on public expenditure and fiscal constraints at a time of prudence and restraint;
(4) accepts in principle that action should be taken and funding should be limited to facilitate essential work to the services in this Parliament;
(5) agrees to review before the end of the Parliament the need for comprehensive works to take place.

Motion 7—Restoration and Renewal (No. 2)—

That this House—
(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster as the permanent home of both Houses of Parliament;
(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster 'Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster', HL Paper 41, HC 659;
(3) agrees that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure; including steps to safeguard the safety of visitors, schoolchildren, staff and members;
(4) notes that works in the Palace should commence as early as possible in the next decade;
(5) authorises necessary preliminary work required to avoid unnecessary delay, without prejudice to a parliamentary decision on the preferred option;
(6) endorses the Joint Committee's recommendation that a Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority be established by legislation to commission and oversee the work required, and the establishment of a joint Commission to lay estimates;
(7) agrees that steps be taken now to establish a shadow Sponsor Board and shadow Delivery Authority, and to ensure that its members have a range of relevant expertise;
(8) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority to undertake a sufficiently thorough and detailed analysis of the three options of full decant, partial decant and retaining a parliamentary foothold in the Palace during a full decant; to decide whether each option properly balances costs and benefits, and whether or not the identified risks can be satisfactorily mitigated; to prepare a business case for the preferred option for the approval of both Houses of Parliament; and thereafter to proceed to the design phase;
(9) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority to apply high standards of cost-effectiveness and demonstrate value for money, and to include measures to ensure: the repair and replacement of mechanical and electrical services, fire safety improvement works, the removal of asbestos, repairs to the external and internal fabric of the Palace, the removal of unnecessary and unsightly accretions to the Palace, the improvement of visitor access including the provision of new educational and other facilities for visitors and full access for people with disabilities;
(10) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority to ensure the security of Members, Peers, staff, and visitors both during and after the work;
(11) affirms that in any event the delivery option must ensure that both Houses will return to their historic Chambers after any essential period of temporary absence.

Andrea Leadsom: This debate arguably should have taken place about 40 years ago, so I can say that I am delighted that here we are today, finally discussing the future of the Palace of Westminster. There are difficult decisions to make on how we best protect one of the world's most iconic buildings for future generations, but we must address those decisions head on.

In any mention of this topic, I am sure the House would like to join me in first paying tribute to the excellent work done by the Joint Committee on the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster, chaired by my right hon, Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and the right hon. Baroness Stowell of Beeston. A number of members of that Committee are present in the Chamber today, and the House owes them, along with the restoration and renewal programme team and our engineers, a debt of gratuity. Their work, and that of our colleagues in the other place, has laid the foundations for the House to take an informed decision on this important issue.

The Palace of Westminster is the seat of our democracy, an iconic, world-famous building—and it is in dire need of repair. Both motions and all amendments on the Order Paper recognise the need for that work. Anyone who has read the report of the Joint Committee will be aware of the two core difficulties we face. The first is that one of us can shy away from: the costs associated with a programme of works of this magnitude will be significant. While it is our responsibility to safeguard this UNESCO world heritage site, it is equally our responsibility to ensure value for taxpayers' money. We have been clear that there can be no blank cheque for this work, and value for taxpayers' money will frame the choices we make today.

The second issue is the state of disrepair within this building. The issue is not a structural one. As the Clerk of the House noted in his evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, the building is believed to be “beautifully built and structurally sound.” The problem, rather, is the services infrastructure that supports the ever-increasing and shifting demands of Parliament—and it is under considerable strain.

Since 1850, we have developed the patch-and-mend that has been going on not just for a couple of years, but for 40 years and more.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that every Member of the House will have a free vote on this matter and that Ministers will not be subject to a payroll Whip?

Andrea Leadsom: On the Government side of the House, there will be a free vote for all Members, and for Ministers.

John Spellar: It sounds as if it is a free vote, and all Members are free to make the choice they wish to make.

There are some critical risks in the Palace of Westminster. First, the lack of fire compartmentation increases the risk of fire, meaning that 24-hour fire patrols are necessary to keep us safe. Over the past 10 years, 60 incidents have
had the potential to cause a serious fire. Secondly, there is a huge amount of asbestos packed into the walls that needs to be carefully and expensively removed to enable repairs. Thirdly, many pipes and cables are decades past their lifespan, with some now being impossible to access. The likelihood of a major failure grows the longer the systems are left unaddressed.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor, I know that asbestos is dangerous when it is exposed, not when it is hidden and packed in walls. To what extent does asbestos hidden and packed in the walls, where it is not disturbed, act as quite good fireproofing for the building?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point that I am really not qualified to answer, but I agree that the health risk is in moving and removing asbestos.

As Leader of the House, I work closely with the Clerk, the Director General and others who are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of those in this building to ensure that risks are minimised. There are more than 7,500 people working in Parliament, and we welcome 1 million visitors each year, including many schoolchildren. Nevertheless, keeping everyone safe is becoming a growing challenge with each passing year.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): That is one point that I must confess I fail to understand. We hear the Armageddon scenario that we are going to be washed away in slurry, burnt to death or electrocuted, and yet we have thousands of visitors from the public in this place every day. I see no signs to say, “Welcome to the death trap.”

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the core issue. We make every effort on the House Commission and through the House authorities, the Clerks, the Director General and the engineers to keep this place safe. We have all the certificates required to evidence that we keep this place safe. The point is that it gets harder to achieve that safety with every year that passes. That is the key point that we are seeking to resolve.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Would it be wise to have thousands of visitors coming into a building where the walls have been opened and asbestos is floating around in the atmosphere? What recourse will members of the public have should they get illnesses as a result, given that there is supposedly Crown immunity in this building?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have made clear, that would not be allowed to happen. We take every step possible to minimise risks. We do not take risks with people’s health and safety. We do not wish to do that. The point I am making is that with every year that passes, it gets more difficult to manage.

What is the next step? Just as the need for works is pressing, so too is the need to be sure that we are acting in the right way, with the right planning and design capabilities in place. The way forward on R and R must be supported by the House. At the same time, we have to be able to justify to our constituents and to taxpayers that we are doing what is necessary to safeguard the Palace of Westminster and that we have thoroughly examined the costs.

I have listened carefully to Members, and I thank all those who have come to drop-in sessions, explored the basements and toured the Palace with the R and R team. I have reflected on all the amendments proposed to the motions I tabled the week before last. Today, there are very clear options before the House.

I turn first to motion No. 1. This motion recognises that, given the scale of the challenge ahead of us, Members must first consider the vast cost associated with any programme of work. With competing demands on our public services, and calls for capital investment in other areas, Parliament will want to think carefully about the impact this will have on the taxpayer, and may ultimately choose to limit spending on the Palace to essential repairs. The case for further work to be done is, however, compelling, and it is important that we do not impede future progress in any decision made today. So this first option also agrees to reviewing the need for comprehensive works before the next general election.

The full cost of an R and R programme under this scenario would not be incurred until late into the next decade.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Leader of the House accept, after all that she has said up to this point, that there is no cheap option here? If the public think, or if the press think, that we can find a cheap option, they are deluded. There is necessary work that needs to be done, and necessary money that needs to be spent.

Andrea Leadsom: The Government believe that it is for Parliament to take this decision, and I think the hon. Gentleman makes a very strong and compelling point.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is quite rightly talking about other people, outside this place, who have a concern and have an interest. When I inquired, at the display table this afternoon, what consultation had taken place with the many thousands of people who work in this building, I was told, “None.” I was told that senior stakeholders were consulted but the workforce were not. What answer does she have? Is it not correct that the people who work here have no voice here this afternoon?

Andrea Leadsom: There has been much extensive consultation, formal and informal, over many years, so that is not the case. In fact, reports from the Joint Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Committee, and the recent financial and explanatory memorandums, have all been useful tools for Members and staff of this place, who wish to acquaint themselves further with the issues around cost and complexity. These documents have also made clear the wide range of views on costs and varying approaches to the works.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): As someone who served on the R and R Committee, I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) that there was consultation, and we were very keen that the staff of the Palace were very much involved in this whole process.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his clarification and grateful to him also for his contribution to the Joint Committee.
That brings me to motion No. 2. If the House accepts that it will bear the cost from the taxpayer’s purse, it will be concluding that the work should be undertaken only on the basis of the most robust cost assessments possible. So the second motion seeks to establish an Olympic-style delivery authority, overseen by a sponsor board that will have a majority of members who are parliamentarians. That would produce up-to-date, fully costed proposals for restoration and renewal as soon as possible. The establishment of an Olympic-style delivery authority with external professionals will guard against unacceptable cost and timetable overruns of the sort that we saw with the Elizabeth Tower refurbishment.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): If these proposals are to be agreed by the House, can I implore this place to become its own planning authority, so that we are not dependent on the Greater London Authority or Westminster City Council; and not only to be our own planning authority, but to extend that remit to areas such as Parliament Square and even Abingdon Street?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I think part of the role of the delivery authority will be to look at the best combination of cost, respect for our parliamentary democracy and, of course, the right solution for this Palace, which is what this debate is all about.

If motion No. 2 is successful, the sponsor board and delivery authority must consider three options: first, full decant; secondly, partial decant with access to one Chamber at all times; and thirdly, full decant with a parliamentary foothold, allowing for parliamentary access during the works, such as to Westminster Hall and Elizabeth Tower. It is important to note that the second motion before the House today does not commit to a final decision. By asking a delivery authority to further evaluate those three options, parliamentarians and the public can be confident that the delivery authority will take into account the risks, costs and benefits of each approach, as well as accommodating the needs of our parliamentary democracy, before recommending its final, preferred, fully costed option in 12 to 18 months’ time. The motion allows those who support the Joint Committee’s recommendations to see them properly stress-tested.

For the clarification of Members, motion No. 2 differs from amendment (b) to motion No. 1 in two key ways. First, the amendment recommends a single option of full decant. The first problem with this is the lack of decant accommodation available to us under the current plans until 2025. The amendment does not allow us to proceed any quicker with a full programme of work than motion No. 2 allows for. The second problem is the fact that the Joint Committee report itself acknowledged that, while recommending full decant, it had not fully costed that option. Amendment (b) therefore does not settle the issue of value for taxpayers’ money.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But the problem is that neither motion makes a decision, and in the end this place is here to make decisions on behalf of the nation. It is time we got a grip and made a decision. I do not mind what the decision is in the end, but make a decision we must, surely to God.

Andrea Leadsom: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman’s perspective on this, but the reality is that we have to look at the best value for taxpayers’ money, not simply at the one proposal made by the Joint Committee, which it acknowledged it had not fully costed. To quote the Joint Committee report:

“We recognise that there is still work to be completed in order to validate our conclusions.”

The costs allocated were not budgets for the programme, and there are real concerns around value for taxpayers’ money arising from the hon. Gentleman’s amendment.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady is seeking to say that her motions suggest better value for the taxpayer, but if we make a decision with three options that have to be fully worked up and costed, that will mean a considerable cost in time and taxpayers’ money. However, making a decision now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, will mean that we can get on with it, set the path forward and get value for taxpayers.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry, but I must absolutely disagree with the hon. Lady. The problem with going for the one solution that she suggests is that the Joint Committee itself made it clear that it had not fully costed the options or even considered the options for fully decanting both Houses. She is also wrong, as is the amendment, on the grounds of the capability for full decant. If Members consider the challenge of decanting from this place, what exactly are they proposing? The planning that will go into fully decanting potentially 7,500 people—the works of art, the furniture, the books—will take a considerable amount of time in itself. That has to be properly planned, properly costed and properly evaluated, so the option for partial decant could, potentially, be a better, more valued option for the taxpayer than the proposal for full decant.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The delivery authority that my right hon. Friend has described will, she said, contain a majority of parliamentarians. For the sake of clarity, can she tell the House whether the parliamentarians will be allowed to vote, or will all kinds of other people be able to vote on our future too?

Andrea Leadsom: The sponsor body will, in effect, be the client of the delivery authority. The delivery authority will be made up of professionals who have expertise in a project of this size and the historical expertise we would need to be able to look at how best to resolve the problem. Parliamentary involvement in the sponsor body will ensure that the views of parliamentarians are taken into account at all points, until the delivery authority comes back to both Houses for a final vote.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way—she is getting a lot of requests. On the subject of decanting, and just for the record—I will speak to this later—the House should know that until very recently there was a contract with Church House, under which, should we have needed to decant at short notice in an emergency, which can happen at any time, Church House had always stood ready to accommodate Parliament, as it did during the second world war.
Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point about an emergency decant from this place. The security advice is that it is not safe these days for MPs to be coming in and out of the secure parliamentary state, so that would rule out a decant option off the estate. Secondly, and very importantly, on the day before the recess I attended—as I think you did, Mr Speaker—the emergency decant preparations done by the House in the event of the sudden need to move from this place, so those preparations are going ahead. However, what we are talking about here is about being out of this place for a significant length of time, so options such as Church House would simply not be suitable.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am very grateful to the Lord President of the Council for giving way. I was on the restoration and renewal Committee, and the conclusion that we came to, preliminarily favouring a complete decant, was based on the assumption that a temporary Chamber could be put up in Richmond House. We now understand that the measurements we were given which led to that conclusion were wrong, and that Richmond House would have to be pulled down completely. That is a completely different cost basis, and I for one would not have come to that conclusion had we known the true picture.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises another key point, which is that the options for decant have recently been examined by the House Commission, with all the various options for refurbishing the northern estate, which many hon. and right hon. Members will know is also in dire need of refurbishment and work on the mechanical and electrical facilities. My hon. Friend is exactly right to point out that, in terms of Richmond House, and having costed the different alternatives, it now becomes clear that to knock down all but the grade I listed facade and to rebuild the building behind it is, in fact, the one solution that has the same cost estimates attached to it as all the various temporary solutions. Yet that project—rebuilding Richmond House—would give a permanent legacy, with better Committee Rooms, more accommodation for staff in this place and a proper business contingency Chamber, as well as offering a solution for the decant.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrea Leadsom: I am going to make some progress, and then I will take some more interventions.

Crucially, the approval of an arm’s length sponsor board and delivery authority allows the project to be led by those with the necessary skills and the experience of delivering large-scale projects. On behalf of Parliament, the sponsor board will oversee the work of the delivery authority. As it will be crucial for Members’ views to inform and shape the programme as it develops, parliamentarians will have a majority of members on the board. In short, motion No. 2 invites the House to make a clear statement about the need to act with urgency, but it also ensures that a rigorous and professional business case will be drawn up that will provide confidence to Members and to the public.

Simon Hoare: On that point, would my right hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will continue for a moment.

If the second motion is carried today, the final recommendation, fully costed, of the sponsor board and delivery authority will come back to this House in 12 to 18 months for a vote. Following that vote, the House-approved business case would immediately progress to the design phase.

The Palace of Westminster will, in all cases, remain the home of our Parliament. That has always been the plan. To make it absolutely clear to all hon. and right hon. Members, full or partial decant will not take place until 2025 at the earliest.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Leader of the House is completely right that we do not yet have anything like enough information to evaluate which option the House should now pursue. I was predisposed to support the decant proposal, but I regret to tell the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), that I took my name off her amendment, having done some preparation for this debate. I do not think we begin to have the information, but setting up the delivery authority is a no-brainer for a project of this scale and nature.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. The need for action is absolutely vital. Each of the motions provides that opportunity, but it is vital that the House itself makes the decision.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I say a huge thank you to my right hon. Friend and her team for all their excellent work, but does she not agree that the time for talking is over? We have to grasp this do the right thing. I cannot believe I am going to say this, but in this instance, in supporting amendment (b), absolutely everybody vote leave.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my right hon. Friend for joining that sentiment. I point out that in terms of progress of work, neither motion 2 nor amendment (b) is suggesting any faster progress. As I set out, the difference between them is that amendment (b) offers only one solution. The motion 2 offers the opportunity to discuss the best combination of value for taxpayers’ money as well as solutions for parliamentarians.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Leaving aside for a second the merits and demerits of supporting the project or not, the Leader of the House and others have stressed the desperate urgency for this work to be carried out. Why on earth, then, have the Government prevaricated and wasted 18 months in getting this debate to the Floor of this House, before even getting it to the House of Lords?

Andrea Leadsom: There has been no waste of time. There has been consultation, and work has been ongoing to make some vital repairs. The hon. Gentleman may have noticed that the cast-iron roofs are being repaired—[Interruption.] No, he must appreciate that there is a need to consult, look at different options and make the right assessment. This decision could, and probably should, have been taken 40 years ago. I do not accept his accusation that there has been any prevarication, and certainly not on my watch.
Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes two important points. One is that we do need to get on with it, and the second concerns the importance of planning for this. It is vital that we get good value for taxpayers’ money. Roughly, the projections show that we will be spending £90 million a year, of which roughly half will be throwaway once we get on with R and R, and the other half will be work that needs to be done anyway and will not be throwaway. They are the sorts of numbers we are looking at. We do need to get on and take a decision, but we must fully cost the best value for taxpayers’ money.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): My right hon. Friend, please clarify something. If we adopt the idea of a delivery authority—I take the point my hon. Friend, because it is an important point. The whole purpose of the sponsor board having a majority of parliamentarians on it is to ensure that throughout the deliberations of the delivery authority it can take soundings from parliamentarians, and it will be the sponsor board and the delivery authority that will finally decide on the best combination outcome to put to both Houses for a final vote.

Andrea Leadsom: Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, I am delighted to answer my hon. Friend, because it is an important point. The whole purpose of the sponsor board having a majority of parliamentarians on it is to ensure that throughout the deliberations of the delivery authority it can take soundings from parliamentarians, and it will be the sponsor board and the delivery authority that will finally decide on the best combination outcome to put to both Houses for a final vote.

I have set out the options before the House. This is a matter for Parliament, rather than the Government, and for my party—and, I think, for all parties—it will be a free vote.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That was really an intervention without permission masquerading as a point of order, but never mind—we have heard it.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right: the whole purpose of the sponsor board having a majority of parliamentarians on it is to ensure that throughout the deliberations of the delivery authority it can take soundings from parliamentarians, and it will be the sponsor board and the delivery authority that will finally decide on the best combination outcome to put to both Houses for a final vote.

I have set out the options before the House. This is a matter for Parliament, rather than the Government, and for my party—and, I think, for all parties—it will be a free vote.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will give way one last time.

John Redwood: I am very grateful. It is on a point of clarification and information of general interest. In the costings for the grander scheme—where we leave these premises—how much of the cost is for essential replacements and renewals, and how much is for the nice-to-have additions and changes?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. About 75% of the cost of the works to the Palace of Westminster is for work that is non-cosmetic—it will be dealing with mechanical and engineering works, the fire risks, and so on—but aimed at preserving essential services for future generations. We have a duty to do it. This is not about carpets and curtains, but about profound and essential services, for the largest part.

Simon Hoare: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will not give way any more.

The Government do not have a position on this and will respect the views of the House, but as a Member myself I would like to take a moment to share my own position on this very important subject. When I became Leader of the House, I took on the restoration and renewal project with a healthy degree of scepticism. I, like many, felt that the case for a major restoration programme had probably been overstated, that the Palace looked fine and that we could continue to patch and mend as we went along, as we have done for many decades. However, during my seven months in the job, I have, as they say, gone on a journey. I have lived and breathed this topic. I have visited the basement and seen for myself what our engineers are up against.

Should a catastrophic failure happen in this place, I want to look back to this moment and know that I chose to protect the Palace for future generations. I want to be clear that we do everything we can to minimise the risks this building faces, but we must recognise that as time passes without comprehensive action those risks only increase. My role has brought me close to the heart of these issues, and I am not the only Leader of the House to have arrived at this view:
both of my predecessors, my right hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) and for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), share my desire to take action. Today I will be voting to take action. I will be voting for motion No. 2.

4.29 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her comprehensive speech about this very important issue. I was pleased to learn that the two motions tabled in her name are amendable. I had previously thought that they were not. I agree with her that we need to take action immediately, and I feel that amendment (b) to motion No. 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), will enable us to make an immediate decision.

I want to deal with three main issues. The first is the issue of the reports that have been published. A Joint Committee of the Lords and Commons was appointed by both Houses in July 2015. It took evidence, and a report was published on 8 September 2016. The Committee deliberated, and reached the conclusion that there should be a full decant of Parliament because that was the most cost-effective option. The Committee proposed that there should be a shadow delivery authority, a sponsor board, and updated costings. A second report was published by the Public Accounts Committee on 10 March 2017. The PAC endorsed the Joint Committee’s recommendation. In particular, it said that the feasibility of a full decant must be demonstrated clearly and beyond reasonable doubt, with a comprehensive risk analysis, before a final decision was made. Both reports were produced on a cross-party basis, and I thank the Committee members in both Houses for all their deliberation and hard work.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that, whichever option we choose, it is important that we do not break the 1,000-year link between the governance of the country and this site, and that we should therefore have a debating Chamber on this site while the restoration works continue?

Valerie Vaz: I will come to the issue of what will happen about a debating Chamber on this site, but I am afraid I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the link might be broken through factors beyond our control. We would be forced to leave if there were a fire, or any other act of God.

I thank the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who did try to find time for a debate. As I said earlier, the PAC’s report was published in March—I emphasise that date—and I then had a conversation with the right hon. Gentleman, who was very keen to get the debate going, but what we had not realised was that the hills were alive with the sound of a general election. As a result of the election, the response to the report was not made by the Government.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Lady confirm my understanding—this is really in response to what was said by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—that we cannot bind our successor Parliaments, whether in legislation or by other means, to abide by any measure that we pass? It can be revoked, and it can be changed. Is that also the hon. Lady’s understanding? Many of those who take my position on the issue fear very much that were we to leave this place, 101 reasons would be found for why we could not return.

Valerie Vaz: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we cannot bind future Parliaments, but I disagree with his other point. I think that when he has heard the rest of what I have to say, he will recognise that that is not the case.

The second issue is that there are new threats. Security, as well as safety, is now a key factor. While work is taking place in Norman Shaw North, Norman Shaw South and Derby Gate under the northern estates programme, all the security considerations will be taken into account. We know what happened at Westminster on 22 March. Our friend and protector PC Keith Palmer died; we were in lockdown. For all sorts of reasons, we need a contingency Chamber. The northern estates programme is on to that; discussions are ongoing with Westminster Council and they have been quite productive. Since the Department of Health and Social Care has now moved out into Victoria Street, it may well be possible to use the space behind the façade of Richmond Terrace, and that could very well be our contingency Chamber; it will become the contingency Chamber when we move back to the House.

Ian Paisley: Does the shadow Leader agree that amendment (b) guarantees that all Members will return to this site under paragraph (8)? That is essential for anyone who loves the history of this site; they recognise that coming back here is important, but if they really care about the historic nature of this site, we will make sure it is maintained for future generations by properly restoring this building.

Valerie Vaz: The hon. Gentleman sums it up perfectly, and I cannot add anything more to that.

The governance of the project is another major area of concern. There will be a sponsor body and a delivery authority. We had a very helpful seminar, which we might be able to set up for Members. It looked at the two successful projects of Crossrail and the 2012 Olympics and how the sponsor body and the delivery authority were set up and operated; we on the House of Commons Governance Committee, which I sat on, heard from Sir David Higgins on how he operated with those two bodies. He said he spent time building up the relationship and the two bodies acted in concert. As Members will know, Baroness Jowell was, when a Member of this House, successful in ensuring the delivery of a very successful Olympics. I know the situation now is slightly different as we do not have an end-date as we did with the Olympics, but Sir David Higgins made it very clear that so long as the professionals, who will be on the delivery authority, have a Gantt chart—I did not know what it meant then, but I do now—so there is a timeframe and the costs are allocated, there should not be any need for any overrun.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What does the hon. Lady say to the argument that if Members were still somewhere in this place, they would be able to have far greater oversight of the works in progress, which would incentivise the building works, because if we decant that incentive goes away?
Valerie Vaz: As with everything, we do delegate things to people—we do delegate things to professionals. I am pretty sure it would be impossible for 650 Members to have their say on how this place operates. That is why we have the delivery authority and the sponsor body.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The hon. Lady believes there will not be an overrun, but when work on the Elizabeth Tower, which houses Big Ben, is to take five years, does she think six years for the entire Palace of Westminster is a realistic estimate?

Valerie Vaz: I cannot look into the future, but I will address those points later.

Michael Fabricant: Does the hon. Lady understand the concern I raised with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House: if we leave it to the delivery authority, with just a few Members on it, and we end up with a take-it-or-leave-it decision to make, the final decision will in effect be made by the delivery authority, and not really by this House? I used to build radio stations and did re-equip of Broadcasting House and other things, so I have some small experience in this, and in reality there will be choices to be made. Of course we want the data from the delivery authority, but this House should finally make the choice between a number of alternatives, not just have a take-it-or-leave-it one.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me his resume. Perhaps he is suggesting that he should be on the sponsor body. Actually, it is the delivery authority, which has the experts on it, that will be accountable to the sponsor body. The sponsor body will have Members on it, and they will be the custodians and guardians of the project.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The two biggest projects in this country in the past few years have been the Olympic games, which involved a complicated build and had to be delivered on time, and Crossrail. As the hon. Lady rightly says, Sir David Higgins was involved in both those projects, and they were both delivered on time and to budget. We have got better at this, and following that particular procedure is by far the best way.

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Those two amazing projects have been, and continue to be, delivered.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) asked about the delivery authority and who will make the decisions. It is clear that that authority will make many critical decisions and, as the hon. Lady says, it will contain experts. Will those experts be voting members? Will they take key decisions? Or will it just be the parliamentarians who will be voting members on the authority?

Valerie Vaz: The delivery authority, with its experts, will carry out the day-to-day work. They are the experts in every aspect. Members here have other jobs to do, and they will be on the sponsor body. However, the delivery authority will be accountable to the sponsor body. As I have explained, Sir David Higgins is an absolute expert at this, and he ensured that both the projects that have just been mentioned were successful.

Mr Hayes rose—

Valerie Vaz: May I just finish addressing some of the issues that have been raised?

Some Members have asked whether we could move one Chamber at a time. Anyone who has visited the basement, as many Members have, will have seen all the wires and pipes. When the new technology was put in place, it was a patchwork effect. For example, the wi-fi was just slapped on, alongside the pipes. Those systems run along the whole building. Fires and floods do not respect any boundaries between the House of Lords in the House of Commons; for them, this is just one building, so if work has to be done, it has to be done to the whole building.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does that not underline the fact that decanting half the building would be problematic, because the services run throughout the whole of the building and we therefore cannot decant just half of it?

Valerie Vaz: I agree. I cannot add anything further to that.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I took part in the basement tour yesterday. It was made clear to us that a significant amount of the asbestos had been removed over the past few years, adequately and safely, while we remained here and while members of the public were able to use the building safely. Does that not illustrate the fact that significant repairs can be carried out while we are here, safe and well protected?

Valerie Vaz: The asbestos is just one aspect of this. We are talking about much more than that. We are talking about electrical cables, water pipes and all sorts of things including the telecoms system, so it goes well beyond just the asbestos. May I just say for the record that the place is safe? We would not allow people into the building unless the accounting officer was convinced that members of the public and parliamentarians were safe. That has nothing to do with the fact that the work needs to be done, but please do not let us give everyone the impression that this is not a safe place.

Turning to costs, the Public Accounts Committee has said that weak governance would increase costs and that good governance would cover that. The Committee recommended that the National Audit Office should have a role in this, and the Committee and the NAO will work to ensure that best value for money is achieved. As I have said, the delivery authority will be accountable to the sponsor body, which will have Members on it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we know from various engineering projects, the projections for the final costs can only ever be notional?

Valerie Vaz: That is absolutely right. As we have seen from Crossrail and from the Elizabeth Tower project, we never know what we are going to find. The Elizabeth Tower had structural issues, which was why the costs increased. With Crossrail, they actually found bodies. We do not know what they are going to find under here. There might be the odd monarch or two, or perhaps the odd Member or two following the basement visit. Who knows?

Mark Tami: Where’s Boris?
What a legacy it would be if we could move the education centre, the lease on which will be running out, to the contingency chamber. We will have more meeting rooms and an up-to-date, compliant building. We could leave behind a great legacy in skills and in civic pride. We will be able to do our work here safely and securely on behalf of our constituents in their Parliament.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am aware that we are already one hour into this three-hour debate and that there are lists upon lists of people who want to speak, so I will not take interventions and will be as succinct as possible.

This building is probably more important to me than to many here, because I come from an ethnic minority Commonwealth background and was brought up looking at the photographs of this fantastic building. It is a real honour to be here, so it was a shock when I became aware of the disaster that lurks around us, below us and above us. I believe we need a full decant because of the nature of the building’s infrastructure.

Most Members will be aware that the House has a basement, which has a long passageway that runs the length of the building. There are 86 vertical chimneys running from that passageway and they were originally designed for ventilation. That of course means a fire could travel laterally and vertically extremely quickly. At present, the chimneys carry a mass of electrical services of varying age, many of them clearly defective. We have gas pipes, air conditioning conduits, steam pipes, telephone systems, communications fibres and, of course, a hugely overloaded sewerage system, which I understand the Leader of the House discovered to her mishap—possibly through her shoes—when she visited.

The infrastructure serves the whole building from end to end, moving up through the chimneys, and there is a small duplication in the roof. In the days before the dangers of asbestos were known, that dangerous material was literally and liberally splashed everywhere by brushes from buckets, but asbestos can be dealt with. The infrastructure dangers are other than asbestos.

The sewerage system consists of two large steel tanks that collect from a very large pipe that runs the whole length of the building. The system was put in place in 1888 and it is just waiting to repeat the bursts we have already had. If those bursts go over some of the equipment and infrastructure, the disaster will stare us in the face.

We try to make not only the sewerage system but all the other systems fit our demands. This means that we are pushing on a door that is solidly locked. We have to take the infrastructure out. Despite the suggestion, it is not likely that we will find bodies because we will be repairing and renovating the infrastructure, not the structure of the building. We will not be digging down to look for Guy Fawkes or one of his relations.

The point we have to understand is that the longer we wait, the risk of a catastrophic collapse of services nears upon us. If my memory is correct, the risk is rated such that by 2020 we will have a 50:50 chance of a catastrophic collapse of our services. That does not just mean fire; it also means a collapse of our electricity or gas services, for example. About a dozen fires broke out last year. It has been asked, “Why wait?” I support amendment (b) to motion No. 1—the amendment tabled by the Chair and deputy Chair of the Public Accounts
Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown)—because we need to assess the situation. We should not wait, but we have to assess before we go any further.

All the connected infrastructure needs to be removed and replaced. I am disappointed by the two motions. Motion No. 1 would kick the whole problem into the long grass and, to a major degree, so would motion No. 2. Both motions would mean extra expenditure when we are staring a full decant in the face. The thought that we could take out the infrastructure in half the building is engineeringly ludicrous. While we did that, we would have a long delay and more expense, and the other half of the infrastructure would continue to deteriorate while we sat and stared at the problem in the first half of the building.

Amendment (b) to motion No. 1, in essence, takes the Joint Committee’s recommendations on repair and renovation. As has been said, it is a bicameral, cross-party report. Many members of the Joint Committee were as cynical as anyone, including me, when they went in but, after the evidence, their conclusions were unanimous and conclusive. They took extensive advice from many who should and do understand the problems and solutions, and that is in the report and its conclusions.

I hesitate to use the word “experts” because it has become traditional to sneer at experts but, as a part-time consultant on a patient with a very severe condition such as cancer, they want to see an expert. This building has a very severe and potentially fatal condition, so we need to take notice of the experts. Any method other than a full decant will vastly increase the costs, the time taken to do the works and the risk of disaster, and that risk is getting worse day by day, as I have said.

The security risk from a partial decant is obvious if one pauses to think about it. I have read the letters and papers from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). His amendment entails a partial decant. That has been rejected by the Joint Committee, by the Public Accounts Committee and by many, many other—if I dare use the word—experts. The approach the amendment sets out will, in essence, double the time for works, double the costs, increase the security risk, and increase the risk of fire and of a complete breakdown of the services in the other half. The thought of cutting a sewerage system—or the electrics or any of the other works—in half does not make sense because of the nature of the building. I am sorry to say this, but I would not give my hon. Friend—I hope he remains a friend—a LEGO set to play with.

I did say I would be as succinct as possible, so let me just say that it would be a severe derogation of our duty to not move expeditiously, and I urge support for the amendment standing in the name of the Chair and Deputy Chair of the PAC and of many others, including myself.

4.56 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Of all the things this House can do to endear itself to our constituents, spending billions of pounds on renovating our place of work is not one of them. In these days of austerity and tightening of belts, and with the impending economic disaster of Brexit coming our way, I would bet this would be near the bottom or at the very bottom of the public’s concerns. The sums involved are simply eye-watering—£3.6 billion rising to £5.7 billion, and that is before all the unforeseen difficulties and the additions that hon. Members will certainly want to factor in. So it is no surprise whatsoever that people are making an estimation that this could come in at a cool £10 billion to £12 billion.

As with so many things that fundamentally impact on my constituents, I thought I would ask a few of them what they thought about these proposals. It was no surprise that they were not seen all that favourably. Mrs McLeod from Pitlochry just said curtly: “You must be joking”.

Mr Morrison from Errol said: “In these days of food banks and austerity I am sickened that they are even thinking about this”.

Mr Mac Donald from Kinloch Rannoch just casually inquired: “why are you even still in that place, it’s time to come home to your own Parliament here”, a sentiment with which I wholeheartedly concur.

Sir Hugo Swire rose—

Pete Wishart: I will make a bit of progress and give way in a moment.

Surprisingly, no one in my less-than-scientific survey of a few people in Perth and North Perthshire thought there were any admirable qualities in spending billions on a parliamentarians’ palace. I am pretty certain that, even if I went looking for anyone who thought there were, I would not find any in my constituency.

Let me compare and contrast what is happening in this Chamber with what has just been happening in the Scottish Parliament, where we are setting out our budgets. We are allocating billions of pounds to socially useful programmes that will enable our citizenry. What are we doing here? We are talking about spending billions of pounds on a royal palace to accommodate Members of Parliament. Nothing could distinguish better the priorities of these two Parliaments.

I do, however, accept that we have an issue. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh really!”] Yes. Because of the decades of prevarication and indecision, this building is practically falling down. The failure of successive Government to face up to their responsibility in looking after this place means we now have a building that could, as people have said, face a catastrophic failure at any time.

The mechanical and electrical engineering systems are already well past their use-by date and the risk of that catastrophic failure rises exponentially every five years. Some of the high-voltage cables in the building are decaying, and fire is an ever-present risk, only compounded by just how easily any fire would spread. Most worryingly, as we have heard from the Deputy Leader of the House and the Leader of the House, there is a substantial amount of asbestos in the building. Mice and other vermin are a common feature, and I have heard that some staff even have names for the mice that they frequently acquaint with on a daily basis. It is not a robin we need in this House, but a flipping big eagle to pick up some of the huge mice that kick about this place. The Palace of Westminster is simply falling down.
Chris Bryant: I sympathise with some of the hon. Gentleman’s argument, but it is simply untrue to say that this building is falling down. It is not. There is work that needs to be done, not least to protect staff and give them a proper place to work in, and to provide decent disabled access, but if we simply let either motion go through, we will be committing more money than if we vote for the amendment in the name of the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. That is what I fear.

Pete Wishart: I have an elegant solution to the difficulties and travails of this House, which is to consider making this beautiful building a tourist attraction for people from all around the world. There are immense development opportunities in this UNESCO world heritage building. Let us design and create a Parliament for the 21st century—one that will be useful for 21st-century parliamentarians—rather than try to shoehorn all this activity into a mock-gothic Victorian tourist attraction. That is what the hon. Gentleman should support this evening, not billions of pounds being spent on some parliamentarians’ palace.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: No, I want to make some progress.

We have a duty of care to the staff and for their wellbeing and safety. It is therefore disappointing that the motion seeks, once again, to kick any future works into touch and to delay the decision. The simple fact is that the decision should have been made a decade ago, not kicked into touch for another Parliament to deal with. The whole story of resolving our difficulties in this House is littered with prevarication and indecision. We will not support any measure that leaves our staff and tra vails of this House, which is to consider making this beautiful building a tourist attraction for people from all around the world. There are immense development opportunities in this UNESCO world heritage building. Let us design and create a Parliament for the 21st century—one that will be useful for 21st-century parliamentarians—rather than try to shoehorn all this activity into a mock-gothic Victorian tourist attraction. That is what the hon. Gentleman should support this evening, not billions of pounds being spent on some parliamentarians’ palace.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) may be seeking to recover his composure—I certainly did not exhort him to resume his seat. We want him on his feet so that we can hear him continue.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I will enjoy a refreshing cup of Irn Bru with the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) any time, but on his substantive point, I assure him that I cannot wait to get away from this place and for my nation to take control of all its own affairs.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Is it true that there are only 22 voters in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency who separate him from fulfilling his wish?

Pete Wishart: Yet again, there is a cunning plan in place, because a precedent has been set. If I, for whatever reason that I cannot foresee, was less than successful in the next election, defeated Members for Perth and North Perthshire are simply given a peerage in the House of Lords.

We have proposed a sensible approach to the current issues facing this House. There is nothing wrong with considering a new-build Parliament off site. It is deeply disappointing and depressing that when that was sensibly presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) to the Joint Committee, it was rejected out of hand and did not even get the time of day as a proposal. Is that not absolutely shocking? It was a failure of true diligence of this House to consider all available options—just rejected immediately. It would have been a solution. Just imagine developers lining up to get a share of this place, a UNESCO site; just imagine what they could do. We are trying to shoehorn a Parliament into this mock Gothic building. We need a 21st-century Parliament designed with all the features that we require as 21st-century parliamentarians to do our job, and that cannot be achieved on this site without decades of work and billions and billions of pounds.

That brings me to amendment (b) to motion No. 2. This is really, really important. For goodness’ sake let us at least end the useless tradition that actively eats into our productivity as Members of Parliament and restore electronic voting in whatever approach we pursue. [Interruption.] Another proposal that has gone down particularly well with my Conservative friends! We waste days of parliamentary time just stuck in the packed voting Lobby, waiting to make that simple binary choice of yes or no.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am conscious that I am probably one of the few Members who have taken part in the debate so far who was actually only elected in 2017, but one thing that struck me when I got here was going to the education centre and the bemused look on the children’s faces when I explained to them that to vote in this place, I have to walk through doors, yet in the education centre, the kids get to vote by electronic keypads.
Pete Wishart: As my hon. Friend will remember, only two weeks ago, we wasted up to two hours on voting in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. We could have been debating, legislating or taking up issues on behalf of our constituents. WebRoots Democracy came up with a report today that said that one month—one month—was lost on voting in the Parliament between 2010 and 2015, at the cost of £3.5 million in Members’ time. This nonsense has to end.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman is presupposing that a month was lost in voting in the House of Commons. Do you have any information as to how much of that month was taken up by voting on SNP amendments?

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter on which I have taxed my mind, and I do not think that I am required to do so, but I have known the right hon. Gentleman since we first jostled together in 1983 at a half-yearly Federation of Conservative Students conference, and I knew his puckish grin then and I know it now. He has made his own point in his own way and we will leave it there.

Pete Wishart: It is a puckish grin with which I am also familiar. All I want to do is to assist hon. Members: help us in our campaign to reclaim our time so that we can properly spend the time debating and looking after our constituents—[Interruption.] Yes, take back control, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) says.

Mr Rees-Mogg rose—

Pete Wishart: On that very issue, how can I resist the hon. Gentleman?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that time in the Division Lobby is wasted. On the Conservative Benches, we find it quite useful talking to our friends and colleagues. Is that not true in the SNP?

Pete Wishart: I do not know how much of a blessing it is to Front Benchers when hon. Members get backstage and buttonhole them. And this is what we get—the shrieks of, “Oh, we need to meet up with our ministerial colleagues in the Lobby.” But that prerogative is exclusively the right of Conservative Members. I do not detect many Government Ministers, as we spend most of our time voting with Labour, and I am pretty damned certain that no Labour Members have encountered a Government Minister in their Lobby over the course of these years. The Conservative Members may have that right, but it is a right that is not open to the rest of us.

I will help Conservatives Members with this one: we could have electronic voting that we would have to do in the vicinity of the Chamber. We would all have to come here and we would get some sort of device, because the technological solution would be to press a button that is handed out to us. We would all be here, so if hon. Members wanted to speak to Ministers or talk to the Leader of the House about a particular issue, they could just go up to them and say, “Hello, Leader of the House. Can I have a word with you please?” None of that would be stopped.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman just clarify that he is saying that we should have individual desks?

Pete Wishart: A number of solutions have been designed in Parliaments around the world. In some Parliaments, that solution may include desks. What I am suggesting is a technological solution, whereby we would come to the Chamber and press a button to vote. We could vote on anybody’s proposal and time would not be wasted.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I have served in the Scottish Parliament, which uses electronic voting. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is an issue—I saw this a number of times—with SNP MSPs who incorrectly press the wrong button?

Pete Wishart: Let me use the hon. Gentleman as an example. Sometimes he is not even there to vote on these issues because he is away refereeing football games, earning thousands of pounds, so it is really good to see him in his place today, prepared to vote.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Public Whip website, in the last full five-year Parliament, the hon. Gentleman voted in only 49.9% of votes. Does he want an electronic system so that he can boost his own record without doing any real work?

Pete Wishart: I do not know quite what the hon. Gentleman misses when it comes to these sorts of issues. I vote for issues that are reserved here in this Parliament and this House. Conservative Members are trying to stop me from voting, through English votes for English laws, so we are in a situation where these particular difficulties exist in the House.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is it not also true that the Public Whip does not record the fact that there are England and Wales only votes that we are excluded from in this House?

Pete Wishart: The whole trend of EVEL legislation is to ensure that we do not vote on those particular issues; they have put in mechanisms to stop us doing that.

I will conclude, although I know that the House has very much enjoyed the alternative view on the issue. I want this House to move on in where we work and in how we do our work. But I have a sneaking suspicion, from my 17 years in this House, that neither of these things will be delivered any time soon.

5.12 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I will be brief because I want to concentrate on only one aspect of the debate, which is safety. I know that there are important issues to be discussed about costs, timing, and whether we have a full or partial move. For the record, I support those who say that we must be clear that Parliament should stay in the Palace of Westminster in the long term. But before we consider these long-term issues, we need to look at what is happening here, today and every day. What is happening is that we are asking not only ourselves and our staff, but also thousands of visitors, to come to a building that is not safe.
It might be an exaggeration to say that Parliament is a death trap, but it would not be a wild exaggeration. Anyone who has taken the tour of the basement will have seen the full horror of the current arrangements. We have already heard about the regular fires that break out. I think the Leader of the House said that there have been 60 over the past 10 years, and 12 in the past year alone. Chunks of masonry have fallen off high parts of the building. We are lucky that no one has been killed so far because of this. It is not remotely conceivable that people would be allowed to work here if this were a normal building, let alone that thousands of tourists would be allowed to visit it.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On the right hon. Gentleman’s tour of the basement, did he happen to give any consideration to the working conditions of the individuals who are tasked with undertaking repairs in the basement areas? Having seen the basement myself, it seems incredibly unsafe and unfair to expect them to continue in those conditions.

**Damian Green** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I did the underground tour as well. It was very frightening to see the cables running alongside the electrical wiring, but the most frightening thing I saw was the sheets of metal sitting above that wiring. They were full of water that was dripping down through the building and were there to stop the wires getting soaking wet. Given that we work in such conditions, how can we not make urgent efforts to get the work done in this building?

**Damian Green**: The hon. Lady’s point illustrates the general one that those who have spent most time and effort looking at the conditions of this House, either on various Committees or, indeed, inside Government, are the ones who are most keen to take early and decisive action. No one’s conscience should be comfortable with the potential consequences of delay and inaction in these circumstances.

I have great sympathy with and support for the Leader of the House, who has been energetic and active in bringing this matter before us. I agree with those who say that this should conceivably have been dealt with 10 years ago, but I assure the House that the Leader of the House has been very energetic in bringing it before us and we should be grateful to her.

The conclusion I draw is simple: get on with it—just get on with it. In the spirit of that conclusion, I will support amendment (b) to motion No. 1, as that is the best way to minimise the chance of a disaster happening as a result of inaction—a disaster that would reflect appallingly on this House.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I confess to being one of those who holds this building in enormous esteem. There are bits of it I do not particularly like, but I have to say that the experience of walking through Westminster Hall, looking up at the angels, carved in probably the 14th century and supporting the roof, is one of the great joys that I would want every single one of my constituents to be able to experience at some point. It is against that background that I care passionately about what we do.

It is not just that we enjoy being here and fought to be here, because we wanted to come into this building and change the world and this country in the way we think is right according to our particular light; it is that we know we are trustees of this building for future generations. In the early 19th century, they did not do it well and it led to a massive fire in 1834, which destroyed ancient paintings and buildings that had been here since the 13th century and before. My terrible fear is that if we do not take our job as trustees seriously now, regardless of party political advantage or, I say to my SNP friends, of ideological interest, we truly risk losing one of the great treasures of this country.

The problems have already been laid out. As the Chair of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), said, there is a single 130-year-old drain that could burst at any time. There is a high-pressure steam heating system next to high-voltage electricity cables, with wires that are decaying into flammable dust every day, next to gas pipes, phone cables, broadband cables and running water, all wrapped in asbestos.

To answer the point made by the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) about asbestos, about two years ago the Clerk had to ring the Leader of the House to say that part of the central heating system had burst through some of the asbestos around the cabling, which was immediately next to the air conditioning.
system of the Chamber of the House of Commons. There was a real danger that he would have to close the Chamber and Parliament indefinitely until that was sorted out. The real problem is that we have a central heating system that is elderly, at high pressure and could burst at any time. It normally takes us about two and a half weeks to switch it on because of the fear of its doing that. That is the real problem about asbestos in the building.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My point was that we are told that these wires and cables are in tall stacks, which are full of asbestos. We are also told that they are going to burn, but they are clad in asbestos. My point was about the assessment that has been made of the fire protection provided by that asbestos, which we know to be one of the most non-flammable products.

Chris Bryant: This is the problem. In many of the spaces we are talking about, which are effectively very narrow chimneys, there is very little room, because they were intended to be ventilation shafts, in essence, but are now so full of generations of heating, electricity and other kinds of cabling that it is impossible to get in there to check. It is even impossible to get in there to check the extent to which the cabling has decayed.

We know that there is asbestos in some places, but we do not know whether there is in others, of course we have to take precautionary measures. That is the problem; we do not know where all the asbestos is. A lot of it will have to come out because we have to remove other things, not because we are specifically removing the asbestos.

There are long corridors with no fire doors. We have 98 risers in the building and miles of inaccessible and narrow wooden tunnels that would act as funnels for a fire that, I tell you now, would speed through the building faster than most of us in the Chamber could run. We do not meet the national fire safety standards. That means parts of the building are falling apart, water is coming in where it should not, and we are degrading a national asset. That is why it is so important, as the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said, to set up a proper sponsor body and delivery authority to do this properly—to bring in really high-quality staff and to make sure the work is delivered on time and on budget, as we can do in this country.

In all honesty, motion No. 1, if left unamended, says, broadly speaking, “Let’s not do anything in this Parliament.” It is not the long grass; it is the very, very long grass. I believe that would be an utter dereliction of our duty, which is why Historic England, who are, after all, the Government’s own advisers on the built heritage in this country, have said that if we were to go down that route, they would have to put this building on the at-risk register. That is a profoundly shocking thing for us to be told if we are not going to take action.

Motion No. 2 is mildly better. I am a bit disappointed in the Leader of the House that she is not going any further than that motion, because it also means that we refuse to make a clear decision now. It means that we try to set up a sponsor body and a delivery authority, for which we want to get the best people, without giving them a clear direction of travel. It means that they will be repeating the work that was done by the Joint Committee.
We produced our report 16 months ago and it is only now that we are getting the debate, so my bet is that when this sponsor body reports, with the three options that it has looked at, the Government will not want to table the motions. There will be a general election coming up; there will be some issue that has to be sorted out, and the debate will be another two years after that.

I say to hon. Members that if they are thinking of voting for motion No. 2, they will have to make this decision all over again in four years’ time, by which time the risk will have increased—and the cost.

That is why I support amendment (b) to motion No. 1. It implements the unanimous recommendations of the Joint Committee and the Public Accounts Committee; it sets up a sponsor body and a delivery authority; and it takes an in principle decision today. It is the only way to take an in principle decision today.

Andrea Leadsom: I just want to set the record straight, because the hon. Gentleman is attributing inaccuracies to my remarks. Motion No. 2 will ensure that the best combination of urgent action can be taken in a cost-effective way. The delivery authority will come back to this House with a final preferred solution within 12 to 18 months and with proper costings. As for his proposal to go down with a final preferred solution within 12 to 18 months, the risk will have increased—and the cost.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which is why, incidentally, to those who say, “If we ever move out, they’ll never let us back,” I say, “Who is this magical ‘they’ who’s going to prevent us from coming back in?” The truth is that whether we choose to come back will always be a decision for Parliament. If future generations decide that things should be done differently, good luck to them, but we should not make a decision now that makes it impossible for us to protect this building, because—this is precisely the point that the hon. Gentleman made—the most certain way for us to be permanently excluded is to have a catastrophic failure in the building, such as a fire or a flood.

Mrs Moon: Before casting their votes tonight, those Members who want to remain should nip into the Library and read sections of “Mr Barry’s War”, in which they will see the absolute chaos when Parliament refused to decant the last time. It was horrendous. It drove Pugin almost mad. We must leave.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is a great book and it, too, is available in all good bookshops, although it is not by me.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am swaying between the amendment that the hon. Gentleman is promoting and motion No. 2. The reason I am drawn more to the motion No. 2 is that I would like us to have the occasional foothold in this place—the occasional use of the Palace in an extended period. Is there any way that the amendment can achieve that?

Chris Bryant: “A foothold” is a difficult thing to specify, but some people have said, for instance, that we should keep the Chamber functioning—I guess that is what most people mean. The difficulty with keeping the Chamber running is that the Chamber is not just the Chamber. It is not a hermetically sealed unit; the air conditioning, the heating, the electricity and all the rest of it come from somewhere. The public have to have access through large parts of the building. We would also have to access from somewhere, and it could not just be through some kind of polytunnel. It is actually phenomenally difficult to achieve that.

There was one other option, which was for us to sit in Westminster Hall. I love the idea of sitting in Westminster Hall. The hon. Member for somewhere down in the south-west—the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)—and I were joint advocates of that. The problem is that the floor is not solid—there are no solid foundations—and we would have to put something inside the roof, which could destroy it, so there are real problems.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I should point out to the House that Members are free to intervene if the Member on his or her feet wishes to take the intervention, but there are now 80 minutes left. I must, in all courtesy, warn Members that a lot of Members who want to speak will not be called. Some of them are also seeking to intervene, and I am sure they can join the dots.
Chris Bryant: I have maybe one small paragraph more, Mr Speaker, which is simply to say that I am very fond of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I disagree with his views on this, because, in the end, they are not in the long-term interests of the Palace of Westminster itself. In particular, the idea of us sitting in Portcullis House, I am afraid, is for the birds. The advice from the security people is that it is simply begging somebody to use the fact that Portcullis House sits on top of the tube station, so I would say to the hon. Gentleman that that is a non-starter.

My final point is that there is only really one proposal on the table that allows us to make a clear decision and to move forward more swiftly, and that is the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier).

5.36 pm  
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am also very fond of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), but I do disagree with him on one fundamental. What the whole House is united about is our understanding that we need to get on with this job. That is why I have lived and breathed this issue with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who is sitting on the Front Bench, why we took the motion to the Backbench Business Committee with the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), and why we have constantly encouraged the Government to bring these motions forward.

The work needs to be done, but the question I have to pose is, if this work is so important—if the building is so dangerous—why, in these decant options, are we waiting until 2025? That is the question we have to ask. I ask why the work is not proceeding faster and at a pace. I ask myself why we still have so few fire doors and why the Library corridor, which is 100 yards long, has no fire door in it. Those are the sort of points we should raise. We are united—I say this to the hon. Member for Rhondda—on the need to take action, but I do ask why, if this work is so urgent, we are waiting until 2025. This whole debate about the decant has muddied the waters. Frankly, the Government should have been taking action years ago. If it is inconvenient to us, so be it. That is the most important point.

When my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire and I first saw the report, we were not saying that we were the experts. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) that nobody suggested we were setting ourselves up as experts. I deliberately went out and consulted experts; I did not just consult my own conscience.

Like everybody else, I love this place, but I am not so important, and we are not so important. What about the 1 million people who visit this place every year? What about the fact that this building is the iconic centre of the nation, particularly as we try and resolve the very difficult questions of Brexit? Do we really want to take the enormous political decision, at this very difficult time for our nation, to move lock, stock and barrel from the iconic centre of the nation?

Members should understand that if we vote for the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier)—it is the crucial amendment tonight—we are taking the decision. It is not motion No. 2 tabled by the Leader of the House and it is not asking for further assessment. If we vote for the amendment, we will be taking the decision now, and there will be no going back on it—we will have to move out. Members should not believe that it will be for only five years. They should look at the Canadian Parliament. I predict that we will be out of this building for 10 or even 12 years. The Canadian Parliament, which is building a replica Chamber, is moving out for 12 years. We have to think of our constituents and ask ourselves this question: do we really believe in this at this time of unparalleled austerity? In particular—I have seen Opposition Members make this point many times—do we believe that we should take the decision this evening to spend £5 billion up-front on our own workplace? It is a very difficult decision and a very difficult argument to make to our constituents.

When we started consulting experts, many other issues really got us worried. For instance, not a lot has been said so far about the fact that the decant proposal is to build a replica Chamber. Although we have heard a lot about the Joint Committee, it did not get all its facts right: it wanted to build the replica Chamber in the courtyard of Richmond House, but unfortunately, it was five metres out. That is not a very competent process. Therefore, the Leader of the House was right that we cannot risk voting for the amendment, because there has not been sufficient assessment of the proposals. When it says that this is a unanimous report, it has to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who was on that Committee. He has now changed his mind—

Mr John Hayes rose—

Dr Caroline Johnson rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: I cannot give way very often because the Speaker asked me not to speak for long, but I had better give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Hayes: To be fair to the Leader of the House, as I think we want to, she has been absolutely clear that the proposal is to demolish Richmond House—she has been certain about that—and to build the replica Chamber nearby us. The message we would send to our constituents is simple: not only have MPs voted to leave Parliament, but they have voted to build another building to occupy and another Chamber a stone’s throw away. What a nonsense!

Sir Edward Leigh: Could we imagine for a moment the United States Congress doing this, or the French National Assembly? This is actually on the table. [Interruption.] The United States Congress is building a replica Chamber? I think not.

Dr Johnson: On the original costings of £3.52 billion for the full decant, I was told today in a meeting with the business director of the project that at the time, they assumed that a building was available of the right size and in the right location. In fact—it has not actually been properly costed yet—the estimate is that the new work on Richmond House would cost an additional £550 million.

Sir Edward Leigh: We are worried, and we are right to be worried, about the costs of the replica Chamber. It has been said to me that it may be necessary at times, if we carry on with this work—nobody is denying that we should proceed with it as fast as possible—that this
Chamber may have to leave. I fear that if the replica Chamber is built, we will be out of the Palace of Westminster for up to 10 years. We will be too comfortable, so we have looked for and have consulted on alternatives. We tracked down Sir Michael Hopkins, the architect of Portcullis House. Nobody had raised this idea with him before then—he built the most bomb-proof, the most secure and the most expensive, by metre, building in the country—but the atrium of Portcullis House is exactly the right width, with this Chamber and the Division Lobbies, for an emergency Chamber for a few months. It would not be too comfortable there, but it is possible. Westminster Hall has been mentioned. The Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), mentioned Church House, which is built to bomb-proof standards. There are alternatives if we have to move out, so get on with it.

The argument that the Joint Committee has established beyond peradventure that it is cheaper to have a full decant is not accepted by many experts—I say this to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley. It was not accepted in the Deloitte report, which talked about net cost analysis. The Joint Committee report did not take sufficient cognisance of the cost of the replica, the work of the patch-up, which will have to be done in the coming years and months, the security costs and the VAT costs. All these costs have been factored into the Deloitte report. There is no time to go into detail, but do not accept the facile argument about the two proposals. We have the decant proposal, which would stop 1 million people a year visiting this building and have all the other disadvantages that I have talked about—do not accept that the decant proposal is much cheaper. Many accountants and experts take an alternative view.

Before we proceed to a vote, let us listen to the hon. Member for Ealing North and remember the thousands of employees working in this building. Of course, we want them to be safe, but we also want them to have a job, and what would happen with a full decant? This is urgent. We must get on with the work now, build the fire doors and so on, and let us remember this historical point—the hon. Member for Rhondda has made many historical points, and I will end on this one: when the House of Commons Chamber was destroyed by firebombs in 1941, Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, representing the best in their two parties, made a conscious and absolute decision that this House of Commons would not be bombed out of its historic home, and that was why we moved to the Chamber of the House of Lords.

I commissioned an architect, pro bono, who proved conclusively that this would be perfectly possible. He looked at all the wiring issues, the sewage issues, all that we have talked about, and found that it would be perfectly possible. Are we really being told that in this day and age we cannot divert sewerage and electrical wiring? They do it all the time in the private sector. They build pop concert arenas for tens of thousands of people in two or three days, but we are told by the experts that it is impossible to resolve this problem. I return to my historical point: when the chips were down in 1941, Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill decided that this Chamber would not move from this building. I therefore urge colleagues to vote down the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch and vote for motion No. 1. We must get on with the work.

5.46 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I want to be brief, so I will not take interventions.

It seems a very long time since we had the pleasure of sitting on the R and R Committee—it seems a very long time because it was in fact a very long time ago. We reported in September 2016, and it is now the beginning of 2018, so it has been the best part of 17 or 18 months, in which time the Government have ducked, dived and dodged, and done everything but bring this issue to the House. Finally, they have tabled two motions, the purpose of which, as hon. Members have said, is to kick the can down the road. I really thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), therefore, for tabling her amendment today.

It is crazy that this is a half-day debate. Regardless of hon. Members’ views—whether they are in favour of or against moving out—it is crazy that one of the most important buildings in the country, the home of our democratic institutions, only merits a few hours of debate. When the R and R Committee first met in July 2015, I started with the view that we should stay. We had been here for hundreds of years and I thought we could do the work around us. How difficult could it be? Like other Members have said, the fear that, if we moved out, we would never move back again was certainly doing the rounds.

I changed my mind. I recognised that the only sensible choice was a full decant—not a partial decant and certainly not staying here and somehow muddling through for 30 or 35 years. I came to that decision because I—and, indeed, the whole Committee—looked at the evidence. I know we live in world today where evidence and facts are to be ignored—or if we do not like them, we just create our own or find other ones that suit our case—but we did not do that. By the end, every member of the Committee recognised that remaining in the House was not a sensible option, for a whole host of reasons.

Cost was one of those reasons, but today I want to talk about just two aspects: safety and security. I advise those who have not taken the tour of the basement to do so and to see for themselves what other hon. Members have talked about: the state of the plumbing and electrics, and the constant measures that have to be taken because of the risk of fire.

A very important point is that every year we are spending tens of billions of pounds—[HON. MEMBERS: “Millions.”] I am sorry. We are spending tens of millions of pounds just to patch and make do, and that figure is growing. Sadly, whichever option we choose, much of that work will be ripped out because it is a muddling-through solution. We are not even standing still: the building is getting worse by the day. We are falling further and further behind and we face the real prospect of a catastrophic failure. If a fire started and was funnelled through the 98 or so risers in the building, the effect would be devastating. I think it fair to say that, if someone had to design a building to burn down, this would be a pretty good one to start with.

We hear a great deal about the possibility that Members would be elected and would then not be able to sit in the Chamber, but what about their safety? And what about the safety of the thousands of employees who work in the building? We should be thinking about them when
we vote tonight. A lot of work is being done on fire safety, but we must be honest: it is badly behind schedule. If a fire broke out and then took hold, and there were people working on the top floor of the building, what would be their chances of getting out? I know that that sounds dramatic, but we know the facts and we are sitting here talking about, effectively, doing nothing about them—and possibly voting to do nothing about them.

However, as other Members have said, fire is not the only risk. Asbestos is a huge problem. When we know exactly where it is, we may be able to leave it in place, or at least know how to handle it, but we do not know exactly where it is. Large parts of the building may contain asbestos, but we just do not know, so we have to establish precautions. Even if we decided to stay, we would probably be evacuated on a regular basis because a ceiling had come down and asbestos was present.

As we have seen, security is an existing and growing problem for us. Some Members think that we can maintain security while working in a building site, but I do not see how that could work. I have been here long enough to remember—I was sitting on the opposite Benches at the time—when the pro-hunting protesters entered the Chamber. And how did they get into the building? They pretended to be contractors. The threat that we face now is far more severe than that. I think there is no doubt that if we stayed, security would be compromised.

We need to face facts. A full decant in conjunction with the programme of work on the northern estate, utilising Richmond House as a secure zone, is the only sensible option. Of course it is a difficult decision and it does involve a lot of taxpayers’ money, but we are here to make difficult decisions and to defend them if we think that they are right. Nothing will be served by dithering and delay. Let us get on with it and deliver a Parliament that preserves its rich history, but is fit and safe for the 21st century.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A five-minute limit will now apply to each Back-Bench speech.

5.53 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There can be a broad measure of agreement that the House needs to be maintained properly. All those who have spoken would acknowledge that work needs to be done, and indeed, that has always been the case. Since William Rufus commissioned the building of Westminster Hall, there have been major refurbishments of the Palace. Geoffrey Chaucer was Clerk of the Works for one of them. After the great fire of 1834—

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman has obviously got my book.

Mr Hayes: Indeed.

After the great fire of 1834, there was the major refurbishment—in fact, it was largely a rebuilding of the Palace—that led to the place where we now sit. Buildings of this kind are always hard to maintain and will always require constant maintenance work. This is not a moment; it is a process. It will be an ongoing process whatever decision we take tonight. Let me make my case as quickly as I can—particularly given your advice, Mr Speaker.

I could make this case on cost grounds. Indeed the report produced by the Leader of the House is very honest about that. The report heavily qualifies the estimates therein. It says that there is significantly more work to be done by professionals before budgets can be set and the accounts therefore made certain. We are not absolutely certain what the costs of the decant would be, nor are we absolutely certain what the costs of staying here would be. But what I think we can say, from all of our experience and intuition, is that they are likely to be considerably greater than the provisional costs that we have now. Every building project I have ever known has run over budget and over time.

Tom Tugendhat: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: No, I will not give way, as Mr Speaker has advised me not to, much as I adore my hon. Friend.

The best comparisons we can offer are Portcullis House and the building of the Scottish Parliament. When the Scottish Parliament was first envisaged, the cost was thought to be about £40 million—it cost £400 million. When Portcullis House was first envisaged, the cost was thought to be a fraction of the cost of the eventual outcome and it took years longer than anyone imagined. So do not be persuaded by any argument on costs because I would bet a pound to a penny that those cost estimates will be very far off the mark when the final accounts are settled.

I could make the argument on the basis of tradition. It is true that traditions matter and this is the heart of our democracy. Imagine the headline that says, “MPs vote to leave Parliament”. What nonsense that is. And imagine what our constituents would think of us and how we would be diminished in their estimation, and rightly so.

So I could make the argument on the basis of tradition. We do tread in the footsteps of giants here. In Richmond House we would be stepping in the footsteps of Stephen Dorrell and Frank Dobson. Much as I admire them both, I do not think either would claim to be giants.

But I am not going to make those arguments. Instead I am going to make the argument on these sole grounds; it is the argument about people. It is about the hundreds of thousands of people who visit this Palace every year and are inspired and enthralled by it. Some of them will end up being Members, as I did after I came here as a schoolboy. It is about my constituents who visited the House today and sat in the Gallery and watched the proceedings of the House. Do they want to go to some alternative? Are they going to be excited and enthralled? Are they going to believe in our democracy when they visit Richmond House with its fantasy duplicate alternative Chamber? Surely not. That is not what people expect of us or of this place and it is vital that they can continue to come here to enjoy that experience.

There is another group of people who are voiceless in this debate: the staff who work in this place, the staff who have given, in many cases, 10, 20, 30 or 40 years’ experience. No one seriously believes that all of those will be accommodated in the new arrangements. We know what would happen. It would start with early retirement and then there would be voluntary redundancy, and then redundancy.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We will now have a Pound; Mr Stephen Pound.

5.59 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I was not too happy about the mention of early retirement before you called me, Mr Speaker.

I rise to support amendment (a) to motion No. 2. In doing so, I find myself in some slightly strange company: the principal sponsors of the amendment are four aristocratic knights of the realm, the Chair of the Defence Committee and my humble self. That shows that this issue arches across any political divide.

From listening to the debate, it worries me that some are casting this in terms of mods and rockers—traditional, antediluvian, tweet-wearing crusty port sippers who want nothing to change whatever, and the young meritocratic thrusters, epitomised by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), whose normally sunny and pleasant disposition has, I suspect, been poisoned by the awful reality of the cost-overrun at Holyrood.

There are two emotions permeating the debate today that we really need to consider. In everything we say and do, we must give credit to the Leader of the House, who has done an extraordinary amount of work on this. In some ways, it must be tempting for her to take this Gordian knot and just slice through it. One of those emotions can be summed up in this way:

“If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well it were done quickly”.

That was a tribute to our Scottish friends. The second emotion involves recognising that this building is not just a matter of stone, porphyry, marble and stained glass. It is not just a structure; it is a home, a statement and a place of democracy. It stands for something in this nation and beyond, far more than mere bricks and mortar. This is the place where democracy lives. It is so easy to say that we could move elsewhere and that it would still be a Parliament, but it would not be the Palace of Westminster. It would not be the building that has survived fire and bombing—it has survived the most horrendous impacts and we have somehow come through—and it is crucial that that footprint be retained and we maintain our presence in this building.

When the Leader of the House introduced the debate today, she twice used the word “iconic”. It is one of the most overused words in the British language. It is a word that we toss around; we call London taxis iconic. We use the word very promiscuously, but if ever that word had a resonance, a meaning and a reality, it is in respect of this building. This is the iconic building. Let us not even think about the tourists who come here and who would be displaced if we moved to the QEI. We cannot lose this. We have fought too hard over generations to maintain and keep it.

Yes, there is work to be done, but is it really beyond the wit of humanity to come up with some kind of compartmentalised, bulkhead system whereby we could do the work in sections? There is only one sewage pipe—I do not want to go into the dreadful scatological
details—but surely we could section it off and work on one bit and then another. I am prepared to lay down my liberty and to work in that coprophiliac hell down there if that needs to be done. What needs to be done must be done quickly. Let us all agree on that. Let us also agree that moving to Perth is not an option. But whatever we decide tonight, let us not take lightly the duty and responsibility that weighs on our shoulders to preserve, maintain, keep, endorse and support this place, this home of democracy, this true icon of all that we hold dear.

6.3 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I rise to speak to amendment (c), and I hope that in so doing I can be helpful to the House in explaining an option for a decant that has historical precedent. This would not be the first time that the Commons and the Lords had met in other places. Westminster Abbey Chapter House has been used, and Church House was used extensively during the second world war. Church House was first used as a contingency Chamber on 7 November 1940, and it was used during the second world war two. In fact, in 1944, both Houses of Parliament were forced to decant to what was then known as the Churchill club, as Church House was sometimes described. I would like to assure Members that the corporation of Church House still stands ready to speak to the Government about once again accommodating Parliament, should the need arise. Many of Churchill’s famous speeches were made in Church House. The then Prime Minister announced the sinking of the Bismarck and the loss of HMS Hood in Church House in 1941, and a plaque can be seen in the Hoare memorial hall, where he made the speech, commemorating that event. Heritage is taken seriously, and any visitor would immediately be aware of the links with Church House.

I will give Members a quick guided tour of what is available at Church House. The main assembly room has exactly the same number of seats as this Chamber, and it was designed with a bombproof roof to increase security after the experience of world war one. The assembly room is set within two sets of exterior walls to address the security needs of the time, and that would address today’s needs, too. Dean’s Yard, with which Members are probably familiar, has a secure entrance with a narrow archway and barrier and contains a quadrangle with no access from outside, around which cars can circulate securely. It would be possible to close the relatively little-used Great College Street and Great Smith Street without great disruption. There are many committee rooms and reception rooms, and Bishop Partridge Hall, which is roughly the same size as the Grand Committee Room, is often used for events—Members may have been there. There is a chapel, a large dining area, catering and, yes, licensed refreshment facilities.

All that is why Church House had a contract with the parliamentary estate until recently to provide a default setting to decant at short notice in times of emergency. It is worth emphasising that it would take less public money to adapt Church House for the needs of one or both Chambers than to construct a replica building. The optics for parliamentarians are therefore strong, because explaining to our constituents, as taxpayers, why we are spending such an amount of money gets a bit easier when we can explain that it has been done before.

To add a little more historical information, Church House has been used for the state opening of Parliament. A simple ceremony was conducted with little of
picturesque tradition that we see in a full state opening, but it was 1939. The King himself made his speech from the throne in Church House, so it has even been used for that purpose.

I simply wanted to provide colleagues with some thoughts on how decanting could be done more quickly. I listened carefully to the Leader of the House, and she said that we would be decanting in 2025—the middle of the next decade—which, in the spirit of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), is not very rapid. Church House would stand ready to help, as it has done before, and there is a strong historical precedent that can be used to explain to taxpayers why it may be an entirely practical solution to address the concerns of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

6.7 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many erudite speeches, particularly that of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). He is a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, and I have enormous respect for him, but I was puzzled to hear him say that he wanted quick action, but also that he did not want to make a decision tonight. He and I share a healthy scepticism of experts—someone does not get to chair the PAC without being able to challenge experts—and that is why the Committee considered the work of the Joint Committee of this House to assure ourselves and help to assure the House that its work was robust and thorough.

It is no accident that the Deputy Chair of that Committee, the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), 13 Select Committee Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) back my amendment (b) to motion No. 1. We regularly consider large projects and how they are managed. We routinely and regularly criticise Departments for their poor procurement, poor project management and poor contracting, and it is important that we get all that right. It is also important that we bottom out what we are trying to achieve right at the very beginning and that we work through the figures. We know that the Joint Committee did not draw up full and detailed costings, which would take a long time to get right, but its figures were robustly reached and were orders of magnitude of the cost. However, the costings are still pegged to 2014 prices, so let us not use them as though they are the actual figures. That is why we need to make a decision tonight. He and I share a healthy scepticism of experts—someone does not get to chair the PAC without being able to challenge experts—and that is why the Committee considered the work of the Joint Committee of this House to assure ourselves and help to assure the House that its work was robust and thorough.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My concern is that the figures are not, in fact, robust—they are not out by 16.5 feet in the proposals for Richmond House. We had hundreds of pages of consultants’ reports, and this key fact is wrong. If that key fact is wrong, how many other facts are wrong?

Meg Hillier: My Committee’s work did not particularly look at that aspect. We were looking at the refurbishment side. The hon. Gentleman sat on the Joint Committee and agreed its report. The National Audit Office assessed the robustness of the methodology used in that report—it didn’t do a full analysis, because such assurance is a very long job—and it assured us that the work was thorough and credible.

There was a sampling of some of the examples we have heard from other hon. Members tonight, and the costs were considered in order to extrapolate the indicative cost figure—the order of magnitude. The work of the Joint Committee was robust and thorough, as far as it could go, but until Members of this House make a decision, we cannot go into the full detail of the figures. That is why we need to make a decision.

The Palace of Westminster is, of course, a world heritage site, which means it comes under UNESCO rules. I have been in touch with Francesco Bandarin, UNESCO’s assistant director general for culture—I have copied our correspondence to the UK permanent delegation—and under UNESCO rules the UK Treasury is responsible for funding this building and making sure it is preserved as a world heritage site.

By December 2018 the Government have to provide information to UNESCO about their plans for this building, and in 2019—incidentally the year that we are expected to leave the European Union—we will also be on the world stage because UNESCO’s committee will consider the Government’s decisions and proposals and assess whether they are acceptable and will do enough to preserve this world heritage site.

As other hon. Members have said, it is not about us. It is about members of the public and the staff who work here, but this is also an internationally iconic building. Are we really saying that we are unable to make a decision tonight to ensure that we work up full costings and a full programme of work so that we can get on with the job, as the Public Accounts Committee concluded?

I have also seen correspondence from David Orr and Jennifer Wood, the external members of the Palace of Westminster restoration and renewal programme board, who wrote to David Natzler, the Clerk of the House, in March 2017 and last week to reiterate their “serious concerns” about the “continuing delay” in holding debates on this issue, so I congratulate the Leader of the House on ensuring that we had this debate today. They also say that

“the idea that the debates...will not be a Decision in Principle but instead would give approval to a shadow Sponsor Board and shadow Delivery Authority and commission them to study further options before bringing the matter back to Parliament”

is a matter of concern. They say that one of the motions “envisages only essential work doing this Parliament followed by a further review before 2022 to consider the need for comprehensive works...We are dismayed by these developments and seriously concerned about the level of risk that is being tolerated.”

We have heard about the risks and safety issues, and it is a real concern to me that we must move forward. We cannot keep putting this into the long grass. We have to make a decision.

Let us be clear: we are a group of people who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, aspire to run the country. In doing that, we have to make decisions. We need to make a decision tonight about this building. Of course it is going to cost money, but let us face it, it is not as if the Treasury is going to give that money to something in my constituency—we cannot see such things as equivalents.
This building is at risk unless we make a decision. Let us move forward and get the full costings and the full programme of works so that we can get on with the job.

6.14 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There is good news in this debate, which is that there seems to be universal agreement, from Members in all parts of the House, that where urgent work needs doing to guarantee the future safety of those who work in this place and those who visit, we should press on with it. Indeed, there is a strong feeling that there is a need for greater urgency in such work. From most things that I have read and heard, it seems that rewiring is a very urgent priority, as that is where the worst fire risk seems to come from. Substantial pipe work may also need doing, where pipes need replacing or re-routing as part of a safety plan. These things can all be done through compartmentalising—taking things in stages and linking up as appropriate. We know we can work alongside builders and maintenance companies, because we are doing that all the time. I pay tribute to those who are working on the Elizabeth Tower at the moment. They are getting on with their work in a way that is not disruptive of our work at all. They must be working in confined and difficult circumstances, but they have so far done it in a way that is entirely compatible with the work of Parliament. So I hope that the Leader of the House would take away the sense that urgent work for the safety of people here in future and for the safety of the very fabric of the building might be accelerated, with options looked at so that we can press on with it in a timely and sensible way.

I find myself having more difficulties about the much bigger scheme being launched any time soon. As we have heard, quite big elements of it have not been properly thought through or costed, which makes taking a decision in principle a bit more difficult. I find myself in that interesting position where many parliamentarians find themselves: having been entirely of the leave faith on the referendum issue, now, showing flexibility and how I am always influenced by the facts, I find myself firmly in the remain camp on this parliamentary discussion.

Let us first address the issue of decanting to an alternative Chamber, which we would have to build. We hear there are problems with the site for one of the potential alternatives. I just do not think our constituents would understand our spending a very large sum on producing a temporary replica of this Chamber for a limited number of years—we are told it will be a short period, but some of us think it will be for rather longer—when there are so many other priorities. My constituents want us to spend more on health and social care, the military and so forth, and I agree with them.

Andrea Leadsom: For clarity, let me say that what is being talked about is a permanent business contingency in Richmond House that provides a real legacy gain to the parliamentary estate and is a secure gain for all parliamentarians for future generations.

John Redwood: I am grateful for that correction, and I did understand that, but the public are saying that this is really only going to be used for a few years because we will come back to use the main Chamber, and this is a very expensive investment in contingency, particularly as one hopes the contingency never occurs. We know from history that there are other ways of dealing with a disaster contingency, as unfortunately people had to do during the second world war. We would cross the bridge in the awful event that we needed to do so, but investing a lot of money in such a protection would be a strange thing to do—I rest my case. I do not think my constituents would regard that as something they would want their taxpayers’ money spent on at the moment. I agree with them that we need to spend a bit more on health and social care. Those would clearly be the priorities if we had this extra money to spend.

Finally, let me say that I agree with those who think there is something very special about this place and something important about it for our democracy. This is the mother of Parliaments and this building does have great resonance around the world, being associated with the long history of freedom, and the development of the power of voice and vote for all adults in our country. It would be strange indeed to be turning our back on that for a period, particularly when we are going through a big constitutional and political change in order to implement the wishes of the British people as expressed in the referendum. Particularly during this period, it is important that our visitors can come to be reminded of our national story and why we are where we are. All those of us who seek to represent people should be daily reminded of that national story when we come here—

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Redwood: No, as I am conscious of time.

We need to be reminded of that story as we go past the memorial to suffragettes, as we go past the statues and paintings of those who made such a contribution to past political battles and debates, and of those who were part of the story of wresting control from the monarch and establishing the right of many more people to vote and have their voice heard through Members of Parliament. That proud history makes this more than an iconic building, more than a world heritage site; it is a living part of our democracy. Our interaction with it and our presence on this grand political stage is the very essence of our democracy. I do not want us to move away for a few years at this critical moment in our national story.

6.20 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): It is good to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), but I wonder how many times people have said in this place, “This is a critical time of national importance, and therefore we should do nothing.” I am sure those words have rung in many people’s ears.

I declare an interest: after the 1840 fire, the stone for the building we now sit in was brought from my constituency. Quarried near a village called Anston, it came via the Chesterfield canal. This icon we have lived in for all this time is something that the people of my constituency like and enjoy, and they—especially children at local schools—are very proud of where it came from. Most of those who, like me, worked in industry and have looked at the health and safety issues here say, “You need to sort that out, Kevin. It’s not as it should be.”
This place is changing quite rapidly. I have been here longer than most, but for the last few weeks, for the first time, I have had workmen outside my office window. There would be nothing surprising about that, except that my office is at the very top of the building, above Speaker’s House, overlooking the Thames. As everyone here knows, work on the roof has been going on for quite a long time now, because of the state the roof is in. When I came to the Chamber today, along the corridor by the Hansard offices to a lift that brings me down to Members’ Lobby, I saw some steel props holding up the roof. It looks a bit like my workplace before I came into Parliament—Maltby colliery. There are some yellow covers, but the props are pinned on the carpet and holding the roof up in the corridor—such are the needs that this House has.

Many hon. Members have talked about the money, so let me look in this excellent publication answering Members’ frequently asked questions about the restoration and renewal programme. We have been—I have three decades’ experience of this—in a position of patch and mend in this place. The publication states:

“Nearly £60 million was spent on essential work to the Palace during 2015/16. £49 million was spent the year before that, and the backlog of essential repairs”

was
“estimated at more than £1 billion in 2012”.

It continues:

“in turn, the risk of system failure, is growing significantly over time. By 2020, some 40% of the mechanical and electrical plant...will be at an unacceptably high risk of failure. By 2025, it will be more than 50%.”

I worked with my hands before I came here, and I would not want to be responsible for some of the kit I have seen when looking around. When I worked underground as an electrician, I was responsible for keeping equipment in proper order so it would not blow up, probably taking hundreds of lives with it. Some of the work here needs to be sorted out, and sorted out quickly.

I listened to the talk about cost, and I looked at the 2014 figures for the three options we have. The cost given for the rolling programme, taking place over 25 to 40 years, is £5.67 billion; for the two-phase approach, taking between 9 and 14 years, £4.42 billion; and for the full decant, single-phase approach, £3.52 billion.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Kevin Barron: No, because other people want to speak.

Last night, the HS2 Bill was debated in this Chamber. In 2010, it was estimated that it would cost £32.7 billion, and then it went up to £55.7 billion. In 2016, the National Audit Office said it had a running cost overrun of some £7 billion, and most people on the Conservative Benches voted in favour of it. I can tell the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who is no longer in his place, about the cost overrun on most things—you know about them if you get somebody in to build an extension on your building. They cannot put in a bathroom without cost overruns. It is about time that this House took the right decision and sorted itself out. Of course we love this iconic place, but we will not like it if we cannot sit in it because of emergencies that may come along. I shall be supporting amendment (b) to motion No. 1 in the Division Lobby tonight.

6.25 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I want to go back to this 16 and a half feet—16ft 5in to be precise. When we sat on the Committee, we looked at and studied the report from Deloitte, we took evidence from experts, we sat for hours and we came to a conclusion based on the possibility that an inexpensive temporary Chamber could be put in Richmond House. That was fundamental to what we concluded. It turns out that that was wrong—that actually the measurements were out and therefore it would not work. That seems to me to undermine all that we tried to do. If the people responsible could not even measure a courtyard, how could they possibly get the figures right on the overall proposals that were being made? I regret that the work that we did and the conclusions that we drew have been fatally undermined by the fact that the figures we were provided with on an essential basis for our conclusion were wrong.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will not on this occasion because time is so limited. I do apologise. I always like to give way, but I think that I had better not on this occasion.

That troubles me. The other thing that troubled me throughout the Committee process was that we never looked at the figures on the basis of a discounted cash flow, and so the assumption that was made was that a pound spent in 40 years’ time had exactly the same value as a pound spent tomorrow. That is incorrect. A pound spent in 40 years’ time obviously has a lesser value. When we consulted the Comptroller and Auditor General about that, he said in evidence that that was not how Government projects were done: Government projects look at the economic return that one gets on the expenditure, and not on the discounted value of money that one may spend in future. However, this is not a project that reveals a return; it is not an investment in that sense, but a cost. Therefore we need to look at the discounted cost, at which point the remaining in becomes the cheapest option by a considerable margin.

[Interjection.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) may shout no, but that is what the figures show when we apply a sensible discount rate.

The other thing that has concerned me throughout this process is that we are being too precious and we are assuming that we will not accept any modest inconvenience. The hon. Member for Rhondda said that costs go up because work has to be done at night. We have to accept that, in this process of saving this building and ensuring that we are here, there may be some modest inconvenience to Members of Parliament. Are we really so precious that we are here, there may be some modest inconvenience to Members of Parliament? Are we really so precious that there must never even be the slightest sound of a hammer bashing a nail into a piece of wood? Are our ears so sensitive that we cannot bear that strain upon them?

I, along with the hon. Member for Rhondda, was extremely keen that we should sit in Westminster Hall, because Westminster Hall is not part of the main restoration and renewal project; it is outside it. The argument that we got against Westminster Hall was the most negative naysaying approach that we could have had—that the
roof put up by Richard II would fall upon our heads if we had a little bit of heating in there. The naysayers wanted to put us in a glass pod—a temperature-controlled pod to ensure that we were kept at the perfect temperature, boiled to the right level in Fahrenheit or centigrade, whichever you prefer. This is a building that has survived for 800 years, not a hot air heating system. Once they said it was a glass pod, the glass pod was then too heavy for the floor. Whatever way we look at it, they were naysayers. It seems to me that we could have sat there in our overcoats, as that would have solved the problem in the winter. And in the summer, some hon. Members more racy than I am might have felt it possible to take off their jackets. It seems to me that there is an easy, affordable solution whereby we maintain a Chamber in our historic residence. That is what we should do and that is what we should vote for.

6.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I first congratulate the officials of the House on all the work that they have done on the various aspects of R and R? We think that it has been first class. It has been detailed and considered. Anything that my hon. Friends or I say today is in no way a criticism of the professional way in which the House staff have gone about their work. That includes the recent issuing of the client advisory services contracts not least to ensure that the building is safe for the thousands of staff and visitors who are here every single day, and to minimise the risk of catastrophic failure. As it is a House matter, it may well be that this House concludes that an expensive restoration of this royal palace, in whatever guise, is the right thing to do because some argue that this is the historic home of the UK Parliament. If that is the decision, although I may not agree with it, I will certainly respect it.

My criticism of the motions before us today and the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) is twofold. First, it is flawed that we are not even prepared to consider, on cost-effective grounds, the delivery of a new Parliament on a new site. My second criticism is that we are prepared to proceed without taking this once in a 160 or 170-year opportunity genuinely to modernise the way we work.

On my first point, the Leader of the House has outlined a delivery body to investigate the three options before us: a full decant, a partial decant, and a full decant while retaining a foothold. Motion No. 2 clearly includes a cost-benefit analysis of each option. But if we are to agree to the creation of a delivery body with a sponsor board doing a cost-benefit analysis of these three options, surely we should do the same cost-benefit analysis of the delivery of a new Parliament on a new site.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman makes a point that has been repeated a number of times in this debate, which is that all three options—in his case, four—should be worked up. It costs a lot of money to work up options to the level that Members are asking. We need to consider that, which is one of the reasons why I am proposing a clear decision tonight.

Stewart Hosie: I respect the hon. Lady. She is proposing a clear decision. The problem is that the decision that she is proposing and the other options on the table explicitly exclude even an analysis of what we believe would be the most cost-effective grounds.

Under any of the other motions before us, we would end up in the ludicrous position of agreeing to proceed on the basis of a decision to rule out that which might be the most cost-effective option. At the same time, we are expected to allow a delivery body to reinvestigate three options or proceed with a single one, when those options were priced in 2014. Those costs may now be wildly inaccurate. We will be abandoning the opportunity that a new Parliament building might offer.

Depending on the option chosen by the delivery body mentioned in the motion of the Leader of the House, and given that the timescale for completion could be anywhere from eight to 40 years, we may also be in a position—although we cannot be certain—in which what appears to be a sensible or cost-effective decision today looks absolutely bonkers in a few years’ time when the floor is up, the roof is off and people look behind the oak panelling. In short, to prohibit the delivery body from even doing a cost-benefit analysis of a new Parliament building is short-sighted. This is important because when the new build option was ruled out in 2012, it was after a pre-feasibility study had been completed, and that study suggested that a new parliamentary building would cost £800 million. We understand that updating those figures for inflation, using the tender price index from 2012, and applying a 22% optimism bias would still give an updated net capital investment figure of £1.4 billion. That figure may be completely wrong—it may be double, treble or quadruple that—but for goodness’ sake, if the starting point is lower than all the other options, surely we are duty bound to have the delivery body investigate it.

On the second point of concern, namely that of modernisation, I very much support the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). We simply must have seats for every single Member in both the temporary and permanent Chambers. The only argument I have ever heard against the modernisation proposal—we heard it earlier today—is that Members can accost a Minister if they happen to be in the same voting Lobby. I have never had any difficulty contacting a Minister or their Parliamentary Private Secretary if the situation is urgent, and I have never once heard that criticism raised by those in the Scottish Parliament, where electronic voting is the norm.

My hon. Friend made some fun of this issue earlier, but let me add a little weight to it. The 10 votes we had on 17 January took a combined total of 1,200 man, woman or people hours—two hours per MP—which is time that could have been far better used. In the Scottish Parliament, those votes would have taken 10 minutes.

Given that neither of the motions in the name of the Leader of the House or the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch accommodates our ambitions, we are unable to support any of them.

6.36 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I want to start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for tabling the motions and for the very able way in which she opened the debate and put the arguments so very clearly.
Nobody wants to leave this House—of course we do not—but we do have a duty and an obligation to future generations to make sure that it is looked after and repaired properly. That is the most important thing.

I hope that the delivery body will look at working on this site 24/7. This is an island site: there is no reason why it cannot be worked 24/7. As I understand it, the proposals that would take seven or eight years are based on working a normal week. This is an island site with no neighbours. I fully agree with the point made earlier—I was going to suggest it myself—that we should give ourselves planning permission on this site. We should be able to deliver that. As a world heritage site, there will be certain obligations, and that is absolutely right. That is why I am much more optimistic that this project can be done quicker than the previously proposed timescales.

During my period as Secretary of State for Transport, I was very fortunate to see some remarkable projects in this country, one of which was London Bridge station, which has just been completed. It was awful that people had to suffer the development of London Bridge, but we can now see that it is a great example of English engineering and people doing a job. However, it would have been done much more cheaply and much quickly if we could have closed it. The fact is that when we operate in buildings at the same time as engineering work is being done to them, the work takes longer and it is more expensive.

Some colleagues say we can segment the work and do it in sections. I would like to know how many of them have done the basement tour. I suggest that they go and work there for six months—actually, I think six hours would probably be enough for them to realise that the conditions are absolutely intolerable for people to work in.

I have reservations about the proposal to build a completely new Chamber. If we are sensible about this, the simple fact is that, if we give two and a half years, and no longer, to do this work, there is no reason why we could not find alternative accommodation. The House sits approximately 146 days a year. It is not always as full as this. In fact, quite often it is a lot emptier. I very much doubt that we would need an exact mirror of the Chamber for the emergency period.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I would rather not, because I know that other Members want to speak, and time is rather tight.

Those are some of my suggestions about the way forward. We should set the delivery body up and move forward, and that body should be instructed to look at doing it a lot more quickly and efficiently: 24/7 working would suffice. That would mean we would be out of this place for a lot less time. On the basis that we have to get on with this job and have been delaying it for far too long, I will tonight support amendment (b).

6.40 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On behalf of the House Commission, I would like to set out briefly for the House the background to the northern estates programme and its link to the proposed restoration and renewal of the Palace.

The northern estates programme covers Norman Shaw North and South, 1 Parliament Street and Derby Gate, where works are due to start later this year. Those buildings house around a third of Members and our staff. The Norman Shaw buildings were brought into use as offices for Members and their staff in the 1970s and now require major works, as does 1 Parliament Street. The Commission gave its approval to a major programme of refurbishment and renovation of the northern estate at the end of 2015, following scrutiny by the Administration and Finance Committees. The plans approved were to do the minimum necessary.

The plan at the time was to decant Members from the northern estate to 7 Millbank, do the works on the northern estate and then return Members to the northern estate. However, during 2014-15, security advice hardened against the use of 7 Millbank for Members. At the same time, Ministers were persuaded to pass Richmond House to Parliament. We finally got the keys to that three weeks or so ago.

The plan changed, and this time it was to decant northern estate Members into Richmond House after some improvements. It also became clear from the Joint Committee report that the courtyard of Richmond House, which has been referred to a number of times, was the only viable location within the secure perimeter for an interim Chamber.

Now a much more ambitious programme of works is being planned on and around Richmond House. It involves construction of what is, in essence, a replica Chamber for use during R and R that can be used as a contingency Chamber in the longer term, as agreed by the Commission in September. It also involves construction of immediate surrounds of Lobbies, business offices and so on, as well as Committee rooms and the necessary decant space for the third of Members and their staff whose offices are in the Palace.

Subject to the outcome of today’s debate, we will probably sequence the main work on the rest of the northern estate, decanting one building at a time while we prepare the Richmond House block. The costs are substantial, with very roughly half attributable to the need to restore the old northern estate and half to a decant to enable restoration and renewal of the Palace. In return, we will have a contingency Chamber that can have many functions and a legacy building that can play a vital part in our education and outreach efforts, as well as providing space that should, in time, enable us to end our reliance on expensive leased office space for hundreds of parliamentary staff.

Those were words from the Commission. I would now like to say a few words of my own. We must get on with this, and that is why I support amendment (b). I have been involved as Deputy Leader of the House, in a ministerial capacity, from 2012 to 2015 and then on the House of Commons Commission, and I am afraid there has been much delay and procrastination on this. I agree that the Leader of the House has grasped this and is moving forward, but there has been much delay. The excuses for why we cannot proceed have been multiple.

This is an opportunity to create a Parliament fit for the 21st century. I agree with the earlier point on electronic voting and also that we should have a horseshoe
Chamber in which every Member of Parliament has a seat, which most people in most environments would expect to be the norm. We need a fully accessible Parliament for visitors and Members of Parliament. It is not right that Members of either House who are in a wheelchair cannot in some cases even get into the Chamber and certainly cannot sit, for instance, with their own party. That is something that needs to be addressed as well.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

Tom Brake: Finally, we have an opportunity to create an exemplary environmental building, incorporating state-of-the-art retrofitted environmental measures, built to the best environmental standards and minimising the environmental impact of the building—by transferring waste and building supplies up and down the river, for example.

I fully support the delivery authority and board model that is proposed. That model was very successful in delivering the Olympics, partly because all the parties were bound together and agreed to proceed with that project. I hope that we might reach the point where we agree to do the same in relation to the renewal of the mother of all Parliaments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members can do as they wish, but I would discourage the taking of interventions in the upcoming speeches, if we are to have an orderly conclusion to the debate.

6.45 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The problem with today’s debate, and the reason I will be supporting motion No. 1 in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, is that in many ways we are being asked to take a bit of a punt and a bit of a guess. What I like about the motion is paragraphs (4) and (5), which amendment (b) seeks to amend, because I honestly do not believe that we have enough facts before us. We should have been given a plan set around a timeframe, showing how and when certain components could be delivered.

We are told on principle that we must all just leave, and that it will cost billions. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) pointed out, some of the facts in the report are not correct. But regardless of that, when I was listening to the speech by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), I noticed that the project has become a shopping list to which we can add new items. The cost goes up and up. Even in the words of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, only 75% of the projected costs are for the necessary work. So at a time when there is tightness on the public purse, it appears that we are bringing in a shopping list of things that we may not need. I find that very hard to defend to my constituents. I have rightly told them, and will carry on doing so, that the Government have a responsibility to live within their means, but now it seems that with our own buildings, money is no object.

I will be supporting motion No. 1, but I would like to see more detail, especially with regard to paragraph (4)—“funding should be limited to facilitate essential work”—because there is that other aspect of this debate, and for all the Members who say that there is absolutely no way that we would not return to this Chamber, there has been movement. The SNP has now made it quite clear that it does not think we should come back, and we have just heard that the Liberal Democrats think we should change the way we do our democracy—that we should have a horseshoe, and that we should sit at desks. We are debating a Chamber. We do not sit here and read things into the record, like they do in the United States Congress; we debate. This afternoon, I have sat through this debate and it has been excellent; I respect all the points that have been made. At times this afternoon I was wondering where I might be going tonight, but I have listened very carefully, and the arguments I have heard tonight in this great Chamber have led me to believe that at this moment in time, motion No. 1 is the one to support, because we need more details about exactly how the work will be carried out, when, and at what cost, and that process needs to be developed and brought forward in a more sensible way.

None of us in here would like to create a situation where the health and safety and wellbeing of the people who work here would be seriously put at threat. But one cannot on the one hand argue that we must move because there is a 50:50 chance that a fire will occur by 2020, which could kill everyone on the top floor, and then say, “But we would not leave until 2025.” We have heard that in the second world war, this Chamber was bombed and we moved to another area. Well, we could go from the invasion of Poland to the moment Adolf Hitler shot himself, and we would still wait another year before we left the Chamber. So if the urgency for health and safety reasons is that great, why are we not doing anything until 2025?

Many points have been made. I absolutely agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said about working 24/7. That absolutely should be mandated, to get on with this work, but I urge my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House also to look at the parliamentary timetable and what we do in those two weeks in September. Can they be redistributed in the year? Could that be the tour of the United Kingdom that many people are suggesting? Three months at 24/7 over the next seven years would give us quite a lot of time to get a lot of the work done—including the total decant out there.

I want to see a lot more robust detail laid out, and motion No. 1, in the name of my right hon. Friend, allows that to happen. We are taking action today: we are having this debate. It has fleshed out a lot of the arguments, and there has been movement on both sides, but I feel that the time has come for us to have things laid out more clearly and more succinctly.

6.50 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): To everything there is a season, to every time a purpose: a time to break down and a time to build up. Words written 3,000 years ago surely are apt today for this building, which is 1,000 years old.

I served on the Joint Committee. I attended that Committee as a sceptic, believing that we were only being pushed out of this place for some false reason, but the evidence led to one undoubtable and unalterable conclusion: in order for us to preserve a building that
we love, a heritage that we cherish and a history that we are in charge of, we have to decant from this building, refurbish it, restore it, renew it and revive it, and on that basis allow ourselves to have a new building for future generations.

We should dispel the nonsense that there is no easy solution. We must take the difficult choice and we must take it expeditiously. No more dilly-dallying should be allowed to take place. There is not a cheap option. Some Members are trying to hide behind the costs—‘If we do the work over time, it will be cheaper.’ That is a fraud upon all of us and it does not fool any of us. It does not fool anyone out there in the general public, up there in the Gallery or, indeed, in any newspaper across this country.

We do not own this building; we are custodians of it for future generations. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) made a strong case when he spoke about the security and safety needs of this building, but those of us who care about the history of this building have probably never even visited the cloisters because we cannot. We are largely excluded from going there because it is crumbling. That most historic part can be preserved and revived only if we embark upon an ambitious plan to rebuild those parts of this crumbling building.

As Members of this House, when we enter each day we walk over stones that were laid by William the Conqueror’s descendants. We walk where Cromwell marched his army. We hear echoes around this building, the place where Wilberforce chanted the call for freedom. We pass through corridors where the smoke of Winston Churchill would have passed by. Indeed, on this great Bench, our heroes of Craig and Carson—and, indeed, Churchill would have passed by . Indeed, on this great W e pass through corridors where the smoke of Winston the place where Wilberforce chanted the call for freedom. W e hear echoes around this building, Conqueror’s descendants. W e walk where Cromwell marched his army. W e hear echoes around this building, the place where Wilberforce chanted the call for freedom. W e pass through corridors where the smoke of Winston Churchill would have passed by. Indeed, on this great Bench, our heroes of Craig and Carson—and, indeed, Churchill would have passed by . Indeed, on this great

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no time for an effective speech.

6.55 pm

Three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the motion lapsed (Order, this day).

The speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Mr Speaker: I am going to take this slowly so that we all know exactly what we are doing—we now come to motion 6, which is to say the Restoration and Renewal (No.1) motion. I call the Leader of the House to move.

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster and its unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Royal Palace and home of our Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster ‘Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster’, HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) accepts that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure in this Parliament, whilst acknowledging the demand and burden on public expenditure and fiscal constraints at a time of prudence and restraint;

(4) accepts in principle that action should be taken and funding should be limited to facilitate essential work to the services in this Parliament;

(5) agrees to review before the end of the Parliament the need for comprehensive works to take place.—[Andrea Leadsom.]

Mr Speaker: I now call the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) to move amendment (c).

Amendment proposed: (c), at end of paragraph (2), insert:

’T(2A) regrets that no detailed assessment has been carried out of the cost-effectiveness of relocating Parliament away from the Palace of Westminster, and calls for any future review to include such an assessment.’—(Pete Wishart.)

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 47, Noes 410.

Division No. 111]

AYES

| Austin, Ian | Grant, Peter |
| Bardell, Hannah | Gray, Neil |
| Berry, Jake | Hendry, Drew |
| Black, Mhairi | Hosie, Stewart |
| Blackford, rh Ian | Kilreny, Ged |
| Blackman, Kirsty | Lake, Ben |
| Brock, Deidre | Law, Chris |
| Brown, Alan | Lucas, Caroline |
| Cable, rh Sir Vince | MacNeil, Angus Brendan |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | Madders, Justin |
| Chapman, Douglas | Mc Nally, John |
| Cherry, Joanna | McDonald, Stewart Malcolm |
| Cowan, Ronnie | McDonald, Stuart C. |
| Davey, rh Sir Edward | Monaghan, Carol |
| Day, Martyn | Moran, Layla |
| Docherty-Hughes, Martin | Newlands, Gavin |
| Edwards, Jonathan | O’Hara, Brendan |
| Foster, Kevin | Saville Roberts, Liz |
| Fysh, Mr Marcus | Sheppard, Tommy |
| Geithns, Stephen | Stephens, Chris |
| Gibson, Patricia | Stringer, Graham |
| Grady, Patrick | Thewliss, Alison |

[6.56 pm]
### Tellers for the Ayes:
Pete Wishart and David Linden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whittard, Dr Philippa</th>
<th>Girvan, Paul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Hywel</td>
<td>Glen, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamson, Chris</td>
<td>Glindon, Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goldsmith, Zac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goodwill, Mr Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gove, rh Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graham, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grant, Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gray, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grayling, rh Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green, rh Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green, Kate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenwood, Lilian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grieve, rh Mr Dominic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Griffith, Nia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Griffiths, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grogan, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haigh, Louise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hair, Kirstene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Halfon, rh Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hall, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hammond, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hancock, rh Matt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hands, rh Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hanson, rh David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hardy, Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harris, rh Mr Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harris, Carolyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harris, Rebecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harrison, Trudy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hart, Simon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hayes, rh Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heald, rh Sir Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healey, rh John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heappey, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heaton-Harris, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heaton-Jones, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hendrick, Sir Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hepburn, Mr Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herbert, rh Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hillier, Meg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hinds, rh Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hobhouse, Wera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hollinrake, Kevin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hollobone, rh Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holloway, Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hopkins, Kelvin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howarth, rh Mr George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howell, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Huddleston, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hughes, Eddie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jack, Mr Alister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James, Margot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jardine, Christine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jarvis, Dan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Javid, rh Sajid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jayawardena, Mr Ranil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jenkin, Mr Bernard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jenrick, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Johnson, rh Boris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Johnson, Dr Caroline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Johnson, Diana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Johnson, Gareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Johnson, Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Darren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Gerald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Mr Kevan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Mr Marcus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jones, Susan Elan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kane, Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kawczynski, Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keegan, Gillian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kendall, Liz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kennedy, Seema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kerr, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khan, Azam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kinnoch, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knight, rh Sir Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knight, Julian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kwarteng, Kwasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyle, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laird, Lesley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lammy, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lament, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latham, Mrs Pauline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadom, rh Andrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lee, Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lefroy, Jeremy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leigh, Sir Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leslie, Mr Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lewis, rh Brandon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lewis, rh Dr Julian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lidington, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lloyd, Tony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lopresti, Jack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loughton, Tim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucas, Ian C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lynch, Holly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mackinlay, Craig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maclean, Rachel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mahmood, Mr Khalid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mahmood, Shabana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Main, Mrs Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mak, Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malhotra, Seema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malthouse, Kit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mann, Scott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin, Sandy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maskell, Rachael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Masterton, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matheson, Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maynard, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McCarthy, Kerry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McDonald, Andy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McDonnell, rh John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McFadden, rh Mr Pat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McGinn, Conor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mclnnes, Liz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McKinnell, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McMahan, Jim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McMorrin, Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McVeY, rh Ms Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meams, Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Menzies, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metcalfe, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miliband, rh Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miller, rh Mrs Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milling, Amanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mills, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moon, Mrs Madeleine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moore, Damien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mordaunt, rh Penny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morden, Jessica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morgan, rh Nicky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Amendment proposed: (b), delete paragraphs (4) and (5) and at end add:

'(4) accordingly endorses the unanimous conclusion of the Joint Committee that a full and timely decant of the Palace is the best and the most cost-effective delivery option, as endorsed by the Public Accounts Committee and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority;

(5) accepts that expenditure on the Palace during this Parliament will be limited to preparatory work for the comprehensive programme of works envisaged, together with works essential to ensure the continuing functioning of the Palace;

(6) endorses the Joint Committee’s recommendation that a Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority be established by legislation to develop a business case and costed programme for the work to be approved by both Houses of Parliament, and to commission and oversee the work required, and that immediate steps be taken now to establish a shadow sponsor Board and Delivery Authority;

(7) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority and their statutory successors to apply high standards of cost-effectiveness and demonstrate value for money in the business case, to report back to Parliament with up to date costings and a realistic timetable for the duration of the work, and to include measures to ensure: the repair and replacement of mechanical and electrical services, fire safety improvement works, the removal of asbestos, repairs to the external and internal fabric of the Palace, the removal of unnecessary and unsightly accretions to the Palace, the improvement of visitor access including the provision of new educational and other facilities for visitors and full access for people with disabilities;

(8) affirms that the guarantee that both Houses will return to their historic Chambers as soon as possible should be incorporated in primary legislation.’.—[Meg Hillier.]
933 934

Lucas, Ian C.
Lucas, Caroline
Lloyd, Tony
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid

Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miliband, rh Edward
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Nicky
Morgan, Stephen
Mundell, rh David
Neill, Robert
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Paisley, Jane
Pawsey, Mark
Peacock, Stephanie
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Rayner, Angela
Res, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Danielle
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scuol, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Serriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skidmore, Chris
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sneill, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Tomlinson, Justin
Treadnich, David
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, Stephen
Bardell, Hannah
Baron, Mr John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Berry, Jake
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Cooper, Rosie
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Davies, Chris
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Day, Martyn
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Walker, Mr Robin
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Anna Turley and
Clive Efford

NOES

Docherty, Leo
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Edwards, Jonathan
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fysh, rh Marcus
Gethins, Stephen
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibson, Patricia
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodman, Helen
Gove, rh Michael
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Bill
Grant, Peter
Gray, James
Gray, Neil
Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hinds, rh Damian
Holloway, Adam
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Howell, John
Hughes, Eddie
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Saqib
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard

934
Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put,

The House divided: Ayes 234, Noes 185.

Division No. 113

[7.24 pm]

AYES

Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Blomfield, Paul
B〚stitute, Sir Peter
Bramı, Tracy
Brady, Mr Ben
Brake, Mr Tom
Brown, Mr Nicholas
Bray, Mr Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burt, Mr Alistair
Byrne, Mr Liam
Cable, Mr Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Mr Alan
Carden, Daniel
Cardinal, Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, Mr Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Cressy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Alex
Dakin, Nic
Davey, Mr Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Debonaire, Thangam
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, Michelle
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duffy, Rosie
Duncan, Mr Sir Alan
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Elliot, Julie
Ellis, Michael
Elmore, Chris
Esterton, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Mr Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flin, Mr Caroline
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gaye, Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glindon, Mary
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Luke
Grayling, Mr Chris
Green, Mr Damien
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nicola
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hair, Kirstene
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr Matt
Hanson, Mr David
Hardy, Emma
Harper, Mr Mark
Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Heald, Sir Oliver
Healey, Mr John
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Herbert, Mr Nick
Hiliker, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Huddleston, Nigel
James, Margaret
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killean, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kylie, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, Mr David
Lamont, John
Leardson, Mr Andrea
Lee, Karen
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Liddington, Mr David
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Mr John
McFadden, Mr Pat
McGinn, Connor
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLoughlin, Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Means, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Metcalfe, Stephen
Resolved,

Question accordingly agreed to.

\[\text{NOES}\]

\[\text{Tellers for the Ayes: Anna Turley and Clive Efford}\]

\[\text{Tellers for the Noes: James Duddridge and Simon Hoare}\]

\[\text{Resumption of Adjourned Debate on Question}\]
That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster and its unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Royal Palace and home of our Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster 'Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster', HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) accepts that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure in this Parliament, whilst acknowledging the demand and burden on public expenditure and fiscal constraints at a time of prudence and restraint;

(4) accordingly endorses the unanimous conclusion of the Joint Committee that a full and timely decant of the Palace is the best and the most cost-effective delivery option, as endorsed by the Public Accounts Committee and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority;

(5) accepts that expenditure on the Palace during this Parliament will be limited to preparatory work for the comprehensive programme of works envisaged, together with works essential to ensure the continuing functioning of the Palace;

(6) endorses the Joint Committee’s recommendation that a Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority be established by legislation to develop a business case and costed programme for the work to be approved by both Houses of Parliament, and to commission and oversee the work required, and that immediate steps be taken now to establish a shadow sponsor Board and Delivery Authority;

(7) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority and their statutory successors to apply high standards of cost-effectiveness and demonstrate value for money in the business case, to report back to Parliament with up to date costings and a realistic timetable for the duration of the work, and to include measures to ensure: the repair and replacement of mechanical and electrical services, fire safety improvement works, the removal of asbestos, repairs to the external and internal fabric of the Palace, the removal of unnecessary and unsightly accretions to the Palace, the improvement of visitor access including the provision of new educational and other facilities for visitors and full access for people with disabilities;

(8) affirms that the guarantee that both Houses will return to their historic Chambers as soon as possible should be incorporated in primary legislation.

Mr Speaker: We come now to the petition. If, inexplicably, there are right hon. and hon. Members who do not wish to hear Mr James Cartlidge present his petition, a decision that would be the source of considerable bafflement to me, I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and, preferably, quietly, with Mr Watling conducting his important private conversation outside the Chamber—the hon. Member for Clacton should conduct his conversation outside the Chamber, as we can then have the remaining pleasure of listening to Mr Cartlidge in an atmosphere of sobriety and respect as he speaks to his petition.

PETITION

Sudbury Bypass

7.37 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This petition is about the restoration and renewal of the road infrastructure of Sudbury. As it happens, we had a suspect package in a bank in Sudbury, which caused the closure of the road through the centre of the town and massive gridlock, resulting in my receiving a huge number of social media messages saying that it is a perfect day to introduce a petition for a Sudbury bypass. Sudbury is a beautiful historic town, the birthplace of Thomas Gainsborough, but it suffers from terrible congestion and pollution, so I am therefore delivering a petition signed by 3,768 citizens.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the town of Sudbury, Suffolk, has suffered from heavy congestion for too long, hampering the development of the town, causing dangerous levels of pollution and reducing the living standards of its residents; further that the Department for Transport should recognise the strong business case, the support of the Suffolk County Council, the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and the Haven Gateway Partnership; and further the Government should provide support for the construction of a Sudbury bypass, including any necessary funding, to improve the future of the town and surrounding areas; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter received 3,711 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Transport to support the construction of a Sudbury bypass.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
British Jihadis (Iraq and Syria)

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

7.38 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid that many of my remarks on this important subject are going to be somewhat critical of the Government, but let me say first that I do recognise the strong commitment, from the Prime Minister downwards—I am sure this extends to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is valiantly standing in for her colleague today—to counter the threat posed by the evil of militant, expansionist Islamist extremism. Nor do I wish to pick fault in the basic direction of the Government’s counter-terror strategy. A number of voices from all parties criticise the Prevent programme, and in particular its methods. I think they are mistaken. My fear, and my reason for calling the debate, is not that the tools available to the Government to combat extremism are being focused wrongly or used inappropriately; it is that those tools, in particular the legal framework, are insufficient to tackle a threat that would destroy our way of life and everything we stand for.

I remind the House that it is not just a handful of UK citizens who have returned from Iraq and Syria. The Government’s latest estimate, expressed by the Minister for Security and Economic Crime in his letter to me last week, is that just under half of approximately 850 UK-linked individuals of national security concern who have travelled to engage in the conflict in Syria and Iraq have returned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this important issue and outlining it very quickly. Does he agree that the research carried out by the Soufan Centre in October 2017 estimating that at least 425 British ISIS members had so far returned to the UK—the largest cohort in Europe—is worrying, and that this House has a right to know how many of them are still in sight and on the radar of our security forces?

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman captures succinctly the essence of my speech. Not only has the institute made that estimate, but the Government corroborate the fact that just over half of those 850 people have returned to the UK.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on calling this debate. Is he as surprised and appalled as I am that these people are allowed back into the country, after going abroad to fight with our enemies and to threaten our lives and our freedoms?

John Woodcock: I guess I am, but can the hon. Gentleman come up with something that would persuade another Government to take such a UK citizen? I would like them never to set foot back here again, but I know that we would never allow a foreign resident who had committed a terrorist atrocity to stay in our country.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): There are individuals being kept in jail in, for example, the Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria who have not yet been tried for any activity. They are being held there, but the British Government refuse to interact with them on the grounds that they are in Syria, even though they cannot leave. Does my hon. Friend understand that there is also a problem for the people who have not yet been tried but whom the British Government do not seem willing to take any responsibility for?

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend and I have spoken about her constituent and the distress caused to her family. It is important that there is due process that is transparent both for the individuals involved and the public.

Lest anyone doubt the relationship between travelling to jihad conflict zones and radicalisation, it is worth noting that research from the Institute for Global Change, which surveyed a sample of prominent jihadists from the middle east and Africa, found that nearly two thirds had fought in one of the three major hubs of jihadi conflict over the past 30 years. Here in the UK, Salman Abedi travelled to Libya shortly before his terrorist attack, which killed 22 people at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester last year. Two of the London Bridge attackers, Khuram Butt and Youssef Zaghba, had expressed an interest in travelling to Syria to join Daesh.

Are more than 400 of those returning individuals in jail or going through the court system? We simply do not know, because the Government will not release the figures, despite repeated requests. There is strong demand from the public to know how many who travelled to fight foreign jihad are currently free in British communities. Those men and women are escaping justice, despite having been prepared to fight British troops in the name of a sickeningly evil cause. If they are not locked up or deradicalised, they are potentially able to import back to British streets brutal killing techniques learned on the battlefield. The Government must know what the figure is. It is simple to collate, and they were prepared to give it back in May 2016 when Advocate General Lord Keen responded to a parliamentary question stating that, at that point, there had been 54 successful prosecutions of returnees from Iraq and Syria, with 30 more cases ongoing.

The refusal to update the number of prosecutions is fuelling the suspicion that in fact only a fraction of returnees are being charged because it is often too difficult to amass sufficient evidence that is admissible in an open court. That suspicion extends to suspected terror suspects who are deported back to the UK. Here, the lack of prosecution cannot be attributed to someone slipping into the country unnoticed, difficult though that in itself should be. Deportees are directly handed back to the UK authorities by another nation. They should be delivered straight into the judicial system and made to pay for their crime, but how many are? Again, at present we do not know because the Government have claimed that they do not hold the information in this form. That is simply not credible.

Last month, I was granted special access to a British woman in a removal centre in İzmir, Turkey. The Turkish authorities wished to deport her back to the UK with her two young children. I hope that the Minister will share my concern over the detention of those children, who are aged just three and one, and will report to the woman’s Member of Parliament about what they are doing on this case.
The Turkish authorities gave me the identities of six other British nationals, two adults and four children, who they said had been deported from the Izmir removal centre in the past 12 months. In speaking to the Security Minister before this debate, I was asked not to name these individuals on security grounds. On this occasion, I am content to agree to that request, but I will say this: it comes to something when a foreign country is prepared to be more forthcoming to a British MP about the terror threat posed by particular British citizens than Her Majesty’s own Government.

Some will claim that this obfuscation is based on a laudable need to maintain a deterrent effect rather than on a desire to save the Government from embarrassment; that it is better to remain vague because future generations are less likely to be deterred from following the next call to global jihad if they know how few of their brothers and sisters have been jailed for previous attempts. Yet such a view surely grossly underestimates the sophistication of the jihadists’ communication capacity. If British justice is falling short, Daesh, al-Qaeda and whatever is the next strain of this evil perversion will be able to get that message out to potential recruits. Will the Government take this opportunity to be more transparent on this vital issue?

In her response, will the Minister answer the following questions: how many UK nationals deported back to the UK have been subject to a managed return because of their suspected support for ISIS, as described in the Home Secretary’s response to me here on 8 January; how many of those have been charged with a terror-related offence; how many of the aforementioned “approximately 850 UK-linked individuals” were deported back to the UK; how many of those have been charged with a terror-related offence; and what is the total number of these 850 who have been charged with a terror-related offence?

Finally, rather than attempting to hide the weakness of our legal system in regard to returning jihadists, will the Government consider the following proposal to strengthen it? The Home Secretary has already said that she will consider extending the period of pre-charge detention to allow the authorities more time to prepare a case, but will the Government consider the steps that have been taken in Australia where it has been made an offence to travel without a verifiable legitimate reason to certain designated terror hotspots—as Iraq and Syria were while that conflict was taking place. The declared area offence law is in its infancy in Australia, having only been on the statute book since 2014, yet the independent reviewer of terror legislation there has just recommended that it be extended for a further five years. Surely there is value in following our ally to create our own UK jihadi travel ban, placing the burden on the suspected terrorist to give proof of legitimate purpose if he or she travels to a designated conflict zone.

Unfortunately, it is very often difficult to establish what they have been doing in Syria, and it is therefore difficult to bring a prosecution. His idea is a good one.

**John Woodcock:** I thank the Minister.

**Alex Chalk:** Not yet!

**John Woodcock:** I am sorry—I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. He is absolutely right.

The approach that I have described would reflect the reality that, for the overwhelming majority, there is no legitimate reason whatever to travel to a jihadi conflict zone. The fact of their going is proof enough that they are supporters of terror. By following this simple step, which is already on the statute book in other countries to which we are allied, we would have a better chance of ensuring that these people face the consequences of their actions if they survive their experience to return to the UK.

7.51 pm

**Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for calling this debate; it is a pleasure to follow him. This is an important debate, following the appalling terror attacks in Britain in recent years. I hope that my words will be complementary to his. I wish to shed a little light on some of the difficulties faced by the military, and people in the foreign affairs and security worlds, regarding this issue. I had some knowledge of the ISIS campaign while working in the armed forces prior to my election to this place.

We are in a muddle about how to deal with British jihadists. I am very sympathetic to the Government, who are doing their best, but I feel that they have been somewhat hidebound by human rights and policing legislation, and laws from earlier Governments that make military action in some foreign states extremely difficult. The reality is that it is easier to kill a British jihadi in that state, rather than to arrest, turn or rehabilitate them. I do not mean that in either a positive or negative way; merely it is a statement of fact. My understanding is that this is down to what are known as detention pathways. These are processes that stipulate the rules and procedures to be followed when making arrests in order to do so lawfully and to respect the detainee’s human rights, whether people think they should be respected or not. This works on two levels.

First, the detention pathway in states that do not control their own territory, such as Syria and the Syrian regime, is non-existent. It is therefore incredibly problematic for the United States or UK allies in Syria to be able to make an arrest legally and without challenge, and therefore equally difficult for the UK to take possession of that prisoner. Is that person a prisoner of war, a terrorist or a criminal? It becomes even more difficult in cases involving proxy forces whose understanding of the Geneva conventions may be somewhat murkier than one would sometimes wish.

Secondly, even in allied states such as Iraq—for example, in the Kurdish territories of northern Iraq—detention pathways are still problematic because they can be challenged in or from the UK by human rights lawyers here if they think that human rights violations are taking place. We have seen some pretty appalling examples of ambulance chasing on an international scale, and I
am very glad that some of those lawyers have been struck off. Those states are fragile for a reason. The rule of law and the behaviour of soldiers are not always as good as one would wish or as is almost always the case in our own standards.

The use of UK law overseas—especially the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, which regulates the police in the UK—has been problematic. Please do not misunderstand me, Mr Deputy Speaker: one of the principles of ethical war is that it is legal. However, warfare that becomes too overtly legalistic and belongs more to a box-ticking culture, rather than a culture of a fundamental, natural understanding of ethical law, is not necessarily moral. I know from my modest experience that there is evidence that some of the legal hurdles that UK forces operate under make war neither more legal nor more ethical. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) wrote a pamphlet a couple of years ago called “The Fog of Law”, which is well worth reading.

In summary, through no fault of our own the Government have inherited a difficult position and a difficult problem with regard to the application of lethal force and UK law overseas in fragile or collapsed states. I do not have a simple answer, because it is a deeply complex problem and I saw it somewhat in action. Those laws do not always take into account local circumstance, failed states or fragile states, and are perhaps more evidence of the proof of unintended consequences.

7.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on securing this debate and on raising an important issue on which he has done much work. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, on whose behalf I am speaking tonight, very much values his contribution. May I also thank all the hon. Members who have contributed this evening, including my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely)?

The safety and security of our country, our people and our communities remains the Government’s No.1 priority. Regrettfully, our country and, indeed, this House have seen the tragic impact of terrorists who seek to use violence to undermine and destroy our society’s commitment to liberal values. Of course, their cowardly actions serve only to strengthen our resolve and our determination to protect the United Kingdom and to disrupt those who engage in terrorism.

Central to that work to protect the public is our management of the threat posed by British-linked individuals who aspire to travel, and who have successfully travelled, to Syria and Iraq to fight for Daesh. The Government have also planned and prepared for the risk posed by those who return.

We have been clear over the past few years that people should not travel to Syria and parts of Iraq. The horrific nature of Daesh’s brutal regime is well documented and there is no doubt that anyone who, for whatever reason, has travelled to those areas against UK Government advice is putting themselves not only in considerable danger, but under justifiable suspicion.

As we have stated previously in the House, we know that more than 850 UK-linked individuals of national security concern travelled to engage with the Syrian conflict. We estimate that over 15% of those who travelled have been killed in fighting in the region and just under half have returned to the UK. A significant proportion of those individuals who have already returned are assessed as no longer being of national security concern. The Government have been clear throughout the conflict that any British national who has travelled to Syria or Iraq and chosen to fight for Daesh has made themselves a legitimate target while in the conflict zone.

Alex Chalk: As a distinguished barrister, my hon. Friend will know, however, that the difficulty for prosecuting authorities is establishing what those individuals were doing in those foreign fields. Given that we apply the rule of law and believe in justice, that inevitably means that, all too often, under the current system people who were probably doing something will get away with it.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. He brings his legal learning, knowledge and experience to the House, to great effect. He is right and has hit the nub of the problem, namely the tension that this democratic, liberal country faces when dealing with people who have gone overseas and to whom we require, rightly, the rule of law to apply as it does to any other citizen. The difficulty posed by that, of course, is the gathering of evidence to prove the case to the required standards.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene. Does she accept that another part of the problem is that the British Government in some situations do not appear to be willing to do what many other countries have done, which is to repatriate those who are, for example, in Kurdish-run jails in Kurdish-run areas of Syria and Iraq and require those people to stand trial? That is creating a Kafkaesque situation for some British citizens who have not yet been proven to have engaged in these activities. Will she engage to look at that?

Victoria Atkins: I will ensure that the Minister hears the hon. Lady’s concerns. As I said at the beginning, national security is very much at the forefront. I will ask the Minister to write to her on that point.

John Woodcock: Can the Minister tell me, or get her colleague to write to me on, the proportion of the 850 individuals who are no longer deemed to be of national security concern and whether any of them have been tried? It is quite possible for them to go over and commit crimes, find out it is all terrible, and come back and no longer be of security concern, but they still need to be held accountable for their actions while they were over there.

Victoria Atkins: I am told that a significant proportion of the 850, minus the more than 15% of those who have been killed in the region, are assessed as no longer being of national security concern. Again, I will ensure that the Minister responds to the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

We have been equally clear that anybody who does return will be investigated by the police to determine whether they have committed criminal offences or pose
a risk to national security. Whenever possible, British nationals fighting for Daesh should be brought to justice either in the UK or in the region. Where there is evidence, the Crown Prosecution Service will seek to prosecute these individuals. Of that, the House can be completely certain.

Indeed, the police and Crown Prosecution Service have already investigated and prosecuted a number who have returned. For example, last month an individual was sentenced to 10 years after being found guilty of possessing an AK47 gun, receiving £2,000 for terrorist purposes and membership of Daesh. That conviction demonstrated our ability and commitment to work with our international partners to use evidence from the conflict area to support a successful prosecution.

Of course, prosecution decisions must be taken independently by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service where there is evidence. As hon. Members have identified, given the nature of this conflict, it is not always possible to gather sufficient evidence to seek prosecution. However, in these cases I can reassure the House that this Government and the police have a range of tools and powers to manage the threat returners may pose, and we are using them. For example, we can use the royal prerogative to cancel British passports where they are at risk of being misused.

On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness raised as an area where travel was not permitted for Australian nationals fighting for Daesh from the region, the Australian Foreign Ministry revoked the declaration of Al Raqqa province as an area where travel was not permitted for Australian citizens. That decision reflected the fluidity of the situation on the ground in that conflict zone and the difficulty in maintaining an effective and proportionate travel ban in such circumstances. The whole of Syria remains a do-not-travel destination under Australia’s travel advice, as is the case with our own Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but it is kept under review, in line with all other counter-terrorism legislation.

I know that the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness understands, as other hon. Members do, that when it comes to matters of national security we cannot reveal how we are managing certain operations or cases, or we risk undermining this critical work. That means, I suspect, that I cannot answer some of the questions he has posed today, but I can reassure the House that the figures covering the use of these powers will be shared in the annual update to the Government’s transparency report on disruptive and investigatory powers.

John Woodcock: The key question is whether that update will match those, without naming names, to the 850 who were known to have travelled to Iraq and Syria. That information is missing at the moment, and the House deserves to hear it.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Security Minister considers that, as well as the five questions that the hon. Gentleman posed in his speech.

Before I finish, I would like to discuss the deportation of suspected Daesh fighters to the UK from Turkey or other countries, as it is obviously a matter of interest to Members across the House. Because Governments do not necessarily disclose whether they have any security or terrorism concerns regarding individuals they deport, it is not possible to provide a figure for how many may have been deported to the UK due to suspicions around Daesh membership. However, the hon. Gentleman should be in no doubt that where we have security concerns regarding any individual being deported to the UK, their case will be treated with the utmost attention and determination. We have done, and we will continue to work extremely closely with the deporting country to manage that return, share any evidence that might be available, investigate the individual upon return and mitigate any threat they may pose through the powers I have mentioned previously.

I have listened to the thoughtful and well argued contributions from Members on both sides of the House this evening and I recognise the attention that this issue rightly receives from Parliament and the wider public. I can assure the House that the Government treat this issue with as much attention and commitment as possible, to ensure that we continue to do everything we can to keep this country safe.

8.8 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
**Deferred Division**

**Capital Gains Tax**

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Lesotho) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 14 September 2017, be approved.

*The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 240.*

**Division No. 110**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afuolani, Gim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afriyie, Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldous, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan, Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen, Heidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amess, Sir David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew, Stuart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argar, Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkins, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon, Mr Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badenoch, Mrs Kemi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker, Mr Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin, Harriett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barclay, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baron, Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebb, Guto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellingham, Sir Henry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benyon, rh Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beresford, Sir Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry, Jake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackman, Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt, Crispin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone, Mr Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottomley, Sir Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowie, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley, Ben</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley, rh Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Sir Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgen, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brine, Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce, Fiona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckland, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burghart, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burns, Conor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burt, rh Alistair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairns, rh Alun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardigle, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash, Sir William</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caulfield, Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalk, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chishti, Rehman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chope, Sir Christopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchill, Jo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark, Colin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark, rh Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, Mr Simon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleverly, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffey, Dr Thérèse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa, Alberto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox, Mr Geoffrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crabbe, rh Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crouch, Tracey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, David T. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Dr Matthew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Mims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison, Trudy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayes, rh Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heappey, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaton-Jones, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert, rh Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinds, rh Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollingbery, George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollobone, Mr Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huddleston, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James, Margot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javid, rh Sajid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkin, Mr Bernard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerrick, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Dr Caroline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawczynski, Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy, Seema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knight, rh Sir Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwarteng, Kwasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancaster, rh Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadsom, rh Andrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee, Dr Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh, Sir Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewer, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, rh Dr Julian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Pengelly, Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lopez, Julia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loughton, Tim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maclean, Rachel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mak, Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mann, Scott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maynard, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCluskey, rh Ms Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercer, Johnny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metcalfe, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milling, Amanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan, rh Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Damien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan, rh Nicky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morton, Wendy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray, Mrs Sheryll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neill, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nokes, rh Caroline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Brien, Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paldin, Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paisley, Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patel, rh Priti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penning, rh Mr Sir Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percy, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philp, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pow, Rebecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisk, Mr Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursglove, Tom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quince, Will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raab, Dominic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson, Gavin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosindell, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross, Douglas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudd, rh Amber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandersbach, Antoinette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seely, rh Mr Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selous, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapps, rh Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelbrooke, Alec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simpson, rh Mr Keith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Chloe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, rh Julian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Rhys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soames, rh Sir Nicholas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spence, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewart, Ian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deferred Division Deferred Division

31 JANUARY 2018

Question accordingly agreed to.

Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symes, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom

Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.

Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morns, Grahame
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Harra, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona

Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pincock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Ummuna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Austin, Ian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Charalamous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tamanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark

Yasmin, Mohammad
Zahawi, Nadhim
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pincock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Ummuna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
House of Commons

Thursday 1 February 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Regulatory Equivalence

1. Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of seeking regulatory equivalence with the EU. [903661]

18. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What comparative assessment he has made of the potential merits of regulatory (a) alignment with and (b) divergence from the EU. [903684]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We are fully focused on making the UK’s exit from the EU and our new trading relationship with the world a success. We have set out proposals for an ambitious future relationship with the EU that minimises regulatory barriers for goods and services. Our partnership should be underpinned by high standards, a practical approach to regulation, trust in one another’s institutions and a shared spirit of co-operation.

Mr Jack: Does my hon. Friend agree that regulatory equivalence, as opposed to regulatory alignment, should be a red line in our negotiations with the EU if we want to do trade deals with other countries around the world?

Mr Walker: Regulatory equivalence is about pursuing the same objectives, and as the Prime Minister outlined in her Florence speech, that could mean achieving the same goals by the same means or achieving the same goals by different means. It does not mean that we have to harmonise our rules with those of the EU. It is not a binary choice; we are proposing a bespoke, bold and ambitious free trade agreement between the UK and the EU, and we want to secure trade with Europe and with the wider world.

Mike Amesbury: By more than 2:1, members of the Institute of Directors would prefer the UK to maintain regulatory alignment with the single market rules for goods and services, rather than actively seeking to diverge after Brexit. Is that the Government’s aim as well?

Mr Walker: The Government have been talking to a wide range of industry groups and representative bodies of business, and we recognise that there are benefits in some areas of maintaining regulatory alignment and ensuring that we have the most frictionless access to European markets. Of course we are entering the negotiations on the future partnership, and we want to take the best opportunities to trade with Europe and the wider world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it true that Michel Barnier has basically offered us the Canada model, agreement on which could be reached this year, thus negating the need for any transition period?

Mr Walker: The Government’s policy is that we are pursuing a bespoke trade agreement, not an off-the-shelf model. We believe that it will be in the interests of both sides in this negotiation to secure an implementation period.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The European Union has clearly and firmly set out its views on the options for these negotiations. Ministers so far have signally failed to provide any coherent response because they cannot agree among one another, and the Minister’s answers today underline that—whether the answer is regulatory equivalence or something different, we just do not know. How long will it be before the British Government have a coherent position to set out in these negotiations?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has repeatedly set out a coherent position with regard to the future partnership we seek with the European Union. There was the Florence speech. My Secretary of State has been making speeches and the Chancellor has been making speeches, clearly setting out the UK’s objectives for these negotiations, and we look forward to achieving those objectives in the months to come.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Minister will know that legal text has now been looked at in terms of the progress report in December and that the issue of regulatory alignment came up with that document. Can we be assured that nothing will be put into legal text that prejudices our interpretation—the Government’s interpretation—in relation to regulatory alignment?

Mr Walker: Absolutely; I can give that assurance. It is very important that we do secure the agreement based on the joint report and that that secures the position on the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom.

Customs Union

2. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU customs union on the economy. [903662]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): The Government conduct an extremely broad range of work on EU exit issues and will continue to do so, which means that all decisions, including those on the EU customs union, are supported by many analyses. Leaving the customs
union liberates the UK to establish new and fruitful trade deals with the rest of the world, as well as pursuing a new trading relationship with the EU that retains as frictionless a trade as possible in goods.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck: From that answer, it is clear that no assessment has been made. We have had it confirmed again this week that the north-east retail and manufacturing sector will be hardest hit in all scenarios. It is clear—is it not?—that nearly 200,000 workers in my region who work in these sectors are facing grim futures because of this Government’s inability to get their act together.

Suella Fernandes: One advantage—although there are many—of leaving the customs union is that Britain can be a champion for global free trade again for the first time in 40 years. Free trade through mutually beneficial partnerships has historically ushered in productivity, innovation, consumer choice, growth and prosperity—something I hope that the hon. Lady will encourage.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I very warmly welcome my hon. Friend to her place. It is great to see a ray of sunshine, optimism and positivity from the Front Bench. What a shame that we do not see the same from the Opposition Benches. Is she surprised, as I am, that we are still discussing the customs union? The EU has ruled it out. The Prime Minister has ruled it out. The Leader of the Opposition—if not quite the shadow Secretary of State—has ruled it out. Why are we still talking about it?

Suella Fernandes: My hon. Friend raises a very prescient point. The British people voted to leave the EU in their historic decision in 2016. In doing so, they instructed this Parliament to take us out of the EU customs union. That is exactly what the Prime Minister and this Government are doing.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Blaenau Gwent has just been boosted by the arrival of the car company, TVR. Does the Minister agree that we need a customs union with the European Union for such ventures to survive and thrive?

Suella Fernandes: The UK is the second largest market for cars in Europe, so it is clearly in both our interests to continue this partnership between our industries. Is it not encouraging that companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, Nissan, Toyota and McLaren have made significant investment decisions in the UK since the referendum? I am committed, with this Government, to ensuring as frictionless trade as possible, so that we can continue this fruitful arrangement and support this vital sector of our economy.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We now know—no thanks to the Government—that all the analysis that the Government have done to date shows that Brexit is bad news. We know that the Prime Minister was shown that analysis a few days ago, and we know that the first thing she did was to jump on a plane to China. Will the Minister confirm the accuracy of the reports yesterday that the Government’s analysis also shows that their obsession with cutting EU migration will be seriously bad for the British economy?

Suella Fernandes: We are in the middle of the negotiations, but when it comes to migration, it is clear that the UK will be committed to designing its own immigration policy, which is determined by skills, talent and brains. That is what will drive our economy forward, and that is what will create jobs and growth.

Peter Grant: My question was whether yesterday’s report was correct. I take it from the Minister’s attempt to dodge the question that that report, like the previous ones, was entirely accurate. Given that the Government’s own analysis shows that leaving the European Union is bad news, leaving the customs union is bad news and leaving the single market is bad news—and now that we know that cutting immigration from the European Union is bad news—do the Government have any plans, at any time before Brexit day, to adopt a strategy that is based on facts and evidence, rather than on blind ideology?

Suella Fernandes: The document to which the hon. Gentleman refers is not Government policy. It comes with significant caveats and is limited in nature. It is clear that there are significant benefits from our departure from the EU and the customs union. First, we have the chance to pursue our independent global trade policy and foster growing economic ties with fast-growing economies for the first time in 40 years. Secondly, we will be free from the common external tariff, which could lead to a drop in consumer prices for British citizens. Lastly, we have the golden opportunity to build a new customs arrangement with the EU that is world-leading and enables prosperity, jobs and growth.

Negotiation Outcomes

3. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to plan for different outcomes in the negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [903663]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): Across the Government, we are planning for all outcomes, including the unlikely scenario in which no mutually satisfactory agreement can be reached. Given the success that we have had in securing an agreement in the first phase of negotiations, we are confident that we will go on to reach a swift agreement on an implementation period
and a mutually beneficial future partnership with the EU. We approach the negotiations anticipating success and a good deal for both the UK and the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: Given DExEU’s propensity to rubbish the Government’s own research, will the Minister commission the independent Office for Budget Responsibility to model the budgetary and economic impacts of the four departure options—World Trade Organisation rules, a Canada-style deal, the Government’s free trade agreement proposal and joining the European Free Trade Association—and then release this modelling to Parliament?

Mr Baker: As my hon. Friend knows, the OBR’s responsibilities are set out in legislation, and we do not have any plans to change them. I am glad that she mentions EFTA. A number of colleagues have raised EFTA with me. It would be important to have a further debate on EFTA if she would like to table one, because I would like to hear from colleagues what problems they believe that EFTA would solve in relation to our relations with the European Union, given that Swiss bilateralts have been ruled out and we are looking for our own bilateral relationships. We do not propose to join the European Economic Area, which would be a bad deal for the UK.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Secretary of State is an early riser, but did any of the other Ministers listen to the former Chancellor, George Osborne, on Radio 4 this morning? What are they going to say about what he says about the fact that this country, especially the manufacturing sector, is doomed outside the European Union?

Mr Baker: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to listen to the former Chancellor on Radio 4 this morning. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State says that he did. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me fondly of the time that I did listen to the former Chancellor on Radio 4, before I went on after him at the height of the campaign.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is important that we keep our skies as open as possible post Brexit? Can he provide any reassurance that he is engaging with the aviation sector to make sure that this industry can continue to thrive under any and all post-Brexit scenarios?

Mr Baker: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is in all our mutual interests to ensure that aviation continues to be open and liberal. The Secretary of State for Transport is well apprised of the issues and is pursuing them.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The BuzzFeed papers tell us that the regions most damaged by a no-deal Brexit would be the west midlands, Northern Ireland, and the north-east. The people of these regions deserve better. Will the Minister take the opportunity to make it clear to certain colleagues sitting behind him that they are wrong and irresponsible to be talking up or wishing for a no-deal outcome?

Mr Baker: To answer the hon. Lady very directly on her last point, as I said earlier, it is our policy to seek a mutually beneficial, deep and special partnership with the European Union, embracing an economic partnership, among other things, and we are optimistic about achieving that outcome.

Jenny Chapman: The Minister will not say it, but I will: they are wrong and they are irresponsible to be doing so.

As well as certain regions being hit hardest, certain sectors are threatened severely by a no-deal Brexit. For example, the food and drink industry exported £9.8 billion-worth of goods to the EU last year. Once and for all, will the Minister rule out a no-deal outcome, commit to a transition on current terms and give industry the certainty it needs?

Mr Baker: I find the hon. Lady’s question peculiar. She seems to be suggesting that I would adopt something other than Government policy. It is the Government’s policy to secure an implementation period on current terms; it is the Government’s policy to secure an economic partnership; and of course it is the Government’s policy to be responsible and prepare to exit the European Union under whatever circumstances may prove necessary.

Non-UK EU Nationals

4. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What steps is he taking to maintain the rights of non-UK EU nationals resident in the UK after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): As the Prime Minister made clear in her open letter to EU citizens, we highly value the contributions they make to the UK’s economic, social and cultural fabric. Safeguarding the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU was a first priority for negotiations. This is a commitment we have delivered on. The agreement reached in December in the joint report gives those covered certainty not only about residency but healthcare, pensions and other benefits.

Emma Dent Coad: The 2011 census stated that 20% of Kensington and Chelsea’s population were EU nationals. In Kensington, we have three schools for Spanish and for French students. Families are living in fear of the uncertainty. With the discussions on EU citizens’ rights opening next week, will the Minister reassure my existing EU constituents that they will retain all their rights once we leave the European Union?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that we reached in the joint report agreement on the wide range of rights that I just described, and that does provide certainty. We want to work with colleagues at the Home Office to ensure there is a streamlined process for the new settled status that will come in under UK law, to secure those rights in the long term.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Is the Minister not concerned that the Prime Minister’s reported comments about the more limited access to rights that those arriving during transition will have may have a...
chilling effect on drawing the skills and talent to the UK that his colleague spoke of a minute ago, to meet the labour market gaps that we urgently need to fill in many sectors?

Mr Walker: We have been clear that during the implementation period, EU citizens should be able to continue to visit, live and work in the UK as they do now, and we will use that period to prepare for the future partnership. There will be a new registration scheme for EU nationals in preparation for our future immigration system. The citizens’ rights agreement reached in December, set out in the joint report, gives certainty about the rights of EU citizens already here going forward, but the agreement does not cover those arriving after we leave the EU.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes, a Dorset knight.

Sir Christopher Chope: Can my hon. Friend confirm that during the implementation period, all foreigners, including those in the European Union, will be treated equally in having access to our country?

Mr Walker: We will remain an open and tolerant country that recognises the valuable contribution of those with the skills and expertise to make our society better, but we will also control the overall number of migrants who come to the UK. As we leave the EU, we are seeking to form new ambitious trade deals around the world with trading partners anew. We will have control of our borders, and free movement as it has worked during our EU membership will end when we leave the EU.

European Court of Justice

5. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Whether he plans for the UK to be subject to rulings of the European Court of Justice during the transition period. [903666]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): In Florence five months ago, the Prime Minister set out a proposal for the implementation period under current terms, utilising the existing structure of European Union rules and regulations, including the European Court, for that time-limited period. That is necessary so that there is only one set of changes for businesses and people and minimum disruption. We are also clear that our priority will be getting the right arrangements for Britain’s relationship with the EU in the long term, out of the single market, out of the customs union and without direct jurisdiction of the European Court.

Chris Bryant: So the European Court will be deciding on issues in this country, and if British businesses want to continue doing trade with the rest of Europe, they will have to abide by all the rules of the single market, and British citizens will have fewer rights in the rest of Europe than they have now. In essence, the Government are turning us from being a proud partner with European colleagues into a vassal state. Will the Secretary of State propose that we hand them over some Danegeld as well?

Mr Davis: I think that is the first time I have seen the hon. Gentleman in alliance with my hon. Friend the Member for the 19th century.

15. [903679] Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): If the Government were regrettably to accept the EU’s negotiating guidelines, so that the United Kingdom remains subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice during any implementation period, what arrangements would be put in place to safeguard Britain’s interests, given that there will be no British judges?

Mr Davis: As my right hon. Friend well knows, we are going into negotiation on this matter almost as we speak. During that period, my primary concern is any new laws coming into effect over which we have had no say, and we will aim to set up arrangements to ensure that they do not harm the United Kingdom.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): After the Prime Minister’s Florence speech, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), who I welcome to the Front Bench, co-ordinated a letter from the European Research Group describing the Government’s policy on the transitional period as staying in the EU “by stealth”. She has not yet replied to my letter of 14 January, offering her the opportunity to retract that view. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is these divisions at the heart of the Government that jeopardise our negotiations? Will he confirm that all his Ministers support Government policy on the transition?

Mr Davis: It is almost sine qua non that all my Ministers support Government policy, which is more than I can say for Opposition Front Benchers.

International Business Community

6. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the Government engage with the international business community during negotiations for the UK to leave the EU. [903668]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): Ministers from across the Government have carried out extensive engagement on EU exit, in both the UK and the EU, with businesses and industry bodies from all sectors of the economy. Those include international businesses with a footprint in the UK and British business winners with interests in the EU. The Prime Minister chairs a quarterly business advisory council to hear directly from senior business leaders on the key issues across EU exit and the wider economy.

Mark Pawsey: Coming from Coventry, which is the home of the UK motor industry, I have been delighted by the industry’s resurgence in recent years. Last year, however, it did see a fall in output of 3%, which was attributed by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders to the need for clarity on Brexit transition. Given the importance of car manufacturing and its supply chain to the west midlands economy, what reassurance has the Minister been able to give the industry about the future relationship with our European partners?
Suella Fernandes: I, too, am delighted about the resurgence to which my hon. Friend refers. It is precisely because of such requests and the result of such engagement with businesses that the Government’s proposals for an implementation period—promising the clarity needed to plan ahead—have been welcomed by various sectors of our economy. We and the EU want to agree the detail of the implementation by the end of March, making good as swiftly as possible on our promise of certainty. We are seeking a bold and ambitious economic partnership with the EU, with the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade arrangement with our European neighbours.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Businesses that I speak to in the north-east tell me of international investments that have been put on hold while companies try to work out what kind of Brexit this Government are actually going for. They do not want to make that public, so will the Minister tell me how she is engaging with international business to assess the impact of that on our economy, and indeed—because I forget what the story is today—whether such an assessment is going on?

Suella Fernandes: I hope the hon. Lady listened to the Secretary of State’s very detailed presentation and speech on Friday in which he set out the terms of an implementation period and addressed exactly the issues that she raises now. The implementation period will provide a bridge and a platform for businesses to enable them to plan for the future, to give them the time that they need, and to enable them to plan on that basis for a prosperous future outside.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The services sector is of course the largest part of the British economy, and while the single market in services may not be complete, it is the deepest market in services anywhere on the globe. Will the Minister confirm that it is our intention that the full services sector will be included in our deep and special partnership?

Suella Fernandes: My hon. Friend brings to the House her experience of the European Parliament, which we all value. As 80% of the UK economy is services-based, it is absolutely vital that we incorporate provisions relating to services in any new arrangement with the EU.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I was astonished to read in yesterday’s National Audit Office report on the equipment plan that the Ministry of Defence’s inability to hedge effectively against sterling fluctuations could cost up to £5 billion. Will the Minister advise us what DExEU is doing to support other Departments that are struggling with Brexit as they engage with the international community?

Suella Fernandes: As I have said, there is considerable engagement with the international business community. The Prime Minister herself chairs a business advisory council to hear directly from senior business leaders on key issues. On cross-departmental engagement, there is considerable work and engagement across all Whitehall Departments to prepare for all outcomes from these negotiations.

Farmers

7. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We have been working closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers. The Government will provide the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of the Parliament. We of course continue to work closely with a range of stakeholders across the farming industry and beyond, as well as with the devolved Administrations.

Colin Clark: EU rules on farming have been “one size fits all”. Does my hon. Friend agree that after Brexit we will be able to create farming policy, regulations and frameworks that work better for all parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Baker: Yes. Once we have left the EU, we will be able to redesign our agriculture policy so that farmers are competitive, productive and profitable, and our environment is protected for future generations. My right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary eloquently sets out the flaws in the common agricultural policy and how the UK Government can do so much better outside the EU.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline how he intends to secure subsidies for the average UK farm of 160 acres—such farms are classified as small farms—and how does he believe that small farmers will be able to survive post Brexit?

Mr Baker: We believe in the importance of small farms and their contribution to the rural community, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will bring forward his policy in due course.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Minister referred to us leaving the common agricultural policy. Can he clarify when farmers will no longer be subject to it, and when our fishing industry will no longer be subject to the common fisheries policy? Will it be when we leave the EU next March, or is it more likely to be at the end of a transition period?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know from meeting fishermen and women that in some cases they are very impatient indeed to leave the common fisheries policy—rightly so. It is a matter for negotiations, and we hope and expect to achieve clarity very soon.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Securing favourable trading conditions will be just as important for the future of our farmers, including those who reflect distinct characteristics of the industry across the UK. Will the Minister confirm what role the devolved Administrations will play in formulating our position?

Mr Baker: They will play an important role, and we will continue to engage with the hon. Gentleman. I am very conscious of agricultural tariffs—the common external
tariff and tariffs around the world. It is in all our interests to ensure tariff-free access to and from European markets as we reach our deep and special partnership.

**Customs Union: Free Trade Agreements**

8. Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [903671]

14. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [903678]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): Remaining in the customs union would prevent the UK from striking new free trade deals and setting new tariffs on goods from countries outside the EU. By leaving the customs union and building a new customs arrangement with the EU, we will be able to forge new trade arrangements with our partners around the world while ensuring that trade in goods between the UK and the EU is as frictionless as possible.

**Mr Clarke:** One of the most exciting opportunities that will become available when we leave the customs union is that of establishing a free port at Teesport, as the Secretary of State and the Minister saw for themselves last week. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will give serious consideration to this excellent idea, which will put rocket boosters under my local economy?

**Suella Fernandes:** I thank my hon. Friend. Friend and the Mayor of Tees Valley for welcoming the Secretary of State and me to Teesport last Friday. My hon. Friend has been an indefatigable voice for his constituents since his election to Parliament last year. It was a pleasure to meet some of the 100 business representatives who were present when the Secretary of State made his speech last Friday. Teesport is an opportunity for global Britain, and a gateway to the world—an example of our new role for ourselves in the world. The Prime Minister’s first bilateral visit outside Europe was to India, which is very telling. It was encouraging that the Indian Finance Minister visited the UK for the year of culture launch in February last year. I am optimistic about the opportunities that leaving the customs union and the EU presents for UK-India relations.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is launching a new customs declaration service, which is due to go live in January 2019. Has it been designed to deal with the fourfold increase in customs declarations that will be required post Brexit?

**Suella Fernandes:** The customs infrastructure is going through the upgrade that the hon. Gentleman mentions, and that is on track and on target. I am looking forward to the opportunity to build on our customs regimes so that we have a customs and excise framework that sets the standard for the world.

**Phase 2 Negotiations**

9. Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Whether the Government plan to accept the EU’s guidelines for phase 2 of the negotiations for the UK leaving the EU. [903673]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** It is not for the UK to accept or reject the European Union’s directives. This is its mandate for negotiations, and we have our own set of objectives. In my speech last Friday, I set out our position on what we would like to see in the implementation period, and we look forward to continuing the discussion with our European Union counterparts. Let me be clear: that work has not stopped. Following the declaration of insufficient progress in December, officials have continued technical discussions on separation issues, Northern Ireland and governance arrangements. I will shortly meet Mr Barnier to continue to the process.

**Ged Killen:** For workers who arrive during the transition period under existing freedom of movement rules, what arrangements will the Government make to ensure that workers who are crucial to industries in Scotland, such as fisheries, social care and hospitality, and who do not meet tier 2 visa requirements, are not simply sent home at the end of the transition period?

**Mr Davis:** We will be discussing in some detail with the European Union the treatment of people after our actual departure from the Union. The hon. Gentleman must take it as read, as I have said several times, that they will be treated properly, that we will not do anything to undermine our economy, and that we will do everything possible to ensure that the industries he talked about are supported.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State and his junior Ministers keep saying that they want a bespoke deal. When are they going to set out what that actually means? When are they going to tell us what the elements of that bespoke deal will be, and when will they cost the bespoke deal’s implications for the economies of these islands? When?
Mr Davis: There can be few policies that have been talked about more by Prime Ministers than this one. There have been two major speeches—Lancaster House and Florence—and two White Papers, and something like 15 Bills will be going through this House over the course of the Parliament, so the House will not be unaware of all aspects of the bespoke deal. We have also made very plain what we see as different in what we are seeking from other deals. For example, we are aiming for the free trade agreement to be comprehensive and tariff-free. On the customs agreement, we are aiming for the most frictionless one possible—we have a variety of proposals that we talked about in front of the Select Committee on that—and the House will be kept fully informed. On the costing, as we have said, I think on Monday, we will of course release all the information necessary once it is no longer sensitive to the negotiations, but before the House makes a decision.

"Scotland's Place in Europe"

10. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the Scottish Government's paper on “Scotland's place in Europe: People, Jobs and Investment”, published on 15 January 2018. [903674]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I have seen the report that the question refers to, and I know that the Secretary of State for Scotland discusses the Scottish Government’s priorities with them regularly at the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations). There is considerable common ground between us on what we want to get out of the process, such as making sure that Scottish universities and business have access to the best of European talent, but it is disappointing that the report does not take the threat of a second independence referendum off the table, as doing so would be in the interests of Scotland.

Hannah Bardell: The Minister will be aware that the figures in “Scotland’s Place in Europe” very much mirror those that were leaked earlier this week. In Scotland, the difference is that the Scottish National party Government do proper analysis and publish it. The analysis says that there will be a hit to GDP of 8.5% and that £2,300 a year will be lost for each person in Scotland. How many jobs have to be lost or under threat before this Government realise that they must back membership of the single market and the customs union?

Mr Walker: The Government are seeking a successful deal for the whole UK, including Scotland. Four times as much of Scotland’s business is with the UK as with the rest of Europe. The worst thing for Scottish jobs and businesses would be to split up our United Kingdom.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Last week, the Scotch Whisky Association expressed concerns at the SNP policy of keeping Scotland in the single market. What assurances can my hon. Friend give to companies and people in my constituency that we are trying to get access to the single market, but that we will also have the right to do deals elsewhere in the world so that we take forward Scotland’s economy, rather than holding it back like Opposition Members?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point in speaking up for his constituents and the businesses within it. I have met the Scotch Whisky Association on a number of occasions to discuss the global opportunities for Scotch whisky. We must ensure that we have the flexibility to take them.

Customs Union: Automotive Sector

11. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU customs union on the automotive sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The Government have been conducting a broad overall programme of work on EU exit issues and will continue to do so. That means that all decisions, including those relating to the customs union and the automotive sector, are supported by a range of analytical work. We want our deep and special partnership with the EU to include the automotive industry. We want to ensure that trade is as free and frictionless as possible, with minimum disruption to the industry. The UK remains the second-largest market for cars in Europe, so it is in both our interests to continue the partnership between our industries. I know that the Vauxhall car plant in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is extremely important, and I look forward to visiting it soon.

Justin Madders: As the Minister knows, the Vauxhall plant in my constituency is fighting for its survival. Vauxhall’s parent company, PSA, has said that it is not prepared to make any long-term investment decisions until there is clarity about the final trading arrangements, and, having heard what Ministers have said this morning, I am not sure we will get that any time soon. Can the Minister at least guarantee that the trading arrangements for the automotive sector will be no less favourable than they are now?

Mr Baker: The Government understand that Vauxhall’s decision was a commercial one, taken as a result of challenging European market conditions. Vauxhall has made it clear that the decision was made to safeguard the competitiveness of the plant. The Government maintain close ongoing dialogue with Vauxhall and its parent group, PSA, as they make their joint plans for the future, including potential investments. Ministers have met senior management representatives of PSA and Vauxhall regularly throughout the process, and will continue to do so.

I hope and expect that as we progress through our negotiations, agree on an implementation period and then move on to our economic partnership, the hon. Gentleman will find that an accelerating degree of certainty emerges.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham in my constituency is vital to the automotive sector. Further to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), about Teesport and free ports, may I ask whether the Minister is prepared to meet me to discuss the possibility of Immingham’s becoming a free port post Brexit?
Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion. Of course I will meet him and other colleagues to discuss it, but I should add that as this conversation has proceeded, certain misgivings have been expressed about free ports. We must ensure that any free port proposal is capable of giving the country the security that it needs.

**Fundamental Rights**

12. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on the protection of fundamental rights. [903676]

16. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on the protection of fundamental rights. [903680]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The “Right by Right” memorandum clarifies the way in which human rights will continue to be protected in domestic law after the UK has exited the EU. Under both the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and existing domestic law, all substantive rights reaffirmed in the charter of fundamental rights will continue to be protected after exit. The Government’s assessment is that, in itself, not incorporating the charter in UK law should not affect the substantive rights from which people in the UK already benefit.

Afzal Khan: The paper leaked to BuzzFeed reportedly suggests that “deregulating in areas such as the environment, product standards, and employment law” could provide an opportunity for the UK. Is that part of the Government’s economic strategy?

Mr Baker: The Government have repeated again and again our commitment to ensuring that we improve the environment and leave it in a better condition for the next generation, and our commitments on workers’ rights have also been repeated time and again.

Paula Sherriff: The Brexit Secretary has labelled employment regulations as “crippling”, the Foreign Secretary has described them as “back-breaking”, and the International Trade Secretary has said that rules on maximum working hours are a “burden”. Will the Minister tell us why the Government are so readily prepared to undermine the promise to enhance workers’ rights as we leave the EU?

Mr Baker: The Government’s policy has been set out and agreed until everything was agreed. Of course I will meet him and other colleagues to discuss it, but I should add that as this conversation has proceeded, certain misgivings have been expressed about free ports. We must ensure that any free port proposal is capable of giving the country the security that it needs.

Mr Baker: The purpose of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is to preserve the effect of EU law on the day after exit day, so far as that is possible. Its purpose is to provide certainty, continuity and control rather than policy changes. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has laid out his policy clearly, and I look forward to his presenting a Bill in due course.

**Transition Period**

13. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What factors the Government plan to take into account in determining their position on the length of the transition period in negotiations for the UK to leave the EU. [903677]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): As I have said before, the duration of the implementation period should be in the region of two years, and the Commission’s position indicates a period of similar length: so far it has talked about 21 months. The aim on both sides is to give individuals, businesses and Governments time to plan and initiate the changes that must be made to allow a smooth and orderly transition, and to secure the best possible outcome for the United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Could it be shorter?

Mr Davis: If I simply accept the European Commission proposal, then yes.

Mr Speaker: Unlike the question from the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), which was commendably pithy—and again I exhort him to issue his textbook for the benefit of all colleagues.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will do my best, Mr Speaker.

The EU has made it clear that EU citizens coming to the UK during the transition period should be eligible for settled status; the Prime Minister says they will not be eligible. Is that a red line, or are the Government willing to compromise on that? I thought nothing was agreed until everything was agreed.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman is right that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, but in the joint report that we concluded and got agreement on in December the EU agreed that the transition date, or end date for ongoing permanent residence rights—not possibilities, but rights—will be March 2019.

**Transition Arrangements**

17. Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Commissioner Barnier on the transition arrangements for the UK after March 2019. [903683]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): At the General Affairs Council on Monday the European Council agreed its negotiating directives on the implementation period. Now that the Commission has a clear negotiating mandate we hope to move quickly to begin detailed discussions on the
implementation period. Given the alignment in our positions we are confident we can reach political agreement by March. There remain a number of areas that we now need to discuss with the EU to ensure the period operates smoothly. We look forward to progressing substantive discussions.

Mr McFadden: When it came to the divorce bill, after a lot of huffing and puffing and wasted time the Government simply signed on the dotted line. What will be different in the transition period we are negotiating compared with the EU guidelines issued this week?

Mr Davis: As to the right hon. Gentleman’s opening remark, as he is an intelligent and well-informed person it is amazing that he does not differentiate between a £100 billion demand and a £35 billion outcome; that seems to have been a somewhat useful exercise by the Government.

As for the next stage, there is a negotiation to be undertaken. There is a variety of important areas, but the primary area for me is the question of our right to sign trade deals during the implementation period so we can bring them into force immediately after we leave. That is a massive advantage for the United Kingdom to have.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency tell me that continued membership of the single market and customs union during the transition period will help them safeguard jobs, yet the Prime Minister on 18 December ruled this out. What have the Prime Minister and Secretary of State got against the employment of people in Bristol West?

Mr Davis: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, the purpose of the implementation period, which was asked for by just about every business organisation, is to ensure they face stability in the couple of years in the run-up to the conclusion of the future relationship. That is what is going to happen, and that is why companies and the CBI and others welcomed it when we announced it.

Topical Questions

T1. [903686] Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): As we accelerate the pace of our negotiations with the European Union, I gave a speech last Friday to lay out the terms of the implementation period for our new relationship. This period, a bridge to the future, will be strictly time-limited and see a continuation of existing structures and rules. We will no longer be a member of the EU, which is a legal requirement for signing a new trade treaty, while still ensuring the continuity of our businesses and their trading relationships. We will use this period to ensure we are best placed to grasp the opportunities of Brexit, and that will mean signing new free trade deals with countries around the world.

Heidi Alexander: Given reports today of a huge gap between the UK and the EU on how financial services will be able to be traded freely in a post-Brexit environment, can the Secretary of State set out exactly how he sees this trade operating successfully in future, and exactly how he plans to protect the jobs of the 1.1 million people in the UK who work in this sector?

Mr Davis: First, not only have we not yet engaged in the future relationship negotiation, but the EU has not yet decided its own negotiating guidelines. They will, we expect, be laid down by the March Council on 22 March, and to that end I am talking to every member state that I can in order to ensure that we are at the same place on this issue, rather than having, as the hon. Lady terms it, “a huge gap”. Indeed, at the end of these questions I am going to Luxembourg for specifically that issue.

T2. [903687] Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that we will find a way, during the implementation period, to negotiate a way to address the consequences of any EU legislation that is deemed contrary to our national interest?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The duration of the implementation period should be around two years. Only when the UK is no longer a member state can we take advantage of our status as an independent trading nation. As such, the UK will negotiate our own free trade agreements but not bring them into effect until after the implementation period has concluded. For this period, we will agree a process for discussing laws that might be brought in, on which we have not had our say. This will give us the means to remedy any issues through dialogue as soon as possible.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): There have been lots of questions this week about the leaked EU exit analysis Whitehall briefings, but this is the first chance I have had to ask the Secretary of State about it directly, so I will choose my words carefully. Can the Secretary of State confirm when he first knew that economic modelling work on Brexit scenarios was being undertaken across Whitehall?

Mr David Davis: Actually, the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not have to ask me; he should read the book. In addressing the Select Committee on 6 December last year, I said in terms:

“We will at some stage—and some of this has been initiated—do the best we can to quantify the effect of different negotiating outcomes as we come up to them. Bear in mind that we have not started phase 2 yet. In particular, we will try to assess, in bigger categories, the effect of various outcomes in financial services and in terms of the overarching manufacturing industry, agriculture and so on. We will do that a little closer to the negotiating timetable.”

I say that because I read with great interest in Hansard and elsewhere this morning various reports about my being traduced, so I thought that I should tell the House that actually I told the Select Committee that this work was under way last December.

Keir Starmer: I think it follows that in December the Secretary of State knew that this modelling was going on. Can he confirm when he was first talked through the economic modelling of the Brexit scenarios by his Department—not when he told others, but when he was talked through it?
Mr Davis: Let me say something on that as well. One of the things that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has been trying to pretend over the course of the last few days is that somehow my colleagues have been critical of the civil servants doing this job, because the outcome is as yet a work in progress—[Interruption.]
That is what it is: a work in progress. I say that because we are trying to do something that is incredibly difficult. Every institution that has tried it has failed—[Hon. Members: "Answer the question!"] I am going to answer the question. Every forecast that has been made about the period post-referendum has been wrong. As I told the Select Committee, the Bank of England—the best forecasting organisation in the business—forecast for 2017 a reduction in exports, but there was growth of 8.3%. It also forecast a reduction of 2% in business investment, but it grew by 1.7%. It forecast a reduction in housing investment, flat employment growth, and growth of 0.5% versus 1.1% being the outcome. What has been going on is an attempt to find a way of getting a better outcome. In those terms, I talked to my own Department and the cross-governmental group in early January on this matter.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): This is an important issue. We need to ensure that Europe continues to protect its security and diversity of supply, and that is something on which we will continue to work with colleagues at the Foreign Office and at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Mr Baker: As a chartered aerospace engineer, this subject is close to my heart. Aviation is crucial to the UK’s economy, and we are committed to getting the best deal possible for the UK. We are focused on securing the right arrangements for the future, so that our aviation and aerospace industries can continue to thrive, that passengers can have opportunity and choice, and that businesses can be profitable. We will seek the right customs arrangements between the UK and the EU to ensure that trade is free and frictionless and that businesses can succeed.

Mr Davis: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend on that point. The British people voted to leave the EU—17.5 million of them—in the biggest mandate in our history, and we are committed to respecting the result of the referendum. The Government have undertaken a wide range of ongoing analysis to ensure that we get the best deal for the British people in our EU exit negotiations, but whichever outcome we choose to negotiate for—most of that has been chosen—it will involve leaving the EU and respecting that democratic mandate.

T5. [903689] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The UK’s civil aerospace companies are leading the world in the development of future technologies, but everyone from the chief executive of Airbus to the chief executive of Rolls-Royce says that a hard Brexit threatens that success. Why is the continued membership of the customs union and the single market not on the table to protect the UK’s engineering manufacturing sector?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend picks up on an important point. It is a component of the negotiations that brought the public claim down from £100 billion to £35 billion—part of that was offset by our assets.

T8. [903695] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The chemicals industry is the largest sectoral employer in the Grangemouth area of my constituency. It exports 60% of its goods to the EU and imports 75% of them from the EU, and it is rightly concerned about frictionless and tariff-free trade coming to an end. Will Ministers tell us what the EU exit analysis projects for that sector?

Mr Baker: We have met representatives of the chemicals industry on several occasions. At the most recent meeting, we had constructive conversations that ended positively. We will ensure that we carry through the positions that we have set out, particularly in relation to goods on the market, and we hope to preserve continued registration of chemicals under REACH. We will of course seek to ensure that our deep and special partnership covers the chemicals industry, so that it can flourish after we leave the EU.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that it is possible for non-EU countries to access only three of the single market’s four freedoms, specifically the free movement of goods, capital
and services, without being required to accept freedom of movement, as can be seen with the association agreement countries? Is the Department currently looking at that type of arrangement?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes an extraordinarily good point. Trade continues all around the world on a free and fair basis, particularly under free trade agreements. It is our expectation and intention to secure a free trade agreement of unprecedented scope and ambition, which should meet just the criteria that she sets out.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), told the House yesterday that the document that I hope will shortly be handed over to the Exiting the European Union Committee “does not yet reflect this Government’s policy approaches”—[Official Report, 31 January 2018; Vol. 615, c. 834.]

Given that the Secretary of State has just claimed from the Dispatch Box that everybody knows what the Government’s position is, will the Minister explain why lots of analysis has been done of the options that the Government do not want when apparently no analysis has yet been done of the option that the Government do want?

Mr Baker: As I said when I answered the urgent question on Tuesday, the Government cannot control the timing of leaks. The preliminary analysis is a work in progress that does not yet reflect the Government’s policy. Once the analysis has been carried through, I am sure that it will do.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Poor old George Osborne, not mentioned at all.

Mr Speaker: Order. I was about to say that the hon. Gentleman chuntered from a sedentary position, but he almost yells from a sedentary position his expression of sympathy for the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am sure the former Chancellor of the Exchequer will bear with stoicism and fortitude not being directly referenced by the representatives of the Treasury Bench.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), confirm that he heard from Charles Grant of the Centre for European Research that officials in the Treasury have deliberately developed a model to show that all options other than staying in the customs union are bad, and that officials intend to use the model to influence policy? If that is correct, does he share my view that it goes against the spirit of the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms that underpin our independent civil service?

Mr Baker: I am sorry to say that my hon. Friend’s account is essentially correct. At the time I considered it implausible because my direct experience is that civil servants are extraordinarily careful to uphold the impartiality of the civil service. We must proceed with great caution in this matter, but I have heard him raise the issue. We need to be very careful not to take this forward in an inappropriate way, but he has reminded me of something that I heard. It would be quite extraordinary if it turned out that such a thing had happened.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): You said it was correct.

Mr Baker: I did not say it was correct. I said that the account that it was put to me is correct. It was put to me, and I considered it an extraordinary allegation—I still consider it an extraordinary allegation. [Interruption.] To be absolutely clear, I said it was correct that the allegation was put to me. I did not in any way seek to confirm the truth of it. What I would say is that we need to proceed with great caution, because it is essential that we continue to uphold and support the impartiality of the civil service.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Every day hundreds of trucks criss-cross the channel carrying vital components for the British car industry’s highly integrated supply chain. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on that travel of customs delays, tariffs and extra bureaucracy if we come out of the customs union?

Mr Robin Walker: We are seeking frictionless access to the European market for our automotive industry. We want to make sure that we continue to maintain the benefits of the complex supply chain, which benefits businesses both in the UK and in the EU.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Can the Minister reassure me that upcoming negotiations with the EU on future migration arrangements will prioritise the needs of UK science and research, allowing the two-way flow of talent that is vital for our top universities, such as York University in my constituency?

Mr Walker: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We have been having some very useful meetings with the science and universities sector to talk about its needs in that respect. We want to ensure that the UK continues to be able to attract the brightest and the best from around Europe and around the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I just want to hear from the two colleagues who have not contributed to these exchanges since 9.34 am, or thereabouts.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On 11 January Lord Callanan visited Bristol, and he made a promise to Hartcliffe residents in my constituency that there would be more jobs after Brexit. Had he been briefed by the Department on the true state of the modelling analysis when he made that promise to those people?

Mr David Davis: As I told the House earlier, every forecasting model of the post-referendum performance of the British economy by every major organisation—the banks, Government organisations and, indeed, international organisations—has proven wrong. One of the ways they have been proven wrong is because employment in this country has grown, despite all the forecasts, to record levels today. We will be seeking to do the best we can to ensure that that growth record is maintained.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman’s second inquiry is a single sentence of fewer than 20 words, I will hear it. If it isn’t, I won’t.

Bob Blackman: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we will be able to implement decisions during the transition period and not wait until the end to implement everything that is agreed?

Mr Davis: We will be able to do some of them, for example, our proposal to put in place a registration scheme and so on. We will also be able to sign trade deals, but not bring them into force.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): How are the Government working with the UK steel industry to make sure it prospers post-Brexit?

Mr Davis: We have had meetings. My Department alone has had meetings with 350 companies, not all in steel, but in all the user industries. We have a regular meeting between the Chancellor, the Business Secretary, myself and leading business representative organisations, and of course we talk directly to the individual companies.
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I have been asked to comment on the stock market update issued by Capita plc yesterday and its impact on the delivery of public services. I completely understand that this is a matter of significant interest to many in the House following the recent failure of Carillion, but I can assure Members that this company is in a very different situation. To be clear, this announcement was primarily a balance sheet strengthening exercise, not purely a profit warning. As has been widely reported, the company has significant cash reserves on its balance sheet. We do not believe that Capita is in any way in a comparable position to Carillion. Furthermore, Capita has a very different business model, and if the House will allow me, I will give an update on that.

The issues that led to the insolvency of Carillion will come out in due course, but our current assessment is that they primarily flowed from difficulties in construction contracts, including those overseas. By contrast, Capita is primarily a services business, and 92% of its revenues come from within the UK. As Members would expect, we regularly monitor the financial stability of all our strategic suppliers, including Capita. As I said, we do not believe any of them are in a comparable position to Carillion. The measures Capita has announced are designed to strengthen its balance sheet, reduce its pension deficit and invest in core elements of its business. Arguably, those are exactly the measures that could have prevented Carillion from getting into the difficulties it did. Of course, the impact of these measures has been to reduce dividends and shareholder returns in favour of others, so this is further evidence of shareholders and not the taxpayer taking the burden on this.

As I have said, my officials met senior Capita executives yesterday to discuss the impact of the announcement. We continue to work closely with the company to monitor the execution of its plan and to ensure the continued delivery of public services. We continue to engage with all our strategic suppliers and make continuing assessments of our contingency plans, where necessary. It would not be appropriate for me to comment in any further detail on the specifics of those contingency plans, given their commercial sensitivity. But let me reiterate that the priority of this Government, and the reason why we contract with these companies, is to deliver public services, and our priority is the continued delivery of those services. As Members will have seen in respect of the collapse of Carillion, whatever the shortcomings there public services continue to be delivered, and we are confident that public services will continue to be delivered as provided by Capita.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the Minister for his response, but I cannot help but conclude that the Government’s thinking on this is both muddled and complacent. He has told us that the situations at Capita and Carillion are completely different, but let us look in more detail at the circumstances of both companies: both have debts of more than £1 billion and pensions deficits in the hundreds of millions; both paid out dividends of more than £1 billion in the past five years; both rely on the public purse for half of their contracts; both were audited by KPMG; and both grew through acquisition and not through organic growth. It seems there are more similarities than differences between these two companies.

I join the Minister in welcoming the decision by the new Capita chief executive officer to face up to some of these problems with a rights issue and the suspension of dividends. But can the Minister honestly say that Capita could not come to the same fate that Carillion did just two weeks ago, that people working for Capita have nothing to fear, and that those saving prudently for a pension with Capita can rely on that pension paying out fully on retirement? Can he say to people who rely on Capita to carry out basic public services, such as the electronic tagging of offenders or the billion-pound contract with the NHS, that they can count on it to fulfil its contractual obligations for the life of those contracts?

I have some specific questions about what happens now. What is the contingency planning? Do the Government have representatives in the business, including a Crown representative? How long have the Government been aware of the problems at Capita, and how many contracts have been issued to it since then? What specific risk assessment have the Government made of other large outsourcing firms? Capita is currently bidding for the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation contract. Will the Government now review that process and reconsider the decision to outsource that and other services they are currently looking to offload?

Will the Government commit to urgently reviewing what looks like a cosy and complicit relationship between the big accountancy firms, the Financial Reporting Council and the corporates they are supposed to be auditing? Is it not now time to split up the big accountancy firms and stop auditors being paid for other consultancy work at the firms they are supposed to be auditing? Capita has announced a fire sale of assets. Will the Minister confirm that Capita is in consultation with the trade unions and its workforce about redundancies and TUPE arrangements in the event that services are sold off?

Jobs, pensions, small businesses and vital public services now depend on these outsourcing companies, but it is time we rethought the whole strategy for public service provision. How many more warning signs do the Government need?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I know she takes a close interest in this important issue. She has raised a large number of questions, and I shall seek to address as many of them as I can. I am pleased that she has acknowledged that Capita is facing up to its problems. Indeed, that creates a contrast with Carillion. She talked about the financial situation of Carillion versus Capita. The chief executive of Capita has faced up to this and strengthened its balance sheet—it has been widely reported that Capita has more than £1 billion on its balance sheet—which shows that the situation is significantly different from that at Carillion and gives us confidence in its ability to continue to deliver services.
The hon. Lady talked about dividends. Again, as a result of this announcement, Capita will not be issuing dividends, which means that money can go back into the pension scheme, allowing £200 million extra to be spent on the company’s core services, rather than dividends. That is evidence that the chief executive has understood the position and is creating a different situation from that which pertained to Carillion. She raised an important point about the major accountancy firms, such as KPMG, involved in this market. The Financial Reporting Council is looking into this matter. We expect to hear from it in about six months, and we will, of course, respond as appropriate. On her question about a Crown representative, I can assure her that there is one in Capita.

I explained in my original answer the role of the Cabinet Office and the Government and the reason that we contract with private companies. The previous Labour Government and other Governments did the same. As has been reported many times, a third of Carillion’s live contracts were agreed by the last Labour Government, a third by the coalition and a third by the current Government. Governments do this to deliver public services. Our role, as a Government, is to ensure the continued delivery of those public services, and the test for me and my colleagues and officials in the Department is this: is the company capable of delivering those public services, and if there is a problem with the company, will those public services continue to be delivered? In respect of Carillion, Members will have seen that all those public services have continued to be delivered, and I am confident that they will continue to be delivered.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my hon. Friend look at the total contempt that the Labour party has for the private sector today? Will he take the time to publish, in due course, a full list of all the contracts with the private sector that were entered into between 1997 and 2010? That will provide a fine example of how the Labour party of today is nothing like the Labour party of that period when they were in government.

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. This Government, and the previous Government, have engaged with private sector companies for the delivery of public services. Gordon Brown, Labour’s last successful Prime Minister—[Interruption.] Well, he was the last Labour Member to hold the office. May I take the opportunity to correct the record on that, Mr Speaker? Gordon Brown said:

“It simply would not have been possible to build or refurbish such a number of schools and hospitals without using the PFI model.”—[Official Report, 14 November 2007; Vol. 467, c. 665.]

Why is it that we use these contractors? Because we know that they can deliver. Labour’s position is slightly confused. Is it honestly now Labour’s position that we should not use the private sector at all? Is the state going to start building roads again? Where does Labour draw the line? It is complete confusion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the substantial interest in this matter, but may I remind the House that there is the business question to follow, and thereafter two debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee? I am anxious that time for those debates should not be artificially truncated, so pithy questions and pithy answers, please, and we will make progress.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I will take your advice, Mr Speaker.

Only two weeks ago, I warned that there was a danger that this whole outsourcing problem would become a set of dominoes, with one falling after another. I believe the House will conclude that the Government’s behaviour in response, and the Minister’s response today, has been marked by indifference to corporate mismanagement, incompetence in office and complacency in the face of a crisis.

The Minister will not tell the House, but I will: Capita was given 154 Government contracts last year. Only last week, Carillion contracts were being re-brokered to Capita, yet the company was clearly in trouble. Share values were plummeting and profit warnings were being issued. There was short selling on the stock market and allegations against Capita of fraud in the handling of public contracts. Yesterday, Capita’s total value on the exchange was barely much more than its total debt. The company is in serious trouble. It is a familiar tale of woe, with strong echoes of Carillion.

We want to know that the Government’s contingency plans in relation to Capita will assure jobs for current employees and protect the pensions of those employees and the pensions of the public sector workers that the company is managing. Will the Minister confirm that the public services that Capita manages will be protected in the event of a corporate disaster? Does the Government’s contingency plan allow for that? What will be the common impact of the problems at Carillion, and now Capita, on the spiralling costs of HS2? Does the Minister agree with the Opposition that not a single penny should be used to prop up badly managed outsourcing companies?

The Government are blind to the corporate greed of these outsourcing companies. Does the Minister agree that it is clear that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), said only the other day, the Government should be driven by the “evidence, not dogma” on outsourcing?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, the core of which was about support for outsourcing companies. He said we should not provide a penny more to prop up badly managed outsourcing companies. Indeed, that is exactly what we did in respect of Carillion. We took the decision that this was a private company and should bear the loss. That is why shareholders in Carillion are unlikely to get more than a few pennies in the pound back for their investment. The private sector has taken the risk, but the job of the Government is to ensure the continued delivery of those public services—to ensure that the dinner ladies get paid, that the hospitals get cleaned, and that the railways continue to be built. That is exactly what we did in respect of Carillion and it is exactly what our contingencies involve for all our strategic suppliers. That is the test for the Government: can we ensure the continued delivery of those public services, and can those public services continue to be delivered?
The hon. Gentleman made a point about pensions. The fact that Capita has embarked on this course of restructuring means that it is effectively choosing to switch resources away from the continued payment of dividends and towards pension funds. That should give pensioners confidence in respect of that pension fund. He also asked about jobs, and again, the restructuring can give confidence about the continuing delivery of those jobs.

I keep coming back to the same point. This is a private company and the interest of the Government is to ensure the continued delivery of those public services, and those public services continue to be delivered. That takes me back to Labour’s position. What Labour seems to be suggesting is that the private sector has no role in public life, and that the level of small and medium-sized businesses working for the Government should be zero. If that is not Labour Members’ position, are they going to tell us where they choose to draw the line? Labour has gone from pumping billions of pounds into private companies for the delivery of public services when Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were Prime Minister, to saying that they should not have a penny. Some clarity would be helpful, because otherwise people may draw the conclusion that there is more than an element of opportunism here.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be irresponsible of this Government to cancel private companies’ contracts simply on the basis of a single profit update?

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and this is an important point about profit warnings. A profit warning does not mean that a company is imminently going to collapse. A profit warning is a warning to the markets that its results will not be in line with what it had previously thought. If every time that a company issued a profit warning, we as a Government said that we would cease to contract with them, there would be very few companies we could contract with. I will not name leading companies, because I do not want to influence their market value, but I could name a huge list of FTSE 100 companies that routinely issue profit warnings. That does not mean that they are about to disappear.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): For the second time in two weeks, we are discussing a private firm, responsible for the delivery of vital services, that has caught us cold with a profit warning. Will the Minister now acknowledge that there is a role for a proper public sector? Will the Government now start to roll back on the privatisation agenda that they and the previous Labour Government obsessed about? Can we look forward to a proper plan for taking public services back into the public sector? And will he now acknowledge that public sector employees should deliver public services?

Oliver Dowden: Of course we acknowledge that there is a proper role for the public sector. That is why, for example, this Government committed at the last election to providing £8 billion more for the NHS and a further £6 billion more for the NHS. To go to the core of the hon. Lady’s argument, the reason that successive Governments of all political persuasions have chosen to engage with the private sector for the delivery of services is that those companies have a speciality in it. They have a speciality in delivering such services, so they can deliver them more efficiently. That means there are savings for the taxpayer. If the Scottish National party position is seriously that we should not have any outsourcing, they need to explain to taxpayers why, instead of ploughing those efficiency savings back into our schools and hospitals, they are choosing to use them to pay for less efficient ways of delivering public services.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the biggest risk to jobs, the biggest risk to pensions and the biggest risk to the delivery of public services would be to withdraw support for Capita on the basis of a reactionary announcement to this profit warning?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we were to choose overnight, in the face of one profit warning, to stop contracting with that company, there would be a significant risk of the delivery of public services falling over. As I have said, the objective of the Government is the continued delivery of public services, and we have continued to pay the cleaners, continued to have the diners served and continued to ensure that what the people out there in the country care about, which is that their public services are delivered, continues to be delivered.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Yesterday, the chief executive of Capita said that his organisation was “far too complex”. If the chief executive finds it difficult to understand how his own organisation works, how do the Government monitor the stability and performance of these very large, complex outsourcing companies, such as Capita, Serco, Atos and G4S?

Oliver Dowden: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about what the chief executive said, and that is the reason why that chief executive has embarked on this restructuring; it is precisely because of that complexity. I will remember working with the right hon. Gentleman when I was an adviser in Downing Street and he was Business Secretary in the coalition, so he will have knowledge of that. In fact, a third of the contracts from Carillion were agreed by the coalition. The process that we had then, and that we have continued to strengthen, is twofold. First, we look at the published results of these companies and use third parties to understand them properly and verify them. Secondly, we continue to engage on a one-on-one basis with each of those companies through the Cabinet Office, to understand their financial position in order to ensure that we deliver on what the public expect—the continued delivery of public services.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, has rightly raised concerns about the failure of regulation from the Financial Reporting Council and KPMG. Does the Minister agree that the answer to this dilemma is not to nationalise those companies, but to make sure that those bodies do their job for the taxpayer and the public service user?
Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. That is why I, and we as a Government, welcome the fact that the FRC is looking into the four major accountancy firms and seeing what lessons we need to learn. Of course we will respond to that and act appropriately.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I bring the Minister back to the core issue, which is that there are two separate but linked problems: the business model and the performance of these companies? Like Carillion, Capita seems to be part of the over-concentrated, over-leveraged, dividend-and-bonus-exploiting culture that relies on the state to bail out failure. Capita incompetence is only too clear from its lamentable performance on the recruitment contract for the armed services. When will this Government finally get a grip?

Oliver Dowden: Behind the right hon. Gentleman’s question is an important point about the diversity of suppliers in this market. We do need to look to diversify further. That is why, for example, we have set a target that 33% of all our Government contracting should be with small and medium-sized enterprises—precisely to ensure that we have that greater diversity. On his point about state bail-out, we have done precisely the opposite of a state bail-out. Carillion went into liquidation, so its shareholders paid the price; because Capita has decided to stop paying dividends, its shareholders are paying the price. Therefore, it is not correct to say that the state is bailing them out in this situation.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Is not the Government’s role to continue to act as a prudent customer and to continue to monitor their suppliers and the services provided? Right now, the best thing that the Government can do is to allow the company to get on with its plans to restructure its business.

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Capita and its executive and shareholders are responsible for Capita. Our responsibility as a Government is for the continued delivery of public services—to make sure that the services on which the public rely continue to be delivered. That is exactly what we did in respect of Carillion, and that is exactly what we are ensuring in relation to contingency plans for all our strategic suppliers, including Capita.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that Capita has a positive record of delivery, but it has been responsible for the £1 billion contract for the delivery of NHS England’s primary care support services since 2015. From the outset, both GPs and local medical committees identified serious issues with the service, including patient safety, GP workload and an effect on GP finances. Although some progress has been made, two and a half years on the service falls far short of what is acceptable, and there is still an urgent need to resolve these issues to give practices and GPs across the country confidence in it. What are the Minister and the Government doing to improve the quality of services provided by Capita?

Oliver Dowden: The Government contract with a company to deliver the individual services, and that is done through each Department. In respect of health services, that is done by the Department of Health, which has to ensure that Capita or any other contractor delivers on what it has promised. The function of the Cabinet Office in this respect is to ensure that overall public services continue to be delivered if there is a failure of the company.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): If I understand the Minister correctly, this company is raising funds from its shareholders in order to strengthen its balance sheet, enhance its pension fund and invest money in its core business. These corporate actions should be welcomed on both sides of the House. Does he share my frustration that the attitude of the Opposition towards the private sector seems to be, “You’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t”?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is precisely right. As I said, it would have been helpful if Carillion had considered these actions; perhaps then it would not have got into this position. Members cannot say that somehow the Government are bankrolling these companies, while simultaneously saying that we are allowing the companies to go bust if things go wrong with them and shareholders pay the price. They cannot make those two propositions at once.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, with Carillion and now Capita, the outsourcing of our services has failed? Instead of expensive bail-outs, they should be brought back into public ownership.

Oliver Dowden: The Government have not bailed out a single supplier. It is the shareholders who have paid the price. It is the shareholders of Carillion who will not receive back the money they invested—or, at least, they will receive a very small proportion of the money, depending on the outcome of the liquidation. The hon. Lady’s characterisation of the situation is simply not correct.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that the combatant steps that the Government have taken to date regarding Carillion have protected services and ensured that there is minimal disruption to citizens? Will he also assure us that they are taking a similar combatant approach to the Capita situation so that we can protect services such as the NHS admin that is so important to us all?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our focus has been to ensure the continued delivery of public services. In respect of all the key strategic suppliers, we ensure that we are confident that public services will continue to be delivered if there is an interruption to those companies. That is what the House saw in respect of Carillion, and it is exactly what we prepare for all the time with regards to all our strategic suppliers.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): This is a very worrying time for Carillion employees in Wales, including the hundreds employed at the call centre in Bangor in my constituency. It is also a very worrying time for disabled people, as all personal independence payment assessments in Wales are carried out by the company. Will the Minister give these people a cast-iron guarantee that their jobs are safe, and that their benefits assessments will be carried out properly and accurately?
Oliver Dowden: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is referring to Capita, not to Carillion.

Hywel Williams indicated assent.

Oliver Dowden: I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is the priority of the Government—this is what we are working on—to ensure that there will be no interruption to the very important public services that he outlined, no matter what happens to their delivery. That is what happened with Carillion. On the very day it was announced that Carillion was going into liquidation—the announcement was made at 7 o’clock in the morning—we ensured that the people delivering public services could continue to turn up to work and to be paid, and that the public services they delivered could continue to be delivered.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Before any new Government contracts are awarded to Capita, will the Government seek fresh assurances in respect of existing and future pension obligations to its employees?

Oliver Dowden: I can assure my hon. Friend that in fact officials from my Department met Capita only yesterday. This is an ongoing process of engagement with all the strategic suppliers, asking exactly those sorts of questions to ensure that we have public services delivered. Of course, we are very cognisant of things like the pension fund as well.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): One of the real issues that comes through with both Carillion and Capita is that the enormous growth of the conglomerate structure means that these corporations are vulnerable when any part begins to fail, and that of course puts at risk the whole. Where is the risk assessment that the Minister and his team have done that guarantees that we will not see failure in Capita and in other public service providers?

Oliver Dowden: As I said, there is a continuing process of engagement. Over the years, the Government Commercial Function has been beefed up. We have brought in people with expertise who understand these companies and are engaging with them on a day-to-day basis to understand their business models. The purpose of doing that is to understand those business models to ensure that we are confident that we can continue to deliver these public services.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that what matters to this Government is what delivers the best public service outcomes to our constituents in terms of quality and value for money—exactly the same considerations that motivated Labour when, in government, it let so many public service delivery contracts to private companies?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, Labour let lots of contracts to private companies, because it believed that they had the expertise to deliver them, and that is exactly what we are doing. Interestingly, since the surge in the use of PFIs that took place under the Labour Chancellor before last, Mr Gordon Brown, we have tightened up the terms of PFI. We are learning the lessons from some of the excessive PFI contracts that we saw, which had underneath them ludicrous service fees for some of the services provided.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Capita is a significant employer in Huddersfield in its shared transport business. It has a very important role in gas safety for the Health and Safety Executive. It is a very important company. Nobody on the Labour Benches wants to see it fail; like all businesses, we want to it to succeed. There is nothing wrong with a public-private partnership: what is important is getting the contract and the relationship right. What went wrong in many PFIs was rotten contracts that still bedevil local hospitals and local schools.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. He is precisely right. There is nothing wrong, per se, with engaging with the private sector for the delivery of services, but we must ensure that there is rigour in the contracts. Many contracts in the past have not been properly negotiated and have not delivered value for the public sector, and they will continue to burden us for many decades to come. However, that is not an invalidation of the model; it is about problems with specific contractual negotiations.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is clear that Capita is unique because it grew out of outsourcing from the public sector, but as it grew the structures outstripped its proper corporate responsibility. It is also clear that we need to argue the case for the benefits to the public sector of outsourcing. Will the Minister therefore set out the benefits of outsourcing and give one or two examples of where it has been a success and delivered better public service?

Oliver Dowden: I am very happy to do so. This is precisely why private sector companies use outsourcing. Every company engages in outsourcing because it recognises that there are some areas where there is greater expertise than can be delivered by that company. It is exactly the same for the public sector. We focus on what actually works—what delivers for the public sector and what delivers the best price and the best value. Over 4,500 projects have been delivered since 2010; over a quarter of a trillion pounds has been invested in infrastructure; and over 70% of our 175 long-term priority projects and programmes identified are now complete, under construction, or part of a programme being delivered. This is delivering the public services that people want.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Capita employs 450 people in my constituency, who are principally engaged in administering public sector pensions. When the Minister has met Capita, what discussions has he had about the pensions function and the Darlington site specifically? Will he meet me to discuss that?

Oliver Dowden: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss all those points.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Minister tell the House the size of the pension deficit and what arrangements the Government are putting in place to cover that black hole?
Oliver Dowden: Capita is a private company, responsible for the running of its business. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the announcement made yesterday by Capita, he will see that it has chosen not to issue a dividend, which has released more cash and means that it can shore up its pension fund. It is a positive announcement in that respect.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Will the Government review all major outsourced contracts as a matter of urgency, and in particular the contracts awarded to Capita for assessing personal independence payments for disabled people? It has been subject to justified heavy criticism for the way it treats disabled people during that process.

Oliver Dowden: The Government routinely publish all significant outsourcing contracts, and I would be happy to provide the hon. Lady with a link to the website so that she can get a full list of those. That is the process for doing it.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Is it not time that private companies providing public services were subject to the same rules of openness and transparency as the public sector, so that they can no longer hide behind the cloak of commercial confidentiality?

Oliver Dowden: Of course there are lessons to be learned from this. Indeed, that is exactly what bodies such as the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs are looking into. However, there is a distinction between a private company and a public body. I do not think it would be appropriate to extend the full FOI provisions to all private companies.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): If the Minister is serious about getting the best value for the public, will he commit to learning from the Scottish Government? The Scottish Futures Trust’s latest independently audited benefits statement shows more than £1 billion in savings since it was established.

Oliver Dowden: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s question. Of course we will learn those lessons, but it is worth noting that the Scottish Government gave a contract to Capita in 2015. Capita was appointed by the Scottish Public Pensions Agency to deliver its integrated pensions IT software solutions, which is another example of Governments choosing to use the expertise of the private sector.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): There are echoes of Corporal Jones from “Dad’s Army” in the Minister’s response this morning—“Don’t panic! It’s all okay.” Why does he think that Barnet Council—a flagship Tory council, known as “easy council” because of its extreme outsourcing—has put in place contingency plans based on the possible failure of this company?

Oliver Dowden: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are not in any way complacent. That is why we continue to ensure—I believe Barnet Council will be doing exactly the same—that there are contingency plans in place. Indeed, those contingency plans have worked in respect of the one collapse of a company we have seen: Carillion. Those public services continue to be delivered.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Capita has a £1 billion contract in the primary care sector of the NHS. The Minister has sought to minimise the necessity of declaring any kind of contingency plans to the House. Does he not think that the House and the general public deserve to know exactly what plans the Government have in the event that Capita is unable to provide those essential services to the public?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have given that reassurance, and I can reassure the House again that in respect of all our strategic suppliers, including Capita, we are understanding their financial position and taking appropriate contingency measures. I hope she will understand that lots of these things are commercially sensitive, and it would not be helpful to go into excessive detail on that.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Capita’s stock has dropped 84% since its 2015 peak. Are there plans for a ministerial taskforce to grip this situation should it worsen?

Oliver Dowden: It is worth noting that a large chunk of the drop in the share price came yesterday in respect of the restructuring of the business—it was a consequence, for example, of the rights issue—but we are of course engaging in such a way. I and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who has responsibility for small businesses, have established a taskforce for Carillon. We are ensuring that we provide all the support we can for the private sector side of Carillon’s delivery of services. For example, we are ensuring that HMRC is showing flexibility in relation to payments, and that banks are showing some flexibility. Should the need arise, we would do exactly the same for Capita.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Poor service delivery is often an early warning sign of future financial difficulties. GP practices in my constituency have been complaining for at least two years about the poor quality of service they are receiving. We know that the contract for assessments for personal independence payments has been failing, and this morning we have heard examples of many other service delivery failures. Rather than leaving this to individual Departments to manage, should not the Cabinet Office have a central overview of where service performance is failing as an early warning of future difficulties?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, we should, and we do exactly that. We of course take an overall view of the delivery of public services, the financial position and contingency. The specifics of public service delivery clearly have to be contracted by the relevant Department, because the relevant Department has a deeper understanding of the need. For example, for health and education, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education are in a better position to negotiate such contracts.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Last year, a Press Association investigation revealed that Capita received £200 million more than originally planned from the Department for Work and Pensions for PIP
assessments, so there is a clear trail of the Government rewarding failed performance. Will the Minister assure me that the Government will not also be rewarding corporate recklessness?

Oliver Dowden: No, the Government certainly will not be rewarding corporate recklessness. Carillion shareholders paid the price for the failures of Carillion in that they will not receive back their initial investment, which is precisely correct. The role of the Government is to ensure that those public services continue to be delivered, and the private sector bears the risk.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Minister assure me that the Government will not also be rewarding corporate recklessness?

Oliver Dowden: No, the Government certainly will not be rewarding corporate recklessness. Carillion shareholders paid the price for the failures of Carillion in that they will not receive back their initial investment, which is precisely correct. The role of the Government is to ensure that those public services continue to be delivered, and the private sector bears the risk.

The business for next week will include:

Monday 5 February—Motions relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018, followed by the remaining stages of the Smart Meters Bill.

Tuesday 6 February—Remaining stages of the Space Industry Bill [Lords], followed by a debate on housing, planning and the green belt. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Wednesday 7 February—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

Thursday 8 February—Debate on a motion on community bank closures, followed by a debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 9 February—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 February will include:

Monday 19 February—The House will not be sitting.

Tuesday 20 February—Second Reading of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [Lords].

Yesterday evening, the House took an historic decision to choose action to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster, and I want to congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members across the House on their attention to this debate and their contributions to it. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

The Leader of the House of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will include:

Monday 5 February—Motions relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018, followed by the remaining stages of the Smart Meters Bill.

Tuesday 6 February—Remaining stages of the Space Industry Bill [Lords], followed by a debate on housing, planning and the green belt. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Wednesday 7 February—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

Thursday 8 February—Debate on a motion on community bank closures, followed by a debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 9 February—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 February will include:

Monday 19 February—The House will not be sitting.

Tuesday 20 February—Second Reading of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [Lords].

Yesterday evening, the House took an historic decision to choose action to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster, and I want to congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members across the House on their attention to this debate and their contributions to it. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week’s business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.
The Leader of the House mentioned the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, which provisionally comes to the House for debate on 20 February. It started in the other place, so will she confirm whether there are plans for any Brexit Bills to start in the other place? The Bill was published on the same day that it had its First Reading. Will she reassure the House that that will not be the case for the other 15 Brexit Bills?

On Brexit, it is a year since the Lancaster House speech on the Government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU, but the Government appear to have abandoned the financial sector. They have shelved a position paper setting out their trade goals for financial services after Brexit. Is the Leader of the House aware that the policy chair at the City of London corporation says that the sector had been counting on the paper to clarify Government policy, and that “the City is left in the dark”?

And so say all of us. When can we expect publication of the position paper on financial services, which will affect 1 million people?

It seems that the Government have annoyed the City; they have also annoyed the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and all the Opposition. The Government have said that the “EU Exit Analysis—Cross Whitehall Briefing” will be published. Will the Leader of the House say exactly when it will be provided to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union and to Members but not on a restricted basis?

The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), said that civil servants who do their work are “always wrong”. He appears to have a bizarre understanding of what civil servants do. They are independent; they follow Government instructions and Government policy. Could we have an apology from the Minister to the civil service?

Next week, there will be debate on a motion on the police grant. Quarterly police figures show a 14% rise in recorded crime in England and Wales. Domestic burglary is up 32%. That is mirrored exactly in my constituency: a young couple who just got married had their wedding jewellery stolen, and another constituent gave me a video of a gang entering a home and marching people upstairs to rob them. There is only one police station in my constituency, in Darlaston, and that is closing, despite having been upgraded. It is not fair to say that the Government are protecting the police budget. May we have an urgent debate—perhaps a Minister could make a statement—on how much more money will be given to local councils to protect local services? When it comes to taxes, it is not right or fair for the Government to shift the burden on to local councils.

Mr Speaker, you allowed an urgent question on Capita earlier, but I want the Leader of the House’s reassurance that the Government’s jobseeker’s allowance helpline and the helpline that administers the teachers’ pension scheme will be protected. I would also like a statement on how much the Government have outsourced to Capita.

Finally, we are celebrating the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave 6 million women the right to vote. We still have to put up with men-only clubs. The test should be: would the Prime Minister be invited? Was she invited to the Presidents Club? The answer is no, but she has been invited to give a speech on Tuesday in Westminster Hall. I encourage all Members to celebrate this landmark in the UK’s history between 6.30 pm and 7.30 pm on that day. The event will launch Parliament’s Vote 100 programme for 2018. Women have moved from their place behind the grille at the back of the Chamber to its Floor. As we celebrate that, let us all think of those unseen men and women who speak out and fight every day for equality for all.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s excitement about the centenary of the Representation of the People Act next Tuesday. One hundred years later, our Head of State is a woman. We have our second female Prime Minister. The First Minister in Scotland is a woman, as is our Home Secretary. The Leaders and shadow Leaders of the House of Commons and the House of Lords are women, and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner is a woman—I could go on. There have been some changes for the better, but there is so much more to do to make sure that women play an equal part in every aspect of our society, both in the United Kingdom and around the world. I share the hon. Lady’s commitment to doing whatever we can to make sure that comes to pass.

The hon. Lady asks for a summer recess date. That will be provided as soon as we can. I absolutely accept that hon. Members want to get on and think about what else they might like to do with their lives other than sit here, and I share that enthusiasm.

The hon. Lady asks about Brexit Bills being introduced in the other place. As she will appreciate, in my role as chairman of the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, I have to ensure that Bills are ready to be introduced. We then have to look at the parliamentary timetable to see what else is going on in either House and make decisions based on the volume of business that is available to go. It is not possible to say with certainty at any one time, “It’ll be this one; it’ll be that one,” but in due course, through the usual channels, we will always give as much notice as possible.

The hon. Lady talks specifically about the financial sector. In fact, there are not 1 million people, but 2 million, if we include all the professional services around the financial services sector—ranging from Edinburgh to Bournemouth, to Birmingham, to Manchester, and of course, to the City of London. It is a vast and very successful sector for this country, and we were recently declared to have extended our pre-eminence over all the other financial services sectors in the world. It is absolutely vital to the United Kingdom. Positional work will be going on and it will be announced in due course, when the moment is right.

The hon. Lady asks me to confirm that the Government will comply with the terms of the Humble Address, and I am happy to do so. She asked about economic forecasts. All I can say is that if hon. Members want to ask the Bank of England how many times its economic forecasts are right, that will demonstrate that forecasting is not an exact science. It is an art, and it is not a criticism of work, but there are ways to improve the accuracy. For example, Government should commission a range of forecasts from independent bodies. I encourage the Treasury to do that ahead of the next Budget. After that, it should be submitted to the House, which can debate the accuracy of the forecasts and the factors that led to their success or failure. This will enhance the accountability of the Government and reduce the risk that wrong forecasts are produced. This is important to the economy and to the business of this House.
The hon. Lady asks about the police grant. Real-terms overall police spending has increased since 2015-16 by over £475 million, including increased investment in transformation and technology. In this settlement, we propose to increase the total investment in the police system by a further £450 million year on year in 2018-19, if police and crime commissioners maximise their local precepts. She is absolutely right, however, to point out the very concerning rise in particularly high-impact crimes, such as knife crime. I hope that she welcomes Operation Sceptre, which many police forces are joining to try to tackle this appalling crime, which has such a terrible impact on victims and their families.

Finally, the hon. Lady asks for reassurance about Capita. There has just been an urgent question, in which the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) answered a number of points about Capita and Carillion. A web page has been set up by the Insolvency Service for those who are affected and seeking advice about the failure of Carillion. In the context of Carillion, there is a dedicated website set up by the special managers, PricewaterhouseCoopers, as well as a dedicated helpline. Jobcentre Plus, through its rapid response service, is available for advice and support for those whose jobs may be affected. In the case of Capita, however, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the Government closely monitor all the firms to which they outsource contracts, and they do not believe that Capita is in anything like a similar situation to Carillion.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): In this centenary year of some women gaining the right to vote, does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be a debate in Government time to mark International Women’s Day on 8 March, perhaps to demonstrate the respect that the Government have for the immense contribution that women have made to this place over the past 100 years?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend my right hon. Friend for all that she does to advance the cause of women and equality. She is a real champion of women’s rights, and I agree with her that the centenary of women’s suffrage should ensure that we mark International Women’s Day. As she knows, time for such debates is traditionally provided by the Backbench Business Committee, but I have raised with the Chief Whip the view expressed on both sides of the House that it would be good to have an appropriate opportunity to mark that important day, and I am optimistic.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of this crumbling House for announcing the business for next week—and what a week! There may or may not be enough Conservative Back Benchers to trigger a leadership challenge, and the party civil war that is now raging in the Conservative ranks would put the cavalry and roundheads to shame. Could we perhaps have a debate on peace, love and understanding, so that the rest of us could wish all the best to our Conservative friends in their current difficulties?

Having secured yet another Humble Address defeat, the Government will once again go through the whole business of trying to defy the will of the House by revealing as little as possible about the latest disastrous Brexit papers. After debasing our Opposition day debates and refusing to be held to account, they are now making a mockery of Humble Addresses.

If we cannot get the Government to vote on Humble Addresses, how about getting them to try to change Standing Orders? One issue that unites the House against the Government is opposition to the procedure known as “English votes for English laws”, which is as useless as it is divisive. No other party in the House will support it, and Scottish Conservative Members would look singularly stupid if they voted for a procedure that continues to emasculate them in the House. We may not be able to secure time for a debate, but the Labour party has loads of time available. Why do not Labour Members join us and help us to defeat the Government and get rid of this divisive procedure?

Lastly, is it not delicious watching all the Brexiteers rage about the unelected House of Lords as it chews up their precious hard Brexit? People who would have no second thoughts about donning the ermine if it were offered and who have ignored all our calls for the House of Lords to be abolished are now starting to rail against it. You couldn’t make it up.

Andrea Leadsom: It is just as well that I genuinely like the hon. Gentleman, because I have to suspend my disbelief when it comes to some of the remarks that he makes. Let me gently correct him: the House is not crumbling. The infrastructure within it is the problem. The House, as he will see, is beautiful, and it is not crumbling. As for his recommendation for lessons on peace, love and understanding, I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, would like to see more of that in this place. I entirely share the hon. Gentleman’s desire for us all to work together, and as Leader of the House, I do all that I can to ensure that we show each other that love and understanding.

The hon. Gentleman talks about Opposition day debates. We issued a clear proposal that when an Opposition motion was approved by the House, a Minister would make a statement within 12 weeks to inform the House of exactly what steps had been taken to address the issues raised, and that continues to be the case.

The hon. Gentleman talks about EVEL—English votes for English laws—which is indeed designed to stop Scottish votes for English laws. It is important for Members on both sides of the House to recognise that it is a consequence of devolution, when a number of the nations that make up the United Kingdom were rightly keen to be able to manage their own affairs more closely. It is right that Members who come to this place from those nations should not be able to vote on laws that affect only England, or England and Wales.

The hon. Gentleman laughs at those who are frustrated by the House of Lords, but surely he recognises its role as a revising House with very useful expertise that often improves legislation and makes a genuine contribution to the work of the House of Commons.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If there is to be a decant, it is vital for it to be as short as possible. On that, we are all agreed. I personally believe that the builders should work triple shifts and not do what builders traditionally do, which is to stay as long as
business of the house

[Sir Edward Leigh]

possible. Is it my right hon. Friend’s opinion that, when we set up the legislation, only the MPs and peers on the sponsor body should vote, so that we can get a grip on this?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, because he has been a passionate advocate for the restoration and renewal of this place, and I am sorry, as he will no doubt be disappointed by yesterday’s decision. While that decision confirms action, it is not action along the lines that he would wish to see, and I am very sympathetic to his personal view that in staying in this place we could do the job more efficiently and effectively. In direct response to his question about how the sponsor body will be set up, it will have a majority of parliamentarians, and their role will be to reflect the range of views across both Houses on precisely what the delivery authority should be tasked with delivering.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing that the business for 6 February will include a debate on housing, planning and the green belt, which is sponsored by the Backbench Business Committee. We know that proceedings on the Space Industry Bill are unlikely to go the distance, but we do not yet know how many Government statements or urgent questions may be granted to Mr Speaker, so may we ask for protected time for that debate so that it may last for 90 minutes or until 7 o’clock, whichever is the later, so that we are guaranteed that it will get a good airing?

Secondly, may I bring all Members’ attention to page 15 of today’s Order Paper under the heading “Applications for Backbench Business Committee debates on the estimates”. Members will have to submit applications by Friday 16 February, which is during the recess. I draw Members’ attention to that so they will be able to debate in full the estimates debates of their choosing.

Lastly, I have another plea. The Backbench Business Committee is effectively now down to five members. We have one member out on a Bill Committee, and we have lost two other members due to promotions to the Government. We are effectively down to five members, but we have a quorum of four, so it is getting very tight. I therefore ask for a relaxation of the quorum, or quick appointments to replace those who have been promoted.

Andrea Leadsom: I hear that, and the hon. Gentleman and I will certainly take that up to see how we can support what sounds like a very real practical problem. I urge all colleagues to look at page 15 of today’s Order Paper. It is important that all colleagues set out their applications for Backbench Business Committee debates on the estimates. The hon. Gentleman is right that the deadline is during the recess, so it would be helpful for all colleagues to look at that. I will also take away his request for protected time for the Backbench Business Committee debate that he mentioned.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been a strong champion for resolving the issue of hospital car parking charges for a long time. I wish him well with his debate this afternoon, and I assure him that I will write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to put forward his request.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention heard a harrowing presentation this week from Professors Nav Kapur and Keith Hawton from the multicentre study of self-harm in England. We learned that there are 200,000 hospital presentations a year in England for self-harm and almost the same number to community health facilities, particularly of 12 to 17-year-olds. One in 100 of those will die by suicide a year after their presentation, and 50% of those dying by suicide have been involved in self-harm. This is an epidemic that is hitting this country. May we have a statement from the Government expressing how they intend to deal with the major risk of self-harm presentation in our hospitals?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady sets out harrowing evidence about the extent of self-harming, and the Government are incredibly concerned about this, particularly about the need for more support for those with mental health issues. We are investing a record £1.4 billion into children’s and young people’s mental health, and there are now a record 1,440 children’s mental health beds. Also, importantly, by this time next year, we will have trained 2,000 secondary school staff in mental health first aid to try to provide support to young people, and by 2021, 70,000 additional children and young people each year will be accessing NHS specialist mental health services.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In the village of Oulton in my constituency, a company that owns 70 rented homes has put in for planning permission to demolish them and replace them with private dwellings. On Friday, I met some of my constituents who could soon be receiving eviction notices and would therefore require new homes. May we have a statement from the Housing Minister on the power that Leeds City Council may or may not have to purchase those homes, instead of—I kid you not, Mr Speaker—wanting to build a lighthouse in the middle of the landlocked city of Leeds?

Andrea Leadsom: That is an extraordinary tale. Whether the council is planning for floods is anyone’s guess. My hon. Friend is a strong champion for his community,
to them—were signed under Labour Governments. Labour agreed the hon. Gentleman must reflect that those PFI deals sector coming, and that those deals have not been in the many of those deals the private sector saw the public Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) and the Treasury Committee private finance initiatives that were badly negotiated and he raises an important issue. I recommend that he land? So many of us want a new deal for our hospitals time.

Mr Speaker: Hereford and South Herefordshire.

Andrea Leadsom: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a debate on that. When I was on the Treasury Committee about five years ago, my hon. Friend the Member for—Jesse Norman—

Mr Speaker:: No, it was not in Queen Victoria’s time.

May we have an early debate so that many of us can give a good pinch and a punch to the private sector partnerships that bereft so many hospitals in our land? So many of us want a new deal for our hospitals and health sector, but we are being dragged down by private finance initiatives that were badly negotiated many years ago. Let’s have a debate on this, please!

Andrea Leadsom: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a debate on that. When I was on the Treasury Committee about five years ago, my hon. Friend the Member for—Jesse Norman—

Mr Speaker: Hereford and South Herefordshire.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I had a momentary mental blank there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) and the Treasury Committee held an inquiry into PFI, and it was quite clear that in many of those deals the private sector saw the public sector coming, and that those deals have not been in the best interests of the taxpayer or the patient. Of course, the hon. Gentleman must reflect that those PFI deals were signed under Labour Governments. Labour agreed to them—[Interruption.] Well, John Major did a few of them, but the vast majority were done under Labour. Now, under private finance 2, there is a much better track record of ensuring that the interests of the taxpayer are better cared for. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a debate would be a good way to raise this issue again.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Mr Speaker, I would like to share some good news with you and the good people of Taunton Deane. We have just heard this morning that the bid to the housing infrastructure fund for £7.2 million to build the spine road in Staplegrove in Taunton has been successful. That will make the building of 1,600 houses in that area viable. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this announcement, which demonstrates the fact that this Government realise that if we are to make the delivery of much-needed housing viable, we must have the right infrastructure?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for her constituency, and it is good news that houses are being built. We are committed to building homes so that everyone can afford a safe, decent place to live, and today an extra £866 million has been confirmed for local housing projects to unlock the potential of 200,000 new homes. I am delighted that the Staplegrove spine road in her constituency will be one of the beneficiaries.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Seventy-seven per cent. of the public, 98 MPs on both sides of the House, and more than 20 national charities back my Bill to measure food insecurity. Figures released this week show that one in eight adults has gone a whole day without food, and the UN estimate of UK food insecurity stands at a staggering 8 million people. Will the Government make a statement to explain why their position on this heartbreaking reality is for so many one of total silence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an issue that is of concern right across the House. Food insecurity is a major challenge, but the Government have ensured that more people get to keep more of their hard-earned cash, raising the personal allowance so that a basic rate taxpayer is £1,000 better off and raising the national living wage to ensure that people are thousands of pounds better off than they were in 2010. It is vital that the Government do everything we can to ensure that people can afford to live well.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I want to bring something that affects my constituency to the attention of the Leader of the House. In Taunton Deane, about which we have just heard, the borough council has borrowed a fortune to do up its headquarters. Not only has it not signed a contract, which I think is illegal and pretty silly, but the headquarters will be valued at only half of what was borrowed. It is not a good council, so may we please have a debate on borough councils in the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: Order. Did the hon. Gentleman consult his hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) in advance of asking this question? If he did, so be it, but if he did not, it is rather unseemly.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I did, Mr Speaker. I sent an email.

Mr Speaker: Yes. I am not sure that that is very collegiate, but I will have to leave Members on the same side of the House to try to sort out such matters. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman, who is quite an experienced Member of the House, that there is a genuine unseemliness about continued references to another Member’s constituency. In the politest possible way, I exhort the hon. Gentleman, who I am sure has a fertile mind and wide range of potential political interests, to focus perhaps on other interests, rather than on those that might affect his constituency—I do not dispute that and do not have authoritative knowledge of the matter—but which most certainly affect that of his hon. Friend.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I encourage my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) to take the matter up with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My constituent “S” was trafficked to the UK as a child and forced to work in a cannabis factory, but the Home Office wants to send him back to Vietnam. May we please have a debate on the interaction between the protection of victims of modern slavery, and the asylum and immigration system?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like a concerning case. As constituency MPs, we all raise particular cases with the Home Office, and I am sure that it will be happy to look again at this one. If she emails me about it, I can take it up with the Home Office on her behalf.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Community Security Trust’s annual report shows a growth in anti-Semitic attacks in this country amidst a pernicious increase in anti-Semitism more generally. At the same time, the chief inspector of schools is making a speech today about the growth of religious extremism in our schools. May we have a debate in the Chamber in Government time on how to combat religious extremism and pernicious attacks on people’s religions?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a worrying story. All of us will have read in the press about the rise in anti-Semitic attacks and the use of words that can be extremely hurtful. He is right to suggest a debate, and I encourage him to talk to the Backbench Business Committee about securing such a debate so that all Members can share their views.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): The Government have expressed their support for women’s refuges, and their funding is currently being reviewed. I fear, though, that that time is running out for many refuges, including Jane’s Place in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House please allow some Government time so that we can assess what urgent steps can be taken to avoid any closures?

Andrea Leadsom: We have committed £40 million until 2020, and we have delivered support to 80 domestic abuse projects across England. The hon. Lady raises an issue that is absolutely at the heart of Government priorities, which is why we have committed to introducing a draft domestic violence and abuse Bill. We have created two new stalking offences and we will introduce a new stalking protection order. It is important that the Government are taking action, and we will continue to do so.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Next Tuesday is Safer Internet Day, and on Monday I will be visiting Eastlands Primary School in my constituency to meet its eCadets and to find out more about their role in promoting safe internet use among their fellow pupils. There is real concern about what is happening online, so could we have a debate to consider what measures we can take to keep our young people safe?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising such an important issue. I hope that he enjoys his school visit. The Government fully support Safer Internet Day. This year, nearly 700 schools will take part, and they will be joined by charities, Government officials, businesses, football clubs and police forces. Safer Internet Day is marked in 100 countries worldwide to help children everywhere to remain safe online.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House will be aware of the hearings on equal pay for women working at the BBC. Will she now take a lead on equal pensions for women, especially women born in the early 1950s who have been denied them? She could certainly make a name for herself—she would be up there with Emmeline Pankhurst if she did something about it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has been discussed in this House many, many times. Conservatives in government have committed more than £1 billion to supporting those affected so that no one will see their pension age change by more than 18 months. The new state pension will be much more generous for many women. By 2030, more than 3 million women stand to gain, on average, £550 extra a year.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend will share my concern about yesterday’s sad news in Redditch that our local Marks & Spencer is closing. I am delighted that the employees will find alternative jobs, but nevertheless it is sad because Marks & Spencer is the last food shop in our town centre, and it is sadly needed. Can we have a debate on how we can work together with our local council colleagues to create vibrant town centres that are communities for everyone to enjoy, and in which to live and work?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a huge champion for her constituency, and she has her own vision for a sustainable and thriving town centre in Redditch. I share her concern, and it is always a great shame when a much loved and much used shop closes in a town centre. I encourage her to do all she can to revitalise the town.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Unfortunately, Nottingham was not selected as one of Sport England’s pilot cities for new models of physical activity. The House will know, however, that Nottingham people have developed lots of good ideas and, with our typical fortitude, will be making those ideas happen anyway in any way we can. Will the Leader of the House support us in that venture by accommodating a discussion in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the innovative efforts to increase sporting activity in Nottingham and on his desire for a debate in Government time. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, in which a sports Minister might be able to give him some specific tips.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Consideration was given in Westminster Hall yesterday to the terrible situation facing disabled people in North West Durham and across the UK when being assessed for their personal independence payment. Many Members were not called to speak in that debate because demand was so high. They had important issues that they needed to press, so will the Leader of the House advise us on how we can have the urgent situation facing disabled people debated in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: I understood there was a very well-attended debate yesterday, and it is right that there was. The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that almost 600,000 more disabled people have been able to come into the workforce over the past four years, with 3.5 million disabled people now in work. That is good news, and the PIP benefit is designed to give people more power
over how they use their benefits to support their lifestyle and their ability to make the most of all the opportunities they have.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on banning the use of plastic straws? Last week, I visited Sunnyside Primary School in the Craigend area of my constituency and met its ocean defenders, who are doing sterling work among local authorities to ban the use of plastic straws. These people will be here a lot longer than we will, so will the Government take action on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Gentleman’s enthusiasm for doing more to reduce plastics in all the things we use, whether we are talking about recyclable cups or any form of plastics. The Government have taken strong action in banning microbeads in certain cosmetics and body wash products. There is a lot more to do in protecting our marine areas, where 80% of our plastics end up, so this Government will be committed to doing everything we can to defend our environment.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Secretary of State for Scotland has raised the House’s concerns in his recent meeting with RBS. He will also be aware that, as has been mentioned in this House many times, we have established the Access to Banking standard to make sure there is proper consultation before the closure of any branch. He will also be aware that the Government have invested significantly in the post office network and that about 99% of personal customers will be able to carry out their day-to-day banking at a post office as a result of new agreements facilitated by Government.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We know it is Government policy to replace sold council houses on a one-for-one basis, but a three-bed semi in my constituency was recently sold for just £27,000 and the council cannot possibly replace a house for that much money—unless, perhaps, it is made of LEGO. We know that across the country only one in five of the council houses that are sold are getting replaced, so may we have a statement from the relevant Minister about how this policy can actually be put in practice?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. If he would like to email me with details, I shall certainly write to the Department on his behalf.

Nick Smith (Blenau Gwent) (Lab): Rent-to-own companies such as BrightHouse charge eye-watering interest rates for essential goods. The Financial Conduct Authority has just revealed that the average debt for rent-to-own customers has doubled. May we therefore have a statement and real action from the Government and FCA to keep this sector in check?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning point about the debts people get into by using these high-cost lenders to facilitate the purchase of essential white goods, furniture and so on. I know from my time as City Minister that the FCA takes this incredibly seriously. It has capped the interest rates that such companies are allowed to charge, and it is doing further work to ensure that we protect consumers from the practices of some of those companies.1

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Now that the House has made the in-principle decision on what we are going to do about restoration and renewal, may I urge the Leader of the House to get together her ministerial colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions to put together a parliamentary skills strategy? We are going to need thousands of people working on this building, with high-tech engineering skills and craft trade skills that currently are not available in this country. This is an opportunity for every constituency in the land to have apprenticeships, with apprentices working here on the building.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his tenacity and his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, on succeeding in her amendment yesterday. I am delighted that the House voted to take action. As he rightly points out, there are huge opportunities, and in some cases those are already being fulfilled. For example, as he will know, the repairs to the cast-iron roofs are being carried out in the UK. There will be lots of opportunities for new apprenticeships, however, and I can absolutely assure him that as Leader of the House I will be taking every opportunity to create jobs for young people in the UK.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Can we have a statement on the unfair distribution of the tampon tax fund? With £15 million available in year 1, Scottish organisations were given just two weeks’ notice before the fund closed. In addition, Sport Relief invited 45 organisations to a funding meeting, but only three of those organisations delivered services in Scotland. With the year 3 criteria making it virtually impossible for Scottish organisations to apply, is it not time for this fund, while it exists, to be devolved?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. If he would like to email me with details, I shall certainly write to the Department on his behalf.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Almost three months ago, on 3 November, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the Pressass gas storage facility plans in my constituency. I am still waiting on a reply. Will the Leader of the House look into this on my behalf?

1[Official Report, 6 February 2018, Vol. 635, c. 6MC.]
Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I will certainly do so.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Today, BT Openreach announced plans to roll out fibre broadband to 3 million homes by 2020. Far too often, however, new announcements are followed by slow action. This is an issue of growing urgency, and not just outside London; pockets of my constituency, including Cranford, suffer from very slow broadband speeds. I would like to thank Mohammad Chaudhry and residents of my constituency for raising this issue, which is having a huge impact on businesses and students and pupils wanting to study at home. Could we have an urgent debate in Government time on how to move from announcements to outcomes that will hugely impact on the prosperity, wellbeing and quality of life of all our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Lady’s concern about pockets with no broadband. It is devastating for people who work or study from home. It is extremely difficult. I must say, however, that superfast broadband is now available to over 95% of UK homes and businesses, which is up from 45% coverage in 2010, so it is not a case of announcements with no action; there is real action behind it. There is more to do, however, and there is a plan. That said, I share her frustration. She may wish to seek an Adjournment debate to hear at first hand the prospects for her constituents.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Residents of the town of Llangollen in my constituency are concerned that there is no Department for Work and Pensions or Careers Wales presence in that town. This means that residents must travel some considerable distance. This is not just a problem for Llangollen; it is a problem for many of our rural communities and small towns across the UK. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate in which we might seek to persuade the Minister of our case?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point for her constituents. In my constituency, there are often online opportunities, in libraries and town councils, to gain support from the DWP, but if she wants to write to me with her specific concerns, I can take it up with the Department, or she might want to seek an Adjournment debate.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On 19 January, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), told the House that the Government were launching local pilot schemes to combat holiday hunger among our poorest children. As proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), using a small fraction of the £520 million that the Treasury expects to raise from April from the sugary drinks levy would be an excellent use of this money in places such as my constituency. Given the obvious merits of getting pilots under way as quickly as possible for this summer’s holidays, may we please have a statement from the Department on how to apply for these pilots?

Andrea Leadsom: Members from all parties will be delighted to hear of those pilot schemes. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for his commitment to making progress in that policy area. I will certainly ask the Department for Education the hon. Lady’s question and see whether it can provide a further update to the House.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): A case has arisen in Bristol of restaurant owners charging their waiters and waitresses to work by demanding that those staff pay a percentage of the total price of the orders they sell to customers, regardless of tips received. This employer’s tax on working is then being used to pay staff wages. Remarkably, I am told that this is legal. May we have a debate to decide whether that needs to change?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds quite extraordinary. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take up that issue with the Home Office to find out whether it is actually legal. It seems to me to be extraordinary.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great privilege for me to represent one of Britain’s great cities in this House, as many Members do, but I was alarmed to read in a recent report on the New Statesman’s CityMetric site that Britain’s great regional cities, such as Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham and Leeds, are lagging significantly behind our European peers in respect of productivity, which is in some cases half the rate of that of equivalent European cities such as Munich, Seville or Barcelona. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on what the Government are doing to address the major problem of unbalanced economic growth and to ensure that our great regional cities are competing effectively with their European peers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. He will no doubt be pleased that at the Budget we announced a £1.7 billion investment in the Transforming Cities fund, specifically to build transport infrastructure, which is so strongly linked to productivity. He may be aware that since 2010 the north-east and Scotland have both seen faster productivity growth than London. There is a long way to go, but it is clear that through initiatives such as the northern powerhouse, we are committed to ensuring that we see growth and a reduction in the imbalances between all regions of the United Kingdom.
UK Diplomacy in Europe

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now come to the Select Committee statement. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Tugendhat to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

12.7 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this, my second opportunity to report back on the work that the House has charged the Foreign Affairs Committee to do. I am pleased that in this report the Committee has begun to tackle one of the most important questions facing us today: our bilateral relations following our departure from the European Union. The House will know that 1,000 years of history and, indeed, simple geography make clear the importance of these connections in our diplomatic outreach.

As part of the Government’s stated policy of pursuing a global agenda, the Committee believes that relations with European states are an important node in the network of our international future. In some areas, that may mean connections to and co-operation with the European Union, as the member states have decided to work together through that structure. On other occasions, it may mean direct bilateral conversations or, indeed, new structures. That poses a question for Her Majesty’s Government: how should we aim to shape this relationship to the benefit of the United Kingdom, our allies and others to achieve the deep and special partnership we hear spoken of so often?

The first answer was reinforced yesterday at a meeting I attended with Baltic partners. I was asked specifically whether the United Kingdom is still intending to invest in defence and play an international role as a nuclear power and a UN Security Council member state. The Committee members present were able to reassure our important allies in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that, on the 100th anniversary of those countries’ foundation as modern states, our commitment to the defence of Europe and, indeed, to the defence of the Baltic states was undimmed. Nevertheless, their question reflected an uncertainty that the Committee calls on Her Majesty’s Government to do their utmost to dispel. To achieve that, the Committee feels that a vision for our European policy needs to be set out. As one of Europe’s leading foreign policy actors, whatever the precise contours of our future relationship with the European Union it will always be in the interests of the United Kingdom to co-operate with the European Union and its member states on foreign policy, defence and security.

Working together will help us to protect and project our shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and will underpin the international rules-based order. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary has told us that he intends to do that, but he has not yet decided what level of access to ask for as regards co-operation with the European Union on foreign, security and defence policy making, and he has not clarified the intent of the United Kingdom to work bilaterally with other member states. The Committee believes that this requires clarification soon, as Lord Bridges warned only the other day in the other place.

The Committee discussed many options and, I am glad to say, unanimously agreed that the ultimate goal should be to secure automatic and institutionalised collaboration that respects the decision-making autonomy of the United Kingdom, the member states and other European nations as they work together. This should include, as Lord Hague suggested, a status on the European Union’s Political and Security Committee that allows the United Kingdom to have a representative in meetings with speaking—if obviously not voting—rights, and a UK-EU strategic partnership to facilitate enhanced dialogue on foreign, defence and security policy. The importance of being, as Lord Hague and Lord Ricketts put it, “in the room” should not be undervalued in order to secure our interests in our nearest neighbourhood.

Now that we are leaving the European Union and surrendering our veto on closer defence integration among the other 27, we must also find a way to support European capability development and ensure that it complements the work of NATO and does not undermine it. To achieve this, the Committee calls on the Government to consider the possibility of participation in some EU defence integration measures, as the United Kingdom already does with the United States and other nations around the world, on the understanding that national sovereignty over force deployment is preserved and that the UK’s ability to co-operate with non-European Union states is unconstrained. The UK would, of course, participate only in programmes as an equal partner with other nations.

The Committee was given mixed messages about the FCO’s role in the Brexit process and beyond and, to clarify the position, the Committee calls on the FCO to publish a paper outlining the overall goals and the specific priorities of UK foreign policy in Europe after Brexit. This would allow the House to debate the priorities set out and to discuss the resources available to meet the objective.

Although we welcome the Minister for Europe’s success in securing additional resources, the Committee is concerned that they are being drawn from the wider network, possibly weakening the Government’s stated policy that we are to become a genuinely global Britain. That would be a grave mistake. Since Lord Hague, the Foreign Office has been opening missions around the world to extend the influence that the UK seeks in foreign affairs. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and now with a vital national interest in extending our diplomatic influence, it would be an error to reduce the resources available to achieve that. If leaving the EU meant that the UK were to reduce its international outreach, that would be a reversal of the aim stated by Ministers in recent months and would cause great concern to the whole Committee, and no doubt to the whole House.

The Committee remains concerned that the Foreign Office is not adequately resourced, and relations with Ireland are one example. The Republic of Ireland is the
United Kingdom’s closest foreign partner. It is vital to the United Kingdom’s national interest that the relationship between Westminster and Dublin is as close as possible. Indeed, it is essential to the prosperity of both. That is why our first overseas visit as a Committee was to Dublin and to Cavan, on the border with Northern Ireland. We were hugely grateful for the warm welcome we received, particularly from my honourable friend the Member for Cavan-Monaghan and the Chair of our sister Committee in the Oireachtas, Brendan Smith. We saw first-hand the complications at the border, the importance of the bilateral relationship and the importance of strengthening it throughout this Parliament. We therefore welcome the Government’s commitment to preserving the progress that has been made in UK-Ireland relations in recent years, and regret that recent tensions appear to endanger the hard-won positive momentum.

We welcome the progress made thus far in negotiations, but also recognise that much more needs to be done. That is why the Committee calls on the Foreign Office to increase its diplomatic presence in Ireland and to produce an analysis of the UK-Ireland bilateral relationship, containing recommendations to improve it and options to revitalise existing, or indeed create new, bilateral institutions.

The opportunity for the United Kingdom is in an internationally engaged, networked world. We are uniquely placed to achieve this due to history, alliances and geography, but in order to do so we need both investment and energy, and the Foreign Office, most of all, must set out its vision, its strategy for achieving that, and the resources required to make it possible. The Committee remains concerned by the silence on many areas and the confusion in others.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I obviously declare an interest as a member of the Committee that produced this unanimous report. If we leave the European Union, we inevitably lose influence. Does my friend the Chairman of the Committee believe that the Government have confronted the issue sufficiently and made proposals to remedy and ameliorate the loss of influence that will inevitably arise within Europe and European institutions?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is more than aware of the debates we have had behind closed doors on this. I will start by saying that when we leave the European Union, the nature of Britain’s influence will change, and does not need to diminish as long as Britain takes the opportunity to invest properly in global power. That is why the Committee was so concerned about the possibility that we are stripping off resources from parts of the world such as Asia and South America to reinforce where we will no longer be in the room in Brussels among the EU27. As my dear and honourable Friend knows very well, that is why we need more resources for the Foreign Office in order to make this possible. We need extra commitment, extra drive and extra energy and, to bind it together, we need the vision that, sadly, have not yet seen.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on this very important report. Does he not agree that, given that we are leaving the European Union, we should redouble our diplomatic, economic and educational links with countries such as Serbia, Poland, Hungary and other countries in eastern Europe that are great friends of the United Kingdom, and that, given the significant number of Polish residents here, we should teach children the positive contribution that Polish people have made to Britain and the world?

Tom Tugendhat: I absolutely welcome my hon. Friend’s comments. Britain’s relationship with eastern Europe, particularly the Visegrad Four, was summed up in my conversation with our Baltic partners only yesterday. Britain’s role in assisting at the liberation of those countries from communism and in defending them at other points in history is one that many of them look at with fondness and affection. We should absolutely recognise and invest in that, and I pay huge tribute to our missions and embassies in those countries and the efforts they are making with the resources they have available. All I would add is: imagine what they could do with more resources; imagine how many more people they could help to persuade of the benefits of thinking along those lines.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Committee on the report. Disrupting modern slavery supply chains across Europe requires high-quality diplomatic skill on our part. What assessment has the Foreign Affairs Committee made of our future diplomatic capacity in this area to disrupt this blight?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question, and this is one area where we need to consider not just bilateral relations but relations with the European Union as an organisation. We must recognise that if that is how 27 member states choose to work, our option for working with them is through the organisation that they choose. That is simply a fact. Seeing how we can plug into that organisation is essential, which is why we call on the Foreign Office to consider very hard the bilateral nature of that relationship, and perhaps to look at it in a different way. When we look at the mission in Washington, for example, and the way that the British embassy there plugs across an entire network, that may be a model for how we look into the European Union. Some of us—I speak personally here, not for the Committee—are attracted by the idea of having a Minister resident in Europe, not only to promote Britain’s interests, but to make sure that our European partners and friends see the importance that we place on that relationship.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My hon. and gallant Friend reminds me that, when I was first elected, half the Whips Office were colonels.

The Committee has done well. There is a reference to the British-Irish Council and to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I hope that the Government will be asked by this House and by the Committee to make sure that our membership of the Council of Europe, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe get more attention than perhaps they have had in the past, and that there are regular meetings between their members and Government, and debates in this House.
The question for us is how we can all contribute and gain, because that is the best way to maintain Britain’s interests as the status of our relationship with the European Union changes. As a last point, may I say that, as normal, most of these reports have three blank pages? It might be helpful for those who do not want to read the whole report to have a glossary somewhere, so that the alphabet soup can be understood by those to whom some of these things are strange.

Tom Tugendhat: Perhaps I can pick up on the last point first. I have just smiled at my excellent Committee Clerk, who was so essential to producing this report, and I am sure that she has noted that.

On the other bodies that my hon. Friend mentioned, I am absolutely in agreement with him that the investment that we must make now in different forms of bilateralism and different forms of multinationalism is absolutely essential to achieving the aims of the United Kingdom. This island is not moving anywhere. We are still going to remain 20 miles or so off the coast of France, and we are still going to have our closest relationships, in many ways, with European nations. How we engage in them is essential, and that will require resourcing and time.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Unquestionably, leaving the European Union means that we must redouble our efforts with our European partners, but surely that cannot come at the expense of manpower or money being siphoned away from other parts of the world. Does the Chair of the Select Committee share my concerns that the Foreign Office does not have enough resources to put the investment that we will need into Europe?

Tom Tugendhat: I absolutely share my hon. Friend’s concerns. He will be aware that the recent sale of an embassy in Thailand, which admittedly raised an awful lot of money to address some of the holes in the capital spending of the Foreign Office, will inherently have diminished our presence in some way. These symbolic buildings, these iconic places, are essential to getting people through the door—and, of course, what is the purpose of a diplomatic mission but to get people in to talk to us? Although these palaces may look glorious, and none more so than our embassy in Paris, the work that our ambassador, the right hon. Lord Llewellyn, is putting into that building—not into the bricks and mortar, but into it as a living body, as an embodiment of Britain in Paris—is essential to ensuring that our network is increased, that our reach is augmented, and indeed that our economy is promoted. That is only possible when we resource it correctly, which is why I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we do need to increase the resources available for the Foreign Office in order to promote the United Kingdom and to get better return for this country on the investment that we are making.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): On page 26, my hon. Friend’s Committee looks at the issue of NA TO and the new EU defence pillar. He encourages participation in some EU defence integration measures. On behalf of my constituents in Kettering, may I caution his Committee against that as a slippery slope, because NATO is the main pillar of western defence and will always remain as such? The EU is in great danger of undermining that, and we should not go down that slippery slope, because it would not be in our national interest.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank my hon. Friend, whose points on this area have been important and well made over many years, and I welcome his intervention now. This report was passed unanimously, despite such points, because of the evidence that we heard. The reality is that non-NA TO EU states—countries like Sweden—are looking to integrate more closely now that we have gone with other European nations on defence. We have a choice. If we wish to work with northern allies like Sweden in defence of the high north and in projecting Britain’s influence in the Arctic, we need to think, what is the most appropriate organisation, and what is the most appropriate structure through which to operate? I am entirely in agreement with him that the EU would not be the best structure and that NA TO is, but the problem is that we have lost our veto in the European Union, the other 27 are pursuing that, and we therefore have a choice either to work with them at some level or not to be part of it at all. Given Scotland’s position and given our position as a nation with interests in the high north, I would urge us to work with others who have interests there and, on occasion and cautiously and carefully, to work with some EU defence structures.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman and the members of his Committee for a sobering but very, very useful report. Given the number of quite serious concerns that it raises—for example, the fact that it appears that three different witnesses for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office gave three different understandings as to what their role in the Brexit process was—can he advise the House on what arrangements the Committee intends to make to ensure that Foreign Office Ministers are held to account for the recommendations? In particular, would it be appropriate to ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to the House at an early date, so that the House can scrutinise in more detail some of the concerns that the report has raised?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. One thing that we are finding, as the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is in his place today will know, is that at times there is a little resistance in the Foreign Office to answering some questions. Indeed, I had to write to the Foreign Secretary about it yesterday. The Minister is one of the most open and helpful people in his Department, so there is absolutely no criticism either of him or his area of responsibility, but there are other areas in which we are finding it hard to get answers.

For example, we have asked how the Foreign Office envisions the meaning of global Britain. So far, it has declined to answer. I find it somewhat unusual that a Government Department should refuse or decline to answer questions from the assembled people in this Parliament; I find that an unusual position to take. Therefore, we are asking the Foreign Office to think again. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to hold the various Ministers to account. The Foreign Secretary will be answering Foreign Office questions here in this House, and we have asked all Ministers to appear twice a year before the Committee, because we feel that six months is a reasonable time lag between visits. The hon. Gentleman is well within his rights to call for a more urgent response if there is something that he sees as more urgently requiring it.
Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I commend the Chairman and the members of the Committee for producing this excellent report. Will he confirm that, in relation to intelligence and security, a permanent official should be appointed to ensure that the relationship that we have with Europe at the moment continues?

Tom Tugendhat: Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will forgive me wearing another hat as the member of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, I will tell the hon. Gentleman that I was privileged to hear from two of our former chiefs of intelligence and two other senior diplomatic officials recently about the sharing of intelligence and the importance placed on it by all nations in the European continent. I am not concerned about it not continuing. The one concern is that we must have influence over data sharing and data holding regulations, because European decisions on that could well affect United Kingdom companies and interests.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is my role simply to say thank you to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for his presentation and to thank colleagues for their contributions. I have obviously listened very carefully to all the exchanges and will draw them to the attention of both the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe. There will be a formal Foreign Office response in due course, but it is also an opportunity to thank the Committee for its work. I certainly look forward to appearing before it again in the future. Finally, happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I commend the Chairman and the members of the Committee for producing this excellent report. Will he confirm that, in relation to intelligence and security, a permanent official should be appointed to ensure that the relationship that we have with Europe at the moment continues?

Tom Tugendhat: Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will forgive me wearing another hat as the member of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, I will tell the hon. Gentleman that I was privileged to hear from two of our former chiefs of intelligence and two other senior diplomatic officials recently about the sharing of intelligence and the importance placed on it by all nations in the European continent. I am not concerned about it not continuing. The one concern is that we must have influence over data sharing and data holding regulations, because European decisions on that could well affect United Kingdom companies and interests.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is my role simply to say thank you to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for his presentation and to thank colleagues for their contributions. I have obviously listened very carefully to all the exchanges and will draw them to the attention of both the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe. There will be a formal Foreign Office response in due course, but it is also an opportunity to thank the Committee for its work. I certainly look forward to appearing before it again in the future. Finally, happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I also wish you a happy birthday?

In an oral statement on social care on 7 December 2017, the then Care Minister, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), replied to a question I asked about the Government abandoning the carers strategy that had been due to be published in summer 2017—a strategy that has been dragging on for so long, in fact, that the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was associated with that piece of work when he was in his former role. The then Minister said, about the thousands of carers who had responded to a consultation and then been left waiting: “We have listened to them, and we will consider what they have said in bringing forward the Green Paper. In the meantime, it is very important to pull together exactly what support there is at present and then respond to that, and we will publish our action plan in January.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2017; Vol. 632, c. 1238-1239.]

It is now February. Not only have we no longer any prospect of a carers strategy from the Government, but they have not met their own target to publish an action plan. This is a shabby way to treat carers. Madam Deputy Speaker, do you have any indication that the new Care Minister plans to come to this House to update us on what, if anything, the Government propose to do to support carers?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady. Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Thank you very much, Minister. No numbers are to be mentioned.
Backbench Business

Baby Leave for Members of Parliament

12.31 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that it would be to the benefit of the functioning of parliamentary democracy that honourable Members who have had a baby or adopted a child should for a period of time be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy.

May I join others, Madam Deputy Speaker, in wishing you a happy birthday? You honestly do not need to worry about numbers. I am 67 and I have discovered, as I get older, that I know a lot more things that I did not know when I was younger. There is nothing wrong with getting older.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and the other members of the Backbench Business Committee, which he chairs, for agreeing to the subject of the motion. As the Backbench Business Committee was introduced when I was Leader of the House, I was very glad that its members did not turn me down when I went before them to ask for this debate.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is in her place. I thank her for all her work on this issue. This has very much been a joint enterprise between her and me. I really cannot speak highly enough of her work as the Chair of the excellent Women and Equalities Committee. I do not usually say good things about people who have been in the Cabinet in Tory Governments, but she is really very important to us all in her role.

I thank the 52 hon. Members from all parties who supported the application for this motion, including right hon. and hon. Friends in the Labour party, so I certainly do agree and I congratulate my hon. Friend. I am looking forward to meeting the new arrival.

This motion asks the House for its in-principle agreement to make arrangements for when a Member has a baby or adopts a child. At the moment, we have no such arrangements. In this House, we set the rules for people outside the House to take maternity, paternity and shared parental leave, we ourselves have a system that makes this place less family-friendly than most workplaces in the UK?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. No one in this House wants us to give ourselves better conditions than people outside, but we are now actually lagging a long way behind and are in danger of setting a bad example in that respect.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Ms Harman: I give way to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour.

Helen Hayes: I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend and constituency neighbour for tabling this motion, and for her work over more than 30 years to advance equality for women in this place and in the wider world. Last week, I visited a girls’ secondary school in my constituency, where students asked me what it is like being a woman in the House of Commons. There were gaps in the room when I mentioned that there is no maternity leave for women Members. Does she agree that we owe it to a generation of young women who are now thinking about their future to make this place somewhere where they feel welcome and have the same rights as every other woman in workplaces across the country?

Ms Harman: Absolutely; my hon. Friend is spot on.

“Erskine May”, our parliamentary rules bible, says absolutely nothing about pregnancy, which is no surprise at all. It used to be the case that the overwhelming majority of Members were men. It was not that those men were not parents; it was just that they regarded a baby as the sole responsibility of their wives. There were hardly any women in this House then, and those who were here were mostly older women whose children had grown up or who had no children. That was certainly the case when I had my three children as a young Member of this House. I was the only woman in the House having babies at that time. Things have now changed, and the sight of growing pregnant bumps in our Division Lobby is commonplace and celebrated on both sides of the House.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On that point, will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Ms Harman: Speaking of pregnant bumps, I give way to my hon. Friend.

Cat Smith: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for making an excellent speech, and declare my interest as one of those Members with a growing bump. Does she agree that that highlights the urgency with which we have to address the issue? I am not the only Member of the House who is currently pregnant. Does she agree that we are working to a deadline? Babies do not wait; it is not going to stay in there forever.

Ms Harman: I certainly do agree and I congratulate my hon. Friend. I am looking forward to meeting the new arrival.
The reason we are proposing this change now is that the House has changed profoundly in its attitudes and its membership. Now, many men want and expect to play their part with a new baby.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): In 1993, when I informed the Chief Whip that my wife was going into hospital and that I intended to be at the birth, I was told, “That’s alright, as long as you’re here on Monday night to vote on Maastricht matters.” As it turned out, my daughter was born on the Sunday, and I was able to leave the hospital, come in and stay until 2.30 am. The dilemma applies to men as well as to women.

Ms Harman: It really does. It was unacceptable then and it is even more unacceptable now.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is a crying shame that, even though the last Labour Government introduced shared parental leave, only around 5% of fathers take it? I do not think there is really any provision in this House for new dads to do that.

Ms Harman: Absolutely. Having talked to colleagues in all parts of the House, I know that fathers feel as strongly as mothers about this issue. That is a real change. It is really gratifying to me to see younger men who are determined to be not only excellent Members of this House but sharing parents and responsible fathers who do not see their baby just as their wife’s business. Most wives now work, and their husbands in this House want to support them in that.

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry not to be able to stay for long, partly because of the problem with my leg. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Lady on a motion that mentions not men or women but Members—that is a plus. When my wife was elected, our youngest child was two, so we did not change the rules to recognise that. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) told me:

“As I say, there have been 17 babies born to women—and countless born to male Members of Parliament but which we do not know about. In the absence of any official recognition of these babies being born to Members, the way things work currently is that would MPs who are giving birth, or men MPs who want time with their baby, ask the Whips for a pair, and their Whips then make an arrangement with the Whips on the other side of the House. The situation in relation to the Whips is nothing like it was when I was having the first of our three children 34 years ago and I had to ask for a few weeks off from the Whips Office when most of them thought that a woman, let alone a pregnant woman, should not be in the House of Commons. I know that attitudes in the Whips Office are now completely different, but each Member still has to make a request. We would not agree to that happening in any other workplace. Furthermore, it is in the discretion of not just one Whips Office but two, because both Whips Offices have to agree.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I speak as an SNP Whip. Our party does not take part in pairing. I very much commend this proposal because I am really uncomfortable with the fact that we would have to go for a pairing arrangement, as is currently the case. I very much support what the right hon. and learned Lady is saying, particularly in the context of those of us who do not do pairing.

Ms Harman: That is a really important point. I hope that we can think of some arrangements that can be made to deal with the issue of SNP Members until such time as we zoom this process through.

Granting or withholding a pair is an important role for the Opposition Whips Office. No one can accuse me of not knowing the importance of fighting in opposition,
because, tragically, that is what I have been doing for 20 years of my parliamentary life, but a woman giving birth should not be a matter of wrangling between Whips Offices or an opportunity to take advantage of the Government, however much they may deserve it.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on securing this really important debate. Does she agree that Professor Childs was absolutely right to argue in her “The Good Parliament” report of 2016 that “to become a truly inclusive institution the House of Commons must accommodate and facilitate both the pregnant woman Member and co-parenting and caring MP”;

that the current informal arrangements lead to misunderstandings about the effectiveness of MPs, particularly women; and that the change that is being sought is long overdue?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. “The Good Parliament” report also reports on all the other Parliaments around the world that have sought, in their own way, to deal with this.

This is not just a matter of the wishes of parents. It is also about the rights of our constituents, because when an MP is paired, Hansard simply records that they have not voted—that the vote to which their constituency is entitled is not cast.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): The negotiation between Whips is important in other circumstances. However, I am sure that many women in this House who take time off to be with their baby in the first few weeks want to practise the act of democracy that is voting so that they are representing their constituents while being a new mother, and it should not be suggested that they simply have not voted.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Why should a constituency lose the right for a vote to be cast in its name because its MP is having a baby? You cannot be voting when you are in a birthing pool, Madam Deputy Speaker, but your constituency has a right to have its voice heard.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her excellent speech. She is making an important point about mothers—and fathers—who are not able to be here when they are looking after their infants. The website TheyWorkForYou.com currently registers the fact that I have voted in just 16.51% of votes in the past year. I have, though, been in Parliament, but have just gone home to look after my child at the end of the day. Does she concur that this should be rectified not only in Hansard but on that website to reflect the fact that parents who are not here are looking after their children?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We need to do this for defensive reasons, because women who are off having babies or men who are off with a newborn baby are criticised, and that is wrong. But it is even more important than that—our constituents should have the right to have their voice heard, and we want to protect that right even though their MP is off at certain times with babies.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her powerful speech and for all the work that she has done over the years on these important issues. I am responsible for two of the 17 babies who have been born since 2010. When my first child was born almost five years ago, one of the campaigning organisations that email constituents about votes emailed my constituents to say that I had not bothered to turn up to a vote. I would very much have liked to turn up to vote on all the issues, but with a very young baby it simply was not possible. That needs to be rectified as well, because in the minds of constituents we are not here and not representing them, but we are doing very important work at home.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That chimes very much with what my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) says. As a mother of four, she thinks that “just because women having babies are based in their constituencies in the weeks and months following giving birth that should not mean that their constituents are not represented by their MP casting their vote.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) had a new son, Bobby James, who was only 35 years old when we had a crucial vote on Brexit—[HON. MEMBERS: “Days!”] Sorry. He was only 35 hours old when we had the crucial Brexit vote. My hon. Friend’s wife, Nikki, had an early induction because her pregnancy was high-risk. He says that with the fixed vote coming up, and his wife in labour, his fundamental role as an MP was pitted against his fundamental role as a man, dad and husband in support of who he describes as his amazing wife. He says it brought an edge to the delivery room that was frankly unhealthy, and that it is surely “easier to move Parliament than hold back the majestic and existential forces of the arrival of new life.”

Let us show that we can manage to move Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said, the trouble is that, even when an MP is paired, people outside the House do not understand pairing. They just see that their MP has not voted. Social media campaigns, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned, criticise MPs who have not voted on important issues, unaware that they are paired because of childbirth. They get criticised in newspapers that run voting league tables. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who we all know is one of the most hyperactive MPs in the House, featured at number two in The Sun’s list of Britain’s laziest MPs. We cannot go on like this.

Emma Reynolds: I apologise for intervening again, but I think I am responsible for the latest addition to the 17 babies. He was born on Good Friday last year. I was criticised by a Sunday newspaper. I will not name it, because although I should not have had to ask, when I got in touch with the political editor, he kindly took my name off a story that rated me as the second worst MP in this Parliament, without mentioning that I had been on maternity leave since the election.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend needs to be able to cast her constituents’ vote by proxy while being in her constituency, with the lovely Theo. That is what the proposal before the House would enable.
The proposal puts to the House that we should agree in principle that Members should be allowed to choose another Member to vote by proxy for them in the Division Lobby when they have had a new baby or adopted a child. If there is agreement to that in principle, many issues of implementation would have to be considered further by the Select Committee on Procedure. As “The Good Parliament” report made clear, other Parliaments have made arrangements for baby leave, but we would need to do it in a way that fits with our culture and our processes.

I know Members are always rightly concerned that any change might have unintended consequences or be the thin end of a wedge. We rightly jealously guard the rules of our democracy. I want to reassure Members on a number of matters. The resolution before the House is not that a Member would be required to apply for a proxy vote, but that they would be able to do so if they chose. Those who want to take no leave or to ask for a pair would be perfectly free to do so, as they are now.

It would not affect pay, which is a matter for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. IPSA has assured me in writing that how we vote in the House is a matter for us, not for it, and it would not regard any change in voting as a matter that would affect pay in any way, so that is just not an issue. It would not be open to abuse because whether someone has had a baby or adopted a child is not a subjective judgment; it is a matter of fact.

It will be evident to hon. Members that I am not moving this motion out of self-interest. It is too late for that—30 years too late. My children are already grown up, but I want this for the younger Members and future parents in the House.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way, and I wish you a happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker—I will not give you the bumps.

My right hon. and learned Friend talked about her own experiences, and she was very fortunate to have our hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) by her side. She also talked about pairing. In personal life, not everyone is paired. I speak as chair of the new all-party parliamentary group on single-parent families. Is she aware of the figures from Gingerbread that point out that single-parent families are an increasingly common family form? The figure is 51% in some London constituencies, and there are 3.649 in mine. These problems are exacerbated for single parents. Will she encourage people to join my APPG, which was registered only this week?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the right hon. and learned Lady responds to the intervention, I should add that I have no wish whatsoever to curtail this excellent debate on a very important subject. However, I draw to her attention that while she is absolutely correct to take lots of interventions, because there is much to be said about this, I have a note of a great many people who wish to speak, and we do not have a huge amount of time.

Ms Harman: I will draw my comments to a close.

In this centenary year, 100 years after women first won the right to stand for Parliament, I hope that we will agree to the motion and that the Procedure Committee will look at the matter expeditiously. We do not have all the time in the world. At least two more parliamentary babies are in the pipeline. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) is awaiting her second baby, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) is also expecting. While we talk, nature is taking its course, so let us agree this and get on with it.

12.56 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): May I echo Members’ good wishes to you on your birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker? Of course, you have a great deal of first-hand knowledge of this issue. Although I know that you are not able to participate in the debate, I am sure you are sitting there thinking fondly of your own experiences of being a pregnant Member of Parliament and your wonderful son, who I have had the pleasure of meeting on a number of occasions.

It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon., and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). She characterised this as a joint enterprise. I am not sure whether it is the sort of joint enterprise that we have talked about in the Chamber in a legal sense, because that is a crime in which more than one person is involved, but I understand the point she makes, because this has to be a joint enterprise if it is going to be successful. I sense from the good will we have heard today that that joint enterprise will be a very positive thing. I pay tribute to her as Mother of the House. She has done so much to set the tone on these issues over many years.

I also pay tribute to those who have rolled the pitch for this and made it easier for us to bring the debate forward. Professor Sarah Childs has been mentioned. Her work has been a foundation of much of the modernisation we are talking about. I would thank Mr Speaker as well, if he were here, because he has helped to set the tone.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is doing a sterling job of ensuring that this is a modern place for us all to work in. That is important for not only our staff, but Members. The Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, the Select Committee on Women and Equalities, which I have the pleasure of chairing, and others have been instrumental in slowly sowing the seeds of change.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Speaking as another member of the Speaker’s Commons Reference Group, I want to say how important this debate is. It is rooted in real and new evidence about Members’ experiences. By bringing the House into line with the policies of other workplaces, we will set the right tone and precedent for the future, particularly in this week, when we will be celebrating 100 years since women got the vote.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Through the Commons Reference Group, we are not only uncovering some important ways in which this place is changing, but identifying ways in which it needs to change. It is a great pleasure to work alongside her on that group.
Being a Member of Parliament is a unique position, a unique honour and a unique responsibility that requires complete commitment, but that cannot mean that only those without caring responsibilities can apply. Indeed, the experience we have as carers can make us much better Members of Parliament, and that is why I wholeheartedly support the motion.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on securing the debate.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is talking about this place, but I want to raise another issue. I chaired the Fawcett Society’s inquiry on the representation of women in local government, and it was shocking to discover that only 2% of local authorities have maternity leave policies, and that a number of women councillors who had babies were then sacked from their jobs as cabinet members. Does she agree that while what we are debating is hugely important, all of us as politicians from political parties ought to engage with our colleagues in local government to secure the necessary changes there that will ensure the proper representation of women?

Mrs Miller: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right: we need more women at every level of our democratic process. I must say that I have a phenomenal team of women in my Basingstoke constituency. Nine of the 14 councillors are women, and that is even more astonishing given that a number of them are young women with very young children. Others should look at what is happening in councils such as mine to encourage more young women to come forward, and to prevent doing so being seen as incompatible with having a young family.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Miller: I will of course give way, but I will then make some progress.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Lady for securing this debate. The right hon. Lady makes an important point about local government. I gave birth 23 and 25 years ago, while I was a senior councillor in Hounslow. Although that was difficult, there are two fundamental differences between being in this place and being in local government. In local government, people are near to home, and the times they have to vote, and to be recorded as voting, are measured and occasional. This place is very different for both those reasons.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady used to be a member of my Committee, and I have worked with her and know her well. She makes a point to which I will return, because although the motion is really important, we need to think about other aspects of this place if we are to make it work for everybody, regardless of their caring responsibilities. I will now try to make a great deal of progress, Madam Deputy Speaker, so that you do not have to remind me that we are short of time.

I wholeheartedly support the motion in its own right, because a new addition to the family—a new baby or a newly adopted child—is a wonderful thing, but a huge change as well. When the rules and conventions of this place were established, women had no place here and men had little or no role in their children’s lives. The rules and conventions were not established on the basis of any research or facts, but reflected the way in which men lived their lives many years ago. Men’s lives have changed, and women’s lives have changed. Women can now become MPs and our lives have changed, but the demands of having a child have not changed. Allowing MPs to decide to take some time away from this place, without disenfranchising their electorate in the process, is an important step in its own right, and one that I fully support.

The proposal is, however, just one small step. I speak as the mum of three kids. When I entered the House, my youngest was three, and for me the transition was very easy. I had worked full time before, and I had the best childcare in the world—grandparents, who were there to look after my children—but not every Member of Parliament has that built in and not every Member of Parliament is as lucky as I was. That is why I believe this is just one small step.

This is one small step in a change to Parliament’s workplace culture that is long overdue. We recognise the importance of workplace culture for the people we represent, whether it is the culture at the BBC that has allowed women to be underpaid, or the culture in Hollywood and the entertainment industry that has allowed the likes of Harvey Weinstein to thrive and to abuse the people around them. When we scrutinise the effectiveness of laws, we often conclude that culture needs to change so that those laws work better. We have heard about the example of shared parental leave, which was introduced by the coalition Government, and about the right to request flexible working. They are all things that people want, but when we do the research, we find that the uptake is low, because the culture in the workplace has not changed to reflect changes in the law.

We have a duty not only to pass laws, but to influence culture. That is why it is so important that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is bringing forward a new disciplinary process on sexual harassment, and it is why we also need to show that culture change in relation to families is also important. This should apply not only to MPs with new children, but to MPs with a wide range of caring responsibilities, such as for older children, for older family members—I have such responsibilities—or, indeed, for disabled family members.

As we consider the motion—I hope we will agree it—I hope not only that we will take this small step, but that other steps will follow. I want to give the particular example of the importance of predictability in working life. Before I entered this place, I was a director of an advertising agency. It was a very difficult and challenging job, but I could do it, because I could determine how to make my working life work for me. It is very difficult to have such a level of predictability here, particularly in relation to votes. Following the motion, I advocate our looking at a voting hour to create more predictability in how this place works so that people with caring responsibilities can better work them around their overwhelmingly important responsibilities here.
To those who say that introducing baby leave is the thin end of the wedge, I have to say that they are right if that will mean that we can show compassion to a colleague who is fighting cancer, or to a colleague who has to attend the funeral of a close relative, rather than disenfranchising their constituents while they are being human beings. We need to make this change so that we can allow people to get the balance in their lives that, sadly, is so lacking at some points in the parliamentary calendar at the moment.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech and I absolutely support the motion. I agree with her in very much hoping that this is the thin end of the wedge, because on the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, we must do more to fix the pipeline problem here so that we encourage more women at a younger age to think about putting themselves forward to become Members of Parliament.

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention because, 100 years since the first woman sat in this place, it still feels for many of us as though we are operating in an 18th-century model of work, and that really needs to change.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I cannot be alone in being a man in this House whose partner has an extremely important job of her own. She sits as a supreme court judge in France, and that takes her away from home, so I have childcare responsibilities, too. Indeed, I have a one-year-old baby—funnily enough, she does not look after herself. When we are talking about equality, I absolutely understand the emphasis on women’s rights—of course I do—but this is actually a human right. It is about not men or women, but about anybody who has responsibility for caring for a child—or, indeed, for caring for an adult. If we are thinking about equality, we could be talking about someone with religious obligations that might keep them away for various reasons.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. It is important to recognise the way in which many family lives have changed over the years, and that was why it was important to frame the motion in terms of MPs or parents, not men and women. Any of us may have caring responsibilities; they are not now the sole preserve of one gender.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the extraordinary way in which the Whips department has evolved during my time in this place. When I remember some of my conversations with the Whips when I first arrived in 2005, I shudder a little, because they did not reflect my previous 20-year working life. As I look in particular at my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who is sitting on the Front Bench, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), both of whom are members of my Select Committee, I know that the Whips Office is in extraordinarily good hands.

We cannot leave this to chance. We need better rules to give people certainty about what they can expect. MPs have a duty to keep our democracy healthy. I do not believe that MPs can ever be treated as employees. Our role means that we will never really be subject to an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority contract; our contract is with the people whom we represent, and they demonstrate their views each time there is an election.

We can modernise the culture of this place—for our employees, of course, for Members today, and for those who will come after us—so that it reflects the 21st century, not the 18th century, and to make it an attractive place for a more diverse range of people who will want to become Members of Parliament. Today is one small step to allow new parents some time away from this place so that they can cope with the demands of a new family member. The change is long overdue, but following this debate, we will need to press forward further with modernisation, particularly around scheduling in this place. The lack of consistency and certainty has been raised with me, because that makes us less productive and less able to balance our family life.

I respectfully disagree with people who think this change is wrong. The health of our democracy depends on the strength of the House of Commons, and we are strengthened if we are truly representative of the communities that make up this United Kingdom. Introducing baby leave for Members of Parliament who need and want it is just one small step in opening up membership of this place to more people, and in ensuring that fewer people choose to leave before their time because their life as an MP is incompatible with the responsibility of being a parent. I hope that the motion gets the full agreement of the House today and, above all, that the Procedure Committee looks at the matter swiftly so that Members with imminent arrivals can look forward to their births without a question as to how they will deal with their Whips.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The debate has to finish just before 3 o’clock, so we will have a time limit of about eight minutes. Sorry, not “about”; the debate has to finish at about 3 o’clock, and the time limit is exactly eight minutes. I had in my mind the terror that I felt the day I told the Chief Whip that I was going to have a baby—something that had happened only once before in the Conservative party. It was causing palpitations again. I call Emma Reynolds.

1.13 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will keep to exactly eight minutes. I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for her contribution, which I found incredibly thoughtful; I agreed with every word she said. I pay particular, special tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), not only for bringing forward these proposals and doing so much work on the issue, but for all the work she has done since joining the House many years ago—I do not know how many, but she is the Mother of the House—to ensure greater gender equality in our country and our Parliament. We have made huge progress in the time that she has been an MP, thanks to her work, but as the motion demonstrates, we still have quite a way to go.
I want to recount what happened in 2017. My husband and I were expecting a baby in April, and we were hoping for a quiet year on the work front. We thought, “This is great. Theo”—well, he was “the bump” at the time—“will be around three at the next election,” because the Prime Minister seemed absolutely determined to stay in place and respect the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. I gave birth at 2 o’clock in the morning on Good Friday. As those hon. Members who have been there will know, it is a very physically demanding and tiring process. Four days later, I was lying on my bed at home in the morning, breastfeeding baby Theo, when my mother used a few expletives while looking at her phone. I asked, “What’s happened?” She said, “The Prime Minister has called an election.” I said, “No, that can’t be right. She was adamant that she wasn’t going to do that.” Some hon. Members had noticed that there was no writing on the podium, but I had not even known that she was making a statement.

My husband came in, and my mum said, “Richard, there’s going to be an election.” He said, “Emma, you have to check this straight away. I don’t believe it.” We were in a state of disbelief for quite some hours, days and weeks. We wondered how on earth we were going to cope with a newborn—this brand new little person we had in our lives, who we were already struggling to cope with during the night, because he was up most of it. We had to do that and organise an election campaign. It was a busy time. I thank the vast majority of my constituents, who were so supportive. I lost count of the number of messages and cards, and the number of people who, when we were on the doorstep, asked how I was, and how baby Theo was getting on.

A small handful of people said to me that once the election was called, they assumed that I would not stand again. I politely said to them, “Would you ask the same question if my husband was the MP?” No answer came back, because it was obvious: of course they would not.

New mums and new dads in this place should have the same rights that we have legislated to give men and women across our country. In a way, I cannot believe that we are dragging our feet on this, given that we have legislated for such marked improvements in the past few years.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I have really enjoyed listening to the hon. Lady’s experiences. I have just joined the Procedure Committee, and attended it yesterday for the first time. It is on our agenda to have an investigation and report on this very important issue. I thought I would put that on record.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, and I urge him to do that quickly, because as we have discussed, various colleagues have a very tight deadline, which the Committee should work to.

I want to put on record my thanks to my husband’s employer. As Members of this House will know, new dads have a right to shared parental leave, but they have to give several weeks’ notice of their intention to take it. It happens to be eight weeks’ notice, which is about the same time as an election campaign. Thankfully, his employer agreed to bring his parental leave forward. I am not sure that we would have been able to cope if he had been working full time while I was running the campaign, so I am grateful to his employer for doing that. I encourage new dads to take up this right, because it is a crying shame, as I said in an intervention, that only 5% do.

We got through the election campaign. A week after I gave birth, Richard Angell, whom some hon. Members will know, brought a whole group of people to come and help. The local paper sent a snapper, and one of the Sunday papers also sent a photographer. They came to my office. I had given birth literally a week before. Baby Theo was there; he peed everywhere. One of my party members said, “Yeah, that’s called the hosepipe trick,” and I said, “Oh right, I hadn’t heard of that before,” but now I am experienced in it. I was having this meeting to gee up my members. The photographers got a photo of me and baby Theo. I was feeling pretty exhausted, but they insisted on joining me on the campaign trail. Little did they know that I did not really want to go on the campaign trail, because I was still pretty tired. If I did it again, I would now have the experience to say, “No, I came to do the members’ meeting and gee everybody up, and I’m going home,” but I did not, and I went out campaigning seven days after giving birth—and I suffered for it physically. Then I had a rest.

We had all these deadlines; people will know that even before the short campaign—and this was such a short campaign—there are deadlines for letters, leaflets and as much stuff as we can get out.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What my hon. Friend has said makes me feel so uncomfortable, because it is actually illegal to work for two weeks after giving birth. The situation that she describes is intolerable. We really have to do something about this.

Emma Reynolds: I admit that I broke the law, and I should not have. The motion before us today would not have helped me, and other Members present were in the same situation—three of us, in fact, were new mums when the election was called. I suspect that nothing can be done when that happens. We were very unlucky with the timing, but something can be done afterwards, which is what I will come to next.

We had the election and I managed to retain my seat, but in the weeks after polling day, I was required to come in to swear in—otherwise, I would not be paid—and to vote on the Queen’s Speech. I was also asked to come in to vote on the Select Committee Chairs and I really wanted to, because they usually endure for five years—let us see what happens—but I did not have a say on that. In fact, I emailed Mr Speaker, who was very sympathetic, but there was not much he could do, because none of these provisions are in place.

As so many hon. Members have said in this debate, it is only right that our constituents are represented in this place. We should have the choice as to whether to appoint a colleague to vote on our behalf. I know that some colleagues are uncomfortable with that, because they would want to be the ones voting. That is why it should be a choice and an option, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham has taken that on board. If someone becomes a new mum or dad, they should be able to appoint a proxy for the time that they are on leave.

I am hugely grateful to the Whips Offices, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). He has been so brilliantly flexible, not
only after the election, when I had given birth, but when I was pregnant. I say this to colleagues: bobbing in this place is very tiring when you are really big. It was a great pleasure to come back in January and be able to bob without the bump. In all seriousness, a huge amount of progress has been made in the Whips Offices. I have spoken to many colleagues who had babies 10 or 20 years ago—as you did, Madam Deputy Speaker, when you did not really have the kind of leave that we have been granted. However, as my right hon. and learned Friend said, we should not have to ask for it. This should be our right and in other workplaces, people do not have to ask; they have the right to it. We are dragging our feet.

I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) said earlier about the website. TheyWorkForYou. I emailed them just before going on maternity leave to see whether the website would reflect that I would be on leave. They fobbed me off, frankly, saying that they would have a look at it. We pestered them but nothing came back. They should consider qualifying it on their website, because many of us have been criticised by national newspapers, and that is not right. It is reputationally damaging. Whether they publish an apology later on or not, it is damaging to someone’s reputation and we should not be put in that position.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to all the right hon. and hon. Members who have gone before me, and I want to single out a few people, as well as you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, Yvette Cooper. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who had two babies while she was in the shadow Cabinet.

Juggling family life and being an MP is really tough, but I love both of them. I say to young women out there: do not be deterred. Come in and do it.

1.23 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome this debate, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) secured. She famously fought a by-election back in 1982 while expecting a child and served as one of the first MPs in this House with young children—a real example to us all. I congratulate her on her work to secure this debate and on her marvellous speech.

We have made steady, but glacially slow, progress towards becoming a child-friendly workplace. We now have an on-site nursery—I was working in that building when it was created—on a site where a bar once existed. It is a much improved replacement. However, as we have heard in many eloquent speeches in this debate, so many further, modernising reforms are desperately needed. We need more baby-friendly spaces, more facilities for buggies, nappy bins, and places for women to breastfeed and express. We also need to recognise not only that Members may also be mums and dads, with all the joys and pressures that that entails, but the opportunity that this presents for the diversity of this Chamber and for us to set an example to the rest of the country.

It is fitting to discuss this issue today because, as some Members will know, it is Time to Talk Day. Since the last Time to Talk Day, I have had a baby, and as a new mum, I have been acutely aware of the need for pregnant women and new mums to keep a close watch on their mental health. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), my baby was—if not a few days old—just four weeks old when the election was called. I had had a C-section, and as she said, it was an incredibly stressful period.

During pregnancy and the year after birth, many women will experience common mental health problems, including anxiety disorders and depression, and dads will too. Further, the risk of developing a severe mental health condition, such as postpartum psychosis, schizophrenia, severe depression or bipolar disorder, increases after childbirth. For women, it is the time that we are most likely to experience those conditions.

One trigger for mental ill health is stress and anxiety in the workplace. That is especially true when a mum or dad returns to work after the birth of their child. These issues affect parents not just inside, but outside this House, and that is why this debate is so important. Like many new parents here, I face two very strong priorities: the desire to be there for my child and the desire to do everything I can to speak up and stand up for my constituents, with the privilege and responsibility that I have as the Member of Parliament for Liverpool, Wavertree.

Although I could keep on top of constituency casework from my home in Liverpool, last June I had to leave my constituency and travel the 200-plus miles down to London, to Parliament. First, I had to swear in, and although I am also very grateful to the Whips, I was then asked to vote on a couple of occasions—back in June, when my baby was just three months old, and again in September, when there were some important votes when she was five months old. In September, I was in the Tea Room with my baby until after 10 o’clock at night. I can see Members bobbing their heads—arguably, that was not the right place for her at that time of night. As a breastfeeding mum, on all those occasions my baby came into the House with me.

As colleagues will know, looking after a tiny human is a massive responsibility. I share with the House that I was a slummy mummy. As any parent out there with a newborn will know, it is a challenge on some days just to take a shower—let alone to be able to get out of the house, get to the station, change the baby on a Pendolino train moving at 125 miles an hour, apologise to passengers for the projectile vomit and the crying, get on a tube, often using the escalators and stairs because there is no lift, and to ensure that no piece of important kit is forgotten for an important overnight trip. For some babies, that will be the first time they are outside the house, get to the station, change the baby on a Pendolino train moving at 125 miles an hour, apologise to passengers for the projectile vomit and the crying, get on a tube, often using the escalators and stairs because there is no lift, and to ensure that no piece of important kit is forgotten for an important overnight trip. For some babies, that will be the first time they are outside the houses and places that they are used to. It can be quite traumatic for them.

Proxy voting, the specific measure in today’s votable motion, is a simple means to count a Member’s vote without them having to physically pass through the Division Lobby. It will mean that the representative role of any MP can continue without disruption. This is an issue of fairness not only for new parents, but for our constituents. As with all the representations that we make in this House, our work on campaigns, and the contributions that we make for the country—on improving the first 1,001 days of a child’s life, on giving children...
the best start in life, on highlighting the importance of attachment, on addressing the woeful breastfeeding rates in this country, on promoting parenting, and on doing everything possible to reduce adverse childhood experiences—we need to lead by example and give the children of MPs the best start, too.

Some might say that this is a dangerous leap into modernity—unfortunately, I have heard people say that—but we should be grateful to the Clerk of the House for reminding us in his very helpful memorandum that in past centuries, proxy voting was known in Westminster. We have heard about what “Erskine May” does not say, but it records that until 1868, Lords who were not present could vote by proxy. Since then, no attempt has been made to suspend House of Lords Standing Order No. 60 to allow the revival of “the ancient practice of calling for proxies”.

In the House of Commons, proxies were allowed in the medieval Parliament. So this is not a leap in the dark, but the unearthing of a fine old parliamentary tradition.

To deny our constituents a voice because of the House’s inability to modernise is an affront to those who put us here. Enabling new parents to register a vote via a proxy would ensure that our constituents could still be heard. We know that the physical arrangements of our parliamentary democracy are about to undergo huge changes, but no matter how and where we assemble as a Parliament, our work continues and our democracy endures. I hope that as we contemplate those changes following yesterday’s votes on the refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster, we will focus on the ways in which we can become even more child-friendly and more welcoming.

Today we are discussing small but significant changes, and people in every workplace should do the same. In every factory, office or other place of work, there are practical ways of helping when parents return to work after having a baby or adopting a child. I think that through these small changes many stressful situations could be averted, and if we are serious about improving our nation’s mental health, they would be an important factor in that.

For more than 35 years my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham has fought for equality and fairness, both here at Westminster and in the country as a whole. I think that proxy voting would be another valuable way of honouring the continuing contribution of the Mother of our Parliament to our public life. I sincerely hope that the House will approve this measure, and that Mr Speaker will move towards adopting a system of proxy voting without delay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I must reduce the speaking time limit to seven minutes.

1.31 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Some years ago, Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I had to work out how to handle pregnancy in Parliament at similar times. It is lovely to see you in the Chair.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the brilliant speeches made by my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). Their speeches alone ought to persuade everyone that the motion should be not only passed, but dealt with very swiftly by the Procedure Committee. It is surely a no-brainer. It is embarrassing that, 100 years after women were given the vote, Parliament does not have the system for maternity and paternity leave that was described by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman).

If other organisations can do this, why can we not do it as well? Shops do it, factories do it, businesses do it, doctors’ surgeries do it, police forces do it, schools do it: every other organisation manages to find a way of doing it. Why on earth can we not do it, especially given that ours is the organisation that has supposedly told so many of those other organisations that they must do it? We tell them that they must have arrangements for leave, but somehow we cannot sort that out for ourselves.

I personally think that this country’s maternity and paternity arrangements are not strong enough. I think that there is not enough provision. I think that culture changes are still needed. I think that too many unnecessary obstacles are put in people’s way. I also think that maternity discrimination is a serious problem. The law is not enforced, and arguably is not strong enough, to ensure that women do not find themselves being made redundant, being demoted or losing responsibilities when they take maternity leave. Similarly, men feel that they cannot take paternity leave, for fear that any of those things will happen. How can we, as Members of Parliament, challenge errant employers who say, “It is too difficult,” or, “We are too special in our particular workplace: we cannot possibly provide for people having babies,” if we do not sort this out ourselves?

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who has pioneered so many of these debates and has led the way for so many of us to follow. It was certainly much easier for me to take maternity leave—both as an MP and as a Minister—because of not just the leadership but the personal support of my right hon. and learned Friend, and it is hugely important that she is still doing the same for each generation of women and, indeed, each generation of men. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the work that she has done on the Women and Equalities Committee to support and promote this reform. I agree with her, too, that there should be wider reforms, not just in Parliament but throughout the country. I know that other parties support that as well.

Having a baby is normal. It is so normal that it is why we are all here. Parliament ought to be able to cope with what is normal, and Parliament ought to show leadership by making it possible. Of course it will always be a challenge, and there will always be chaos. For me, much of that chaos involved travelling to and fro with small children, and not just with a baby. I was a dab hand at changing nappies on a fast-moving train, but the potty training was a little bit more challenging. We had a few sticky moments with a portable potty with a lid on it when I put it on a shelf on one of those fast-moving trains.

Having small children and being a Member of Parliament will always involve some complexities. It is an honour to be a Member of Parliament and to represent our constituents, but it ought to be made possible to manage
both, as all too often it is not. A former hon. Friend of ours, who has since left the House, was asked to come in for votes when her baby was very small. At that time, we were not even allowed to take babies through the voting Lobbies. We ended up in a mad “baby relay”: we took it in turns to vote and to carry the baby while she went to vote. That was great for us, because we had the chance to cuddle a tiny little baby, but the truth is that neither she nor the baby should have been here. They were here because it was a tight vote, and there was pressure on Members to come in.

As many Members have said, this should not depend on favours. It should not depend on special deals and arrangements. It should not depend on the Whips. It should just be a very sensible, practical arrangement. Given that we come up with practical arrangements for all sorts of other organisations throughout the country, it should not be beyond the wit of the House to come up with one that works here.

The truth is that for any working mum—and often for working parents—there is always a sense of guilt and conflicting responsibilities. MPs who are mothers feel guilt towards the newborn because they are trying to do their constituency casework at the same time, and a sense of guilt towards their constituents because they should actually be in Parliament or at a meeting. They have a sense of responsibility towards Parliament, towards constituents, towards the baby, towards the family, but also towards so many other women who might be finding it hard to take maternity leave. We feel that we have a responsibility to show that it is possible—that we do not have to pretend to be superwomen and to be able to do it all at once because otherwise it means that we are not doing our job properly. We want people in all walks of life to be able to combine parenthood and employment, because that is normal. It is what we do. We should end the muddling through and put the proper arrangements in place.

Finally, I ask Ministers to have another look at the arrangements for ministerial maternity leave. I first took ministerial maternity leave 16 years ago. We were muddling through then as well; we later attempted to introduce more formal arrangements, but they then disappeared. They need to be brought back, but they also need to be revised.

It is the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote. What better time could there be not just to get this sorted, but to get it sorted really, really fast? That would be our next step, not just towards equality for people in this House, but to enable us to continue to be confident pioneers for equality throughout the country.

1.38 pm

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a massive honour to follow all those who have spoken so far, and I feel that we are hon. Friends across the House today. I suppose that I should register not an interest, but a total disinterest in ever having another child, so this measure would not benefit me in the slightest. I could not be more disinterested.

I found the testimony of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) incredibly moving. It put me right back at that moment when I was 22 and a new mum, and I was terrified that I was going to break that little thing. I will not put you through it, Mr Deputy Speaker, but some of the things that happen to a woman’s body immediately after she has had a baby are terrifying, and you do not expect them. I thought my internal organs were falling out. [** Interruption.**] The thought that I would have had to get up and go to a meeting—

**Mr Deputy Speaker** (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that it is not me that is worried, but I am very worried about the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith)?

**Jess Phillips:** Forewarned is forearmed is what I think in these situations: “You’re not dying” is what I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), but we all thought that we were.

The idea that I would have had to get up at that moment, terrified, suffering real fear for the first time, and go to a constituency party members’ meeting is absolutely horrifying. The thought of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East doing that is absolutely terrifying to me—so massive, massive credit to all the women who have had babies while they were MPs.

Because I quite like a row, I want to head off at the pass some of the things I have heard in this place about why what is proposed in the motion cannot happen. I think we are pretty much all here to support it today, but I have heard quite a lot of mutterings—and they are mutterings, because they sound like this: “Mutter, mutter, mutter, amazing idea, mutter”—and I want to address them. Some of them have been from women in this House; I have heard squeamishness about asking for a right, because we as MPs are criticised for talking about ourselves and accused of being insular. We all know about the fake news on the internet when sites show a busy Chamber when we are supposedly talking about our salary and an empty Chamber when we are talking about something else—which are, I say just for the public outside, all a total lie. The idea that we should be asking for a right for ourselves is totally and utterly acceptable.

I am chair of the women’s parliamentary Labour party and I have had to talk to women and say that I will not feel afraid about asking for rights for the people in this building. When I worked at Women’s Aid, I fought for the rights of the women at Women’s Aid to better parental leave. No matter where I worked, I would be fighting for the women there to have better rights, and we should not be embarrassed about fighting for them here, either. So I want to put to bed the idea that this is somehow selfish. It is not; it is a right that we should be entitled to.

The other chuntering I have heard is about the proposals being the thin end of the wedge: “Where will this lead?” It will lead to being exactly like every other employer in the country. As the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said, the big end of the wedge is that we are kind and nice employers; the big end of the wedge is decency and humanity. I am all right with the proposals being the thin end of the wedge, but the reality in this situation is that we are asking for something for a very specific reason.

Some people say to me, “You can’t have other people voting for you!” as if we have the divine right of kings when we come into this place and our vote is handed to...
us by God and is so special that nobody else could say how we might feel about, say, fisheries industries. That is, frankly, ridiculous. The idea that people feel they are so special that nobody could ever cast their vote for them, because they have never followed the Whip and are always deciding exactly what they will vote for all by their little selves, I find highly unlikely. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) might be the only person who could say that.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that the thin end of the wedge is not a thin end of erosion of our democracy, but a thin end of how we balance work and family life when circumstances might be unpredictable? Two months ago my mother had a stroke. While she is a lot better now, I was in a position of having to put in place, with my sisters and brother, 24-hour care for someone we were used to having caring for us. While I know and understand the issues there will be with parents, for those in that position to have to struggle for the flexibility to manage that alongside being a Member of Parliament is something I would want to see us change, and have the courage to change.

Jess Phillips: I could not agree more. As someone who cared for my own mother when she was dying, I know how much pressure gets put on, and it is largely the women in society who are in the middle, and are caring for children and for dying or very sick relatives. As a nation, we have got to get better at dealing with that. Why not start here?

I went for lunch with a gentleman yesterday—my husband is listening; it was not him. That gentleman told me that he had intended to take the shared parental leave that other colleagues have spoken about. He said, “As soon as I had said, ‘Okay, I am going to take three months off,’ it started to creep in: what if my clients get divorced you if you were my husband.” I say in response, “Point of order: my wife just had a baby.” I thought, “Oh, really! My heart bleeds for you, here’s my tiny violin, because that is what we have all had to put up with forever.” I do feel total sympathy with what he was saying, because I have lived that life.

The truth of the matter is that we have got to make sure that when we make these changes, it is not only the women in this building who take this leave, and that the men in this building take it, too. Frankly, given some of the backtalk I have heard when I have talked about this, I think some of the men in this building should be ashamed of braging about being here at the moment when their babies were born, and of standing up and saying in Committees, “Point of order: my wife just had a baby.” I say in response, “Point of order: I would divorce you if you were my husband.” There is one place a man should be when their baby is born, and that is by the side of their partner.

This is not about the women in this place getting something better; it is about the parents getting something better. We have got to lead by example. I know, not just from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East but from the opposite side of the Chamber, that there are husbands in this building who are starting to take that leave, and we have got to stand as an example of that. So, basically, I say to the men in this House, “When this comes in, I am coming for you, to make sure that you take it.”

1.47 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for calling this important debate. It is important for me to be here, because I had a baby a year and a half ago as a sitting MP. I will not go into details about what happened to my insides, but I will talk a little about the impact of pregnancy and birth.

I will not go into the exact details, but I will say that I had a 40-hour long labour which resulted in an emergency C-section, after which I caught an infection and so did the baby. The Royal Free Hospital in my constituency, which is amazing, looked after us for nine days, but even in those nine days while I was in the hospital bed I had to handle emails and sign things off from my office simply because there was no one else to do it and I could not nominate someone to take care of crucial matters—and certain crucial matters did come up, which I will elaborate on in a minute.

I am not describing these details because I want sympathy; I am describing them because before I had a child I had never quite realised the physical impact pregnancy has on the body. I was quite old when my younger sister was born, so I had been around babies and children, but I still did not realise quite what would happen to my body going through a 40-hour ordeal and an emergency C-section. I could not move from the bed and had to ask everyone for help, which was definitely not easy, as I am used to doing things for myself.

I represent a marginal seat—the lady I took over from had won the seat by only 42 votes, and I had won by only just over 1,000 votes—and did not feel that I could neglect my constituents, so I came back to work very quickly. As a result, because my body had not recovered, I developed a serious case of mastitis. Anyone who has had that will know what it does to their body. When I went to the GP, they made it very clear that I had got it because I was overworked and exhausted and because I had gone back to work very early.

During that time, in my sleep-deprived state, I knew that I had to do something, so I tabled an early-day motion asking whether we could change the way the voting system worked. I was getting emails saying, “Why didn’t you turned up for this vote?” even during the six weeks that I had taken off following my emergency C-section. I was being asked why I had not voted in a certain way or why I had not turned up for a certain meeting. Anyone who knows the constituents of Hampstead and Kilburn will know that they look up their Member’s voting record to see whether they have turned up to vote or not. In tabling the early-day motion, I wanted to make it clear that we have to change the voting system, and this is the time to do it, now that more women Members of Parliament are having children than ever before.

I also want to point out how our position here in Parliament lags behind that of other countries in the world. In Sweden, Denmark and Slovenia, Members of Parliament may be granted leave of up to 12 months in the case of pregnancy, childbirth or adoption. The situation is the same in Estonia, Finland and Latvia. In Belgium, Portugal, Croatia and the Netherlands, there is no formal maternity leave, but a Member of the House of Representatives who is on maternity leave can be replaced by another Member from the same political group, so that they are not penalised for their absence.
The fact that our attitude to parental leave lags behind those countries is compounded by our attitude to our parliamentary voting system. Scotland, India, Ireland, Israel and the European Union—to name but a few—all have electronic voting, which is not only time efficient but accommodating for members.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. Does she agree that, by the time we are done with this, we should match if not better the best Parliaments in the world? Also, may I just say that, physically, having the second child is harder?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for that note of confidence. I absolutely agree with what she says: we have to do even better if we want to make Parliament a more welcoming place for female representatives and if we want to act in the way that my constituency Labour party did when I stood for election. One after another, its members stated categorically that they wanted more women in Parliament and wanted an all-women shortlist. The constituency had had a female MP for 23 years in the form of Glenda Jackson, and they wanted another one. That is what we should all be encouraging in the House of Commons.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. She mentioned Scotland, and I did not want to miss the opportunity to jump in. We have debated these matters before, and she mentioned electronic voting. In the Scottish Parliament, we have a seat for every Member. She will know that one of the arguments against proxy and electronic voting is that Members need to be here in the Chamber to listen to the debate. The irony is that we cannot fit even half the Members of this House into this Chamber. We all have modern technology, and we can all watch the debates at home, so does she agree that there is no reason not to introduce such voting methods?

Tulip Siddiq: Absolutely. The hon. Lady and I have had discussions about this matter, and we agree that Parliament needs to become more modern and that we need to encourage e-voting. Perhaps that will be next on the agenda.

As I have mentioned, I had a lot of support from my constituency Labour party when I ran to be an MP. As I was a young woman, they thought that there was a chance I would have children. Questions were raised about that, but the chairman—David Queen, who sadly died a few weeks ago—was a real feminist. He said, “What is the problem if we have MPs who have children? It is good for the constituency.” He said that politicians with children apparently got more votes, although I do not know if that is true.

I also want to take this opportunity to mention the support I have received in Parliament. The staff in the nursery here were really fantastic when I first took my child in, and I want to pay tribute to them. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who was in the Chamber earlier, is my neighbouring MP. Right at the beginning, when I had morning sickness, he was the first to ring and say that he was happy to cover any meetings that I needed him to cover, because his wife had gone through the same thing.

On a trip to Paris, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) carried my suitcase up and down the stairs at the Gare du Nord and St Pancras International because I physically could not lift it. On that same trip to Paris to explore how we tackle anti-Semitism, the former MP for Brentwood and Ongar, Eric Pickles, told me that he would be happy to be godfather to my child and asked whether I wanted to name my daughter Erica, after him. I declined his offer. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) gave me a wristband to monitor the number of times my baby kicked. I developed a real spirit with Members on the other side—including the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith)—who I would often talk to about what it was like for us to be young women with children who also wanted to be good MPs for their constituencies. The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker both noticed my ever-growing bump—when you are 4 foot 11, your bump really stands out—and told me that I did not need to bob up and down, and that I could just wave my Order Paper if I wanted to be selected to speak. That was a real privilege at the time; I wish I could still do it.

Perhaps the memory that stands out most is when I received an urgent call from my office right after I had had the baby. A constituent, Richard Ratcliffe, had called my office because his wife had been in Iran and she and their small child had been detained by the Iranian authorities. I had just had my baby, but obviously I had to meet him because there was no one I could delegate that responsibility to. When I spoke to Richard on the phone, he said, “Why don’t I pop over to your house?” I said, “That’s a good idea. Let’s have a meeting.” He then said, “Is there any chance that the leader of the Labour party could meet me as well?” I rang my right hon. Friend. The Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and told him, “I’ve just had a baby, but I have a really urgent case. Is there anything we can do about this? He will have to meet me at my flat because I am breastfeeding.” My right hon. Friend said, “Why don’t I come over to your flat and we’ll all have the meeting there?”

So I had the meeting—with a tiny baby in my arms—with Richard Ratcliffe, whose wife had just been detained in Iran, and with the leader of the Labour party in the room. While I breastfed the baby, we discussed the Iranian authorities and the revolutionary guards, and talked about how we could get my constituent back into the country. At one point, my baby was very unsettled and I had to take some important notes, so I said to my right hon. Friend, “Could you hold the baby for a bit while I write these notes?” The baby had been quite unsettled, but for some reason, as soon as I handed her to him, she settled down and went to sleep. Perhaps there might be a kinder, gentler cuddling, which she preferred; I do not know what it was.

That was a defining moment for me and my motherhood. Both the men in that room demonstrated a serious comradely spirit to me. They took the time to come to my house because I did not feel that I could leave it, and they did not bat an eyelid while I breastfed. That is the kind of ethos that we need to bring into this House, to show people that a first-time MP who has an urgent case involving a woman being detained in Iran can still fulfil her duties. There are ways to make provisions. If it can be done in my flat in north London, it can be done in
this place. I sit on the Women and Equalities Committee. We scrutinise legislation on other people’s maternity and paternity leave. If we cannot lead by example, we should not be sitting here. I commend the motion to the House.

1.57 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am not sure how to follow that entertaining speech from the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). It is an honour to take part in this debate. I pay tribute to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing it. For me, this is what we at home like to call a wee treat. About 20 years ago, I interviewed the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who had just become a member of the new Labour Government. I asked her how she planned to change the working landscape for families in this country. I had just finished my maternity leave at the BBC, and I have to say that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is right: even back in those dark distant days of the past, the BBC was still able to put out news bulletins even though I was no longer there. Employers will find a way.

The working landscape for families has changed remarkably since 1997. Children who were born then and who are now becoming parents can benefit from a whole raft of legislation that makes it easier for them to be with their partner and their child and to bond as a family immediately after the child is born—except of course if they are a Member of Parliament. It seems ridiculous that we in this place should be so far behind the very people that we are here to represent and to help. I have to say that, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I have no intention of having another child. I have found this debate moving and entertaining at times, but it is also been frankly horrifying, and if I was in any doubt before, I am now certain that I will be not be having another.

The gender balance in this House has changed completely and, as we have heard, there are now 200 women MPs. Many of them are young enough to be starting or expanding their family, and many of our male colleagues are doing the same. For the many of us who have constituencies many hundreds of miles away, we must bear in mind that that will not mean being at home for an hour or two late at night or travelling by high-speed train with a small child, although that must be difficult; it will mean being away for a week at a time and being separated from a child at the most important time of their life. We cannot be there to help our partners through the sort of ordeals that we have heard about today, which some of the younger male Members have already been through. We should not be asking parents to choose between voting and providing that support when an alternative is already there. In fact, as we have heard, it was there in the 19th century. It is there every time we go to the ballot box in the form of a proxy vote—someone can go to exercise our democratic right for us—and we should not exclude ourselves from that possibility.

All the changes that have come about in the past 20 to 30 years—the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999, the Work and Families Act 2006, the Children and Families Act 2014, the Equality Act 2010—had the aim of creating a level playing field, so that young women are not judged when going for a job on whether they might be going on maternity leave, and young men, who would not present the same problem, can also take baby leave. However, we do not seem to have taken it into account that local parties might face the same dilemma when selecting candidates for this House. If local party members choose the young women, who is perhaps married and about to start a family, they will lose her from the House. If they choose the young man, they may think that they would not. We are making it difficult for ourselves to pursue the stated goal of making this place more representative of the country.

We need more young women and young men. We need more people from every section of society. By making a simple change, we can make it easier to encourage young people who are about to start families to think that becoming an MP might just be possible and that they will be able to continue to represent the people whom they want to represent. They will be able to say, “When I have my child, I can have someone else vote for me,” or, “When my partner has a child or when we adopt a child, someone else can vote for me.” It is the simplest thing, and yet we have not done it.

If we are to be truly representative, we have to represent all our constituents, but we are falling short of that. We have the opportunity to put that last piece of the jigsaw in place and make it possible to vote by proxy. It seems ridiculous that that could be done in the 19th century and that, in the 21st century, we are even asking the question.

2.3 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on securing this important debate, and I thank other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I also thank Mr Speaker, who I understand has made quite good progress over the past few years on this matter.

As a new Member, I had no idea that the day nursery used to be a wine bar, so the position of the nursery seems perfectly normal to me, which is good progress in itself. I declare an interest as the father of eight-week-old Ophelia and husband to my wife, Lucy. Ophelia was itself. I declare an interest as the father of eight-week-old Ophelia and husband to my wife, Lucy. Ophelia was able to join me here for the first time to vote against the Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Although there are those who have concerns about Members taking babies through a voting Lobby, I pay tribute to the Clerks, who astutely did not count Ophelia’s vote when I walked through—quite rightly so, given that I have no idea of her views on the Government’s Brexit strategy.

I support this important motion. When I went on paternity leave—a little earlier than expected—in the run-up to Christmas, as a Back-Bench MP, I was able to clear my diary fairly easily, and my constituents were supportive, but of course I needed to be here to vote, and there were some important matters that I wanted to vote on. We should consider the use of proxy voting. I see that the Clerks use iPads when we vote, so—dare I say it—perhaps we could use an app. If we could vote without having to nod through the Lobby, that would
be welcome progress. In those early days, as my hon. Friends have said, my duty as a husband and a father was to be at home to help in any way that I can, but I had to leave for many hours to come and vote here, so it would have been helpful if I had been able to vote from home or via a proxy. Formalising the process would also be helpful, because while the Whips were accommodating, the presumption was that I would be here for all votes apart from those that I had negotiated not to attend. I would rather that was the other way around. When there are crunch votes, such as the Brexit ones, when I am sure that Ophelia would have said that I should be here if she could, I would come to vote, but the presumption needs switching.

It is important that we set the tone in this place. We should be doing the same thing that we have legislated for in the country, which seems perfectly sensible, but we also need to set the tone. Parenting is not a gender issue—at least it should not be—and I am of the firm view that a family friendly and gender-balanced economy not just is the right thing to seek, but would be good for economic growth and wellbeing.

The House may not be surprised to hear that I think that my wife is a remarkable and talented woman—

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): She is very fortunate.

Darren Jones: Thank you. I say that about my wife not least because during the snap election, when we were two months pregnant, I made it clear that I stood no chance of winning and that I would be able to apply for shared parental leave in my previous job as a lawyer. To make things worse, having actually won the election when I said that I was not going to—I am honoured to be here, of course—the local BBC news team had noticed a slight bump and announced our pregnancy to 1.3 million people in the region without checking first. When we received all these text messages saying, “Congratulations!” we thought that they were about the election, but we suddenly realised that they were about Ophelia. We had not yet had the three-month scan, so we wondered how on earth everybody knew. My wife therefore had a bit of a bumpy road on the way to becoming a mum involved with a parliamentarian.

My wife is also my constituent, and she has said that it is okay for me to share her experiences over the past year, which have been quite distressing. It has been quite difficult for me to support her. She was the director of public policy at an energy company called Open Energi, which receives Government funding, and doing very well in that senior role. After the announcement of her pregnancy, she was told that her role was no longer needed and that she was being made redundant. Having worked so hard to achieve what she had, that was very distressing for her, but she is a formidable woman, so she decided to take her employer to a tribunal.

As a litigant in person, while pregnant, she cross-examined her former employers in front of a judge, who said that since the Supreme Court had decided that fees were illegal for employment tribunals, his time was increasingly being taken up by “these type” of cases. Can Members imagine the environment and the atmosphere? As one of only two women among 10 people in the tribunal room—there is no gender balance in employment tribunal hearings or sexual discrimination cases—the experience was clearly distressing, and I have now taken that matter with the president of the employment tribunals. My wife sadly lost that case, so perhaps we need a debate about the application of burden of proof rules in this country, because it is down to women to establish a burden of proof that discrimination could have taken place, but employers can bring forward witnesses and documents to show that it did not take place—at the time, it was said that documents did not exist—and that makes it difficult for women to bring such claims.

As a father and a husband, it is perfectly sensible for me to want to lean in. It is normal for dads to want to lean in. I want my wife to achieve her aspirations as much as possible, and we want to give our children the best upbringing together. I support the motion not just because Parliament should be in line with what is happening in the rest of the country, but because it gives us the opportunity to set the tone for what we expect in a modern Britain. We should look at reforms for companies that receive Government money and at the judiciary—perhaps at even having a gender balance—and then we could achieve change in the wider economy, too. I commend the motion to the House and look forward to supporting in any way that I can.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): If you do not mind my saying so, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am glad to see you in the Chair for this debate. I guess that might be bittersweet on some levels, but it reminds us very strongly that there are some fantastic parents here in Parliament. There are those of us who have grappled with the experience of being the custodian of a child and being a parent. In all honesty, I have met few finer examples of such people than those I work alongside here in Westminster, and we have already heard some of those stories today.

I will not rehearse the points that have already been made, but I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this debate. We have been discussing this issue for some time, and it is one small change that might make life a little easier in what is an incredibly hard and difficult job.

I do not believe that we should be exempt, or that we should not acknowledge the freedoms and flexibilities of a job for which we are well paid and which we love. It should be hard and it should cost us something, but if we can make small, incremental improvements that improve the lives of people here, not only us but the whole of our society will benefit.

Last night we discussed the renewal of Parliament, and today we are discussing our own arrangements. It can perhaps seem a little indulgent for parliamentarians to spend their time talking about themselves, but we are the only ones who can have this conversation. We are the ones who determine our working practices here, and rightly so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) referred to the famous internet meme in which MPs are packed into the Chamber to talk about their own conditions, but absolutely absent when a
serious issue comes along, and she rightly pointed out that the meme is untrue. It would be nice to see people using the image of us talking about our conditions today. It is not a criticism to say that the attendance today is relatively sparse and that everyone is taking one position. I have spoken to many young fathers who have told me that they really want this change.

**Mrs Miller:** The hon. Gentleman, who is a colleague on the Women and Equalities Committee, says that we are voicing one view. He is right, but surely if anyone had a differing view, they would be here.

**Mr Shuker:** I could not agree more, which is why I feel confident that the motion will be approved. We should take confidence from that and encourage the Procedure Committee to consider the matter swiftly. I know that the Committee has already done some preliminary work on how such a system could work.

The model of care for a child in the first year of life is split between two parents, and that sets the pattern for child rearing all the way through the child’s life. All the studies seem to show that. If we want people to live up to the expectation of being present for their children, we should try to reflect that in our practice, too.

I have a four-year-old daughter, and I have always juggled life in Parliament with making the most of the flexibility that is offered on votes so that I can try to be present in her life. We all make it work, whatever our way of life, whether it means using some time on a Monday, getting back for the school run on a Thursday, or shifting days around at the weekend. We might take a day out in the middle of the week, but turn up for the votes later.

I have never had a formal conversation with my Whips Office about the implications of my having a child. I have never sat down and said, “Here are my working patterns.” Until now, I have never really broadcast what that looks like, and that is because of two fears, which probably play on the minds of young fathers as well as of young mothers.

The first fear is whether I might be open to criticism for not being hard at work. When I added up my time over my first year in Parliament, excluding the commuting, I was working a 70 or 80-hour week. That has eased off as I have got better at the job, but that fear should not be a legitimate concern. There is no shortage of work, and we are all doing it—it is fairly obvious when we are not.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I apologise for not being here for the full debate and for intervening now. I thank the hon. Gentleman for enabling me to spend a lot more time with my children after he won Luton South in 2010, which left me with another five years before I got into Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Our constituents should expect us to work very hard but, at the same time, we have to put processes in place so that things are not unnecessarily difficult, as is the case at the moment. We have some ridiculous processes that make things unnecessarily difficult, whereas the rest of the country has moved on.

**Mr Shuker:** The hon. Gentleman was generous to me in 2010, and he is generous to me now.

The second reason why I have never had a formal conversation with the Whips is because of the worry that this might look like a lack of professionalism or a lack of hunger. It is true that, having made the choice to support my family, it is much harder to have sharp elbows and to force my way to the front. I have been fortunate in being able to structure my work time so that I can be present for my daughter, but most people’s experience of having children while being in this place is of being completely frazzled all the time, and of trying to find a way to make it work.

Very sadly, my relationship with my daughter’s mum broke down during this Parliament. I take full responsibility for that but, equally, we need to be honest about the working practices of this place and their implications. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) told me that among my intake, a quarter of marriages broke down in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament. We have to be honest about the implications of this place and its effects.

There are real issues with the current informal arrangements. For example, it is not just difficult but impossible to exercise shared parental leave, because we do not have a formal employment relationship. We can make reasonable accommodations in all sorts of ways for Members with other issues. I do not believe we should dial down our parenthood to be representatives in this place; I think we should amplify it. By talking about it and normalising it, we might be able to get to a fairer society in which we close the gender pay gap, in which women’s roles in society are properly recognised and in which we approach all sorts of other issues through the lens of saying that normal life happens and it is an anomaly that we exist in this way.

Finally, there are currently procedures whereby we informally work with our Whips Offices to enable, in my case, two weeks off after the birth of my daughter, or longer periods, given the physical constraints, for many women who have had children. Again, however, there is pressure to come in, to be present and to vote.

From the other side, our pairing arrangements start from the basis that we know that certain Members will just not be around for long periods of time. That has a direct effect on those of us who need to pair so that work can proceed. For example, a Select Committee visit might not go ahead because we have already paired out what we can to cover illness or childcare. This is not a brag, but I have never requested to be let off the Whip for personal circumstances. I have never missed a vote because I have been ill—I have certainly been ill, but I have been present to vote—and I do not think people abuse the system, but there are restrictions.

Making these arrangements would not take power away from or give power to the Whips Offices. Whatever our standpoint on what would be a good outcome, this change would professionalise the House and make it much easier to plan for such eventualities. As a member of the parliamentary Labour party, I foresee no problems or restrictions in my party’s standing orders if I were to sign over my proxy vote to the Chief Whip so that I could take paternity leave or baby care leave. I am comfortable with that. There are ways around this situation, and it should not be something that is hung on a straw man.
Overall, this change is required, and it will have a profound impact on the way we work. It is the thin end of the wedge, although we should be clear that today we are just talking about the principle. We need to become better at looking after ourselves and looking after each other, because we do not want to cause unnecessary strain.

This job should be hard. Public leadership and public sacrifice should be just that—they should be sacrificial—but putting in place artificial barriers not only holds back women in this place, but holds back men, too.

2.19 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I was a co-signatory of the motion, but by a quirk of parliamentary procedure the fact I am leading in the debate for the Scottish National party means my name had to come off. I pay a huge tribute to the right hon. and learned Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who received an email to her read:

"Dear Alison

I am in favour of many of the SNP’s policies but am a little worried to find that you are mother of a (very) young family.

I can see how this could work with a seat at Holyrood but Westminster membership must pose a harder challenge.

It would help to know your solution before polling day."

I emphasise the words “your solution”. It is incredible that anybody would write to a potential candidate and see the fact that they have children as a problem. An excellent “Channel 4 News” programme recently had the rapper Professor Green on it, and he spoke about why we need more people in politics who have been the subject of Government policy and are from different backgrounds and have different experiences.

My hon. Friend’s response to the email was as follows:

“Thank you very much for your email. I apologise for the delay in replying, but I wanted to give you a more considered response to your enquiry and give you some back ground as to why I’m standing.

I am certainly not alone among male and female candidates across the country in this election in being lucky enough to have a family; indeed the male Labour incumbent in this seat also has a young family.

The outgoing House of Commons was 22% female, and the average age of an MP was 50. More than 400 MPs, 62% of the total, are white men aged over 40. I think that Westminster ought to be a good deal more representative of the people it serves, and that can’t be achieved without more women.

Inequality affects policy and it affects governance. I firmly believe that, with its poor gender balance, Westminster has made deficient policies in areas which affect families such as cuts in areas of child and maternity benefits. By contrast, with a slightly better gender balance Holyrood has taken on a great deal of issues in its remit which disproportionately affect women, such as free personal care, expansion of nursery education, and making law the right to breastfeed in public."

She then went on to talk about how she had been a councillor over the previous five years and the challenges she had faced. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) was also a councillor in Aberdeen when she had small children. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central finishes her email by saying:

“I will cross whatever other bridges require to be crossed after the votes are cast and counted on the 7th of May.”

That is an excellent response.

Luciana Berger: I welcome the strong contribution the hon. Lady is making. She makes a point about the opposition candidates may face at the time of an election if they are a new parent, and I reflect on the abuse I got as a candidate from someone from a different political party who stood against me. He took to Twitter to criticise me for not attending an evening debate during that election period, accusing me of being timid for my refusal to attend. I told him that I had not refused to do any debates, but that with a newborn baby evening events are near impossible, and that I would gladly take him on any day. He responded by saying that he did not realise we were still in the 1950s, when only a woman could look after a child, and that he thought the Labour party believed in shared paternity. Let me take this opportunity to tell him strongly that the Labour party most certainly believes in shared paternity and champions it. My final response was to remind him that we had not been expecting a general election; that he did not know my personal circumstances; and that, as far as I was aware, men still could not breastfeed. I also suggested...
he might want to stop digging, but I left it at that. The point I am seeking to share with the House in telling that little anecdote is that the issue we are discussing today pertains to what happens in this House, but the point the hon. Lady is making about what happens at election time and how candidates treat other candidates, particularly on this issue, is still relevant. It shows that in 2018 we still have an issue to address.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Lady for that and completely agree with the point she makes. This vote on this issue is not just about the technicality of how we cast our votes, although that is very important. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned the thin end of the wedge and I agree with what she said on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has highlighted to me the issue of proximity and how he sometimes faces significant challenges with weather and geography. This is also about the discourse and narrative we have in politics with each other, and that the press have with us. Members have spoken about TheyWorkForYou and the digital environment, how our votes are recorded, and how all the systems and processes around politics and how we do it need to be more transparent and reflective. If we have a system whereby the vote is recorded for our constituency, it will be much, much more positive.

I wish briefly to pay tribute to my MSP colleagues, Angela Constance and Fiona Hyslop, both of whom are Cabinet Secretaries in a gender-balanced Cabinet and both of whom have had children while in office, as Ministers and as MSPs. They have paved the way and inspired me to stand. The Scottish Parliament made clear from the outset its commitment to inclusive and family-friendly workplace practices. As I have said, there is a seat for everyone; voting takes but a few seconds; and in its planning phase best practices from Parliaments across Europe were drawn up to ensure that in establishing the new legislature we could learn from some of the mistakes and successes from Parliaments across the world. We have a crèche in the Scottish Parliament, and not the stricter nursery system that is in place here. I pay tribute to the work the Speaker has done on that, but my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) has highlighted to me some of the challenges he has faced. His wife has had a child very recently and he has faced challenges in bringing children to this place, as the family room is sometimes misused by other Members or is used for meetings. He has had a great deal of support on that, but we need to look at such aspects of this as well. The Corporate Body in the Scottish Parliament has set out many inclusive practices, which include how business is done—finishing at five o’clock.

I do not want to talk too much about the place. Instead, I wish to focus on some of the other experiences here. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North talks about how she travels to Westminster by plane. Most airlines do not let women who are more than 36 weeks pregnant fly; for Flybe, it is 34 weeks. After having a baby, women cannot fly for at least a week and probably for more like a fortnight. As other hon. Members have mentioned, a woman who has had a C-section may not be able to fly for six weeks. So what happens if my hon. Friend has another baby? She has said she had no intentions of having any further children, so although we might not have put women off standing for election, we might have perhaps put them off having children, although I remain undeterred—I declare an interest as someone who aspires to be a parent. My hon. Friend says that being away from Westminster purely because she cannot travel here would be very unfair to her constituents and mean they would be unrepresented. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts said his wife was lucky to have their son during a recess, and that he had fantastic staff who assisted and ensured that everything was covered in the constituency, but that these matters needed to be formalised.

It seems incredible that 100 years after women got the vote we are debating the fact that they cannot take part fully on behalf of their constituents and in debates. We know that parliamentary work is not just about walking through the Lobbies and voting; it is about being in the constituency. Having an open and accessible Parliament, in whatever part of the UK, will ensure that people, from whatever walk of life, but particularly women, parents and aspiring parents, feel able to take part in democracy by standing for election, and it will make the life of those women, particularly those parliamentarians due to have children very soon, significantly easier. I hope that the House and the public are listening carefully to the testimonies today.

2.30 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker), Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you in your place, I say to my hon. Friend: that is what a feminist looks like. I also thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for co-sponsoring this debate, along with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). My right hon. and learned Friend was a formidable role model when she was pregnant—with Harry, I think—and stood for election. It is fitting that, as Mother of the House, she should bring forward this debate. It is right for Members to debate this subject and for the Backbench Business Committee to have given time for it.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke is always raising important equalities issues on her Committee, and I am sure that she, together with other members of the Committee, including my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South, will monitor what the Procedure Committee comes up with. Hon. Members will remember that the former Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, when they took paternity, were actually celebrated, whereas my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), when they took maternity leave, suffered abuse. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) was a Member surrounded by gurgles and red boxes. They are all formidable campaigners.

The fact that women have suffered abuse and accusations of being lazy is unacceptable. Constituents want Parliament to be representative of society, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) pointed out. There is no implication for women. So what happens if my hon. Friend has another baby? She has said she had no intentions of having any further children, so although
 proposal, in addition to the process of nodding through in certain circumstances, I say also to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) that Ophelia is lucky to have a hands-on dad.

I want to raise a few points that have been raised with me. It would not be compulsory to request this provision, but in my view there is a compelling case. Proxy voting will obviously have to be in line with party policy, and it does not equate to a free vote. The motion does not ask to widen proxy voting to other circumstances; only that it apply where a Member cannot attend a vote owing to caring responsibilities. All the motion does is enable women MPs to balance giving birth and looking after a baby with their work as an MP. All my hon. Friends who have given birth while MPs have carried on with their work in their constituencies and the House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and other hon. Members have pointed out, they know that in the 21st century they have to respond to emails—and they do so all the time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) says she does not want to have any more children, but I have to break it to her: she is going to be a mum forever, even when they are older and have children of their own.

In October 2017, the Clerk of the House resubmitted to the Procedure Committee a memorandum on proxy voting in the House of Commons. The Clerk identified Members with caring responsibilities—limited to mothers of infants—as a category of Member that might qualify for a proxy vote. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham is right that this should be considered by the appropriate Committee, and more work should be done, following the motion, together with the work of Professor Sarah Childs and her report, “The Good Parliament”. This is going to be more of an issue as women MPs take their place and we move towards parity.

Debating this issue, as we women take our rightful place in the House, is a lovely way to celebrate the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave 6 million women over the age of 30 the right to vote. My right hon. and learned Friend and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke, my children are now a bit older than infants—as a category of Member that might qualify for a proxy vote. My right hon, and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham is right that this should be considered by the appropriate Committee, and more work should be done, following the motion, together with the work of Professor Sarah Childs and her report, “The Good Parliament”. This is going to be more of an issue as women MPs take their place and we move towards parity.

Debating this issue, as we women take our rightful place in the House, is a lovely way to celebrate the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave 6 million women over the age of 30 the right to vote. My right hon. and learned Friend and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke, the co-sponsors, and all the Members who have spoken in this debate are wonderful role models. The parents of Ophelia, Azalea, Amélie, Theo and Ruby—all the wonderful little babies born to Members during my time in the House—have today, along with other Members, pushed the boundaries towards a good and more equal Parliament.

2.35 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): It is a huge pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We have heard some excellent, personal and informative speeches today—they certainly took me back to the horrors of those early days. I opened yesterday’s debate by describing it as a debate that should have taken place 40 years ago. I say again: this is a debate that should have taken place 40 years ago. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for the way she opened the debate. She has been a consistent champion of these issues throughout her career, and it is certainly fitting that she, as Mother of the House, should have secured this debate today. I also want to recognise the total commitment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, who has supported and promoted so many issues that affect women and equalities in this House. I absolutely agree with all Members here that it is essential that we address the issue of baby leave.

The motion before the House presents two issues for consideration. The first is the need for Members of Parliament to take baby leave. I think we can all agree that new parents must spend time with their babies and be enabled to do that. The second issue concerns how we reconcile that with the question of how and whether Members should be able to vote in the House of Commons during any such leave. I thank the all-party group on women in Parliament, until recently chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), now by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for its hard work in this place promoting equality for women, and also the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, chaired by Mr Speaker, which is tasked with following and implementing, where possible, the recommendations made in Professor Sarah Childs’ “The Good Parliament” report. I want to put on the record my thanks for the important work that those groups have been taking forward.

As the House might be aware, I have championed secure early attachment for many years and have worked with charities on this vital issue. I was for nine years chairman and trustee of OxPIP—the Oxford Parent Infant Project—a charity that helps parents struggling to form a secure bond with their babies, and when I became MP for South Northamptonshire, I set up NorPIP—the Northamptonshire Parent Infant Partnership—to provide help to all those new parents struggling across the county. I even persuaded my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) to become a founding trustee.

Now, through the national charity I set up, Pipuk, five further parent infant partnerships have been set up around the country. I am delighted that more families can seek support for the earliest and probably the most important relationship we ever have—because a baby’s lifelong emotional health is profoundly impacted by his or her earliest experiences in the 1,001 critical days of the perinatal period. I was proud to hear the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mention the cross-party 1001 Critical Days campaign that I set up in 2011, and which commands support from across the House.

The mental health White Paper published just before Christmas states that there is a need to commission research into interventions that support better attachment and improve the understanding among professionals of the importance of low-stress, healthy pregnancies and secure attachment.

Like the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, my children are now a bit older than babies—my eldest is 22—but the excellent speeches today did take me back to my early experiences, when I was not in this place. I had, I think, a 46-hour delivery.
I had just been promoted to senior executive at the bank for which I worked and was required to be back after 11 weeks. Following that, I also had a good dose of postnatal depression to deal with. So, I totally empathise with all those Members who have spoken about their experiences here. I am very committed to ensuring that those who come after us do not have to suffer those same problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) sat next to me during the first part of this debate. He was telling me that his brother, who works for the civil service, is looking forward to six months’ shared parental leave. My hon. Friend is himself expecting a baby with his wife; he is asking nicely for two weeks’ leave. To his brother I say: how's that?

Mrs Miller: I do not know whether my right hon. Friend remembers, but she was pregnant the first time we met. That is a few years ago now. I think we were on the selection trail together as well. Does she agree that, as important as it is, this debate is a first step in our efforts to make this place a much easier place not only to be a parent but to be somebody who cares for their broader family?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. There is a lot more to life than this place. That may seem extraordinary to all of us, but we are all human beings. We are parents, we are daughters and sons, and we have responsibilities. This debate is timely as we seek to support these matters in this House and continue to break down the barriers that could discourage women and men from pursuing a career in Parliament.

The motion suggests that the way to resolve the issue of baby leave is through the introduction of proxy voting. Although I absolutely support the need to make the House more accessible for new parents, it is also important that we recognise the possible consequences of any reforms. With that in mind, in November last year I wrote to the Chair of the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), copying in the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. I asked the Procedure Committee to consider the matter of baby leave and proxy voting, and for the Committee to set out its views to the House.

I also wrote to every member of the Cabinet, and I can tell Members that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister replied to me and agrees that this is an important matter. She wrote:

“Being a member of Parliament is a demanding job, and it is important that we give due consideration to the impact that this can have on work-life balance, childcare and baby leave.”

So she has made clear her support.

Following my letter to the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne said to me that, should the motion be agreed today, the Committee will undertake an inquiry into proxy voting. I welcome that, as it is clear from the debate that a number of important questions need to be considered, some of which I shall now set out briefly.

Giving Members of Parliament the right to baby leave raises a number of potential questions about the duties of Members and the rules by which they are regulated. As colleagues will know, Members of Parliament are appointed representatives of their constituencies and are not regulated by the same employment rules that apply to other members of the workforce. Introducing baby leave might lead some to suggest that MPs should be treated as employees, which could of course have wider implications.

The introduction of proxy voting would also mark a departure from conventional voting practices in the House in several ways. For example, when Members vote in a Division, it is expected that they do so having had the opportunity to attend the Chamber. I think we can all agree that television and 24-hour reporting—let alone Skype, Twitter and everything else—gives Members the opportunity to follow business from further afield, but any change will need to be carefully considered, and we would need to decide who would act as a proxy and how the system would be regulated.

It is important to note that Members of Parliament are elected by their constituencies as individuals, so it is implied upon their election that their votes cannot be transferred to another MP. The appointment of a proxy voter could be perceived as a reduction of personal accountability. Any changes will therefore need to ensure that personal accountability is maintained.

In addition to those questions, and as I said in my letter to the Procedure Committee, a number of alternative suggestions have been made, aimed at addressing the needs of new parents who are undertaking the duties of an MP, while also making sure that their constituents have adequate representation in Parliament. One such example is that all political parties represented in the House could agree a memorandum of understanding and agree to the same terms, which would allow their MPs to take parental leave and formalise “pairing” arrangements across all parties.

Mr Shuker: I appreciate the thoughtful way in which the Leader of the House is approaching this matter from first principles and setting out some of the issues mentioned by Members. Will she go slightly further and acknowledge that there is a reputational issue around Members of Parliament not being present to vote and thereby being reported as absent, when actually they are taking up the responsibilities that she has said are vital?

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly not advocating one route over another; I am merely pointing out to the House that these issues need careful consideration, which is why I wrote to the Procedure Committee and why I am delighted that it will hold an inquiry.

The Clerk of the House has prepared a helpful memorandum on proxy voting, which is available on the Procedure Committee’s website and which I encourage Members to read. It explores some important issues, including by looking at the approach in other Parliaments and, as has been alluded to, our own medieval tradition of allowing voting by proxy. I am sure that not many pregnant women were involved in those days, but still, they found a way. Should the Procedure Committee launch an inquiry—I am told that it will—I would encourage all colleagues to submit their views. I have no doubt that the many insightful contributions today will be of great value to the Committee.

This is an important debate, which has really caught the attention of Parliament in recent months. As Leader of the House, I want to make it absolutely clear that if we can agree the way forward on baby leave, I will drive it forward with my total commitment.
2.46 pm

Ms Harman: I warmly welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is great to see you here with us.

This has been a really important debate and I thank all Government and Opposition Members who have contributed. People have spoken in deeply personal terms about profoundly constitutional issues. They have shown passion for their families and for their constituents. Nobody has spoken against the motion, so this has been an important debate to shape the Procedure Committee’s proceedings. The Committee needs to take the matter forward with focus, clarity and expedition. After a debate such as today’s, we do not want this issue to go rustling off into the long grass. That will not be acceptable.

I thank all Members who spoke in the debate. We must all be an alliance for progress on this issue. All of us who are in the Chamber must make sure that this actually happens, and that the issue does not disappear for decades more. I am sure that we can have that purpose and intent. I would like to apologise for the fact that I had not thought about the situation of SNP Members, who do not even have pairing. I feel embarrassed about that and, even for the very short time before the Procedure Committee comes forward with a rule to shape how we do proxy voting, we must make some arrangements that reflect the situation for the SNP right away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House believes that it would be to the benefit of the functioning of parliamentary democracy that honourable Members who have had a baby or adopted a child should for a period of time be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy.

---

2.48 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to undertake a consultation to identify the most efficient means of abolishing car parking charges at NHS hospitals in England for patients, staff and visitors and to provide the timescale for its implementation.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the application for this vital debate. I especially thank my colleagues who have supported me in securing it, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). I also thank the various charities and organisations that have actively supported the campaign through their own research and on social media, such as CLIC Sargent, Bliss and Scope, and organisations representing drivers, such as FairFuelUK and the RAC. Those are just a few of the bodies offering their help and support to bring an end to the extortionate car parking charges found at many hospitals in England.

We all know that being a patient or visitor can be a stressful time. The last thing that anyone should be worried about is whether they have change for a car park or whether they can afford the rates that are charged. I started this campaign for free hospital car parking in 2014, after finding out that hospitals in England were charging staff and visitors up to £500 a week to use on-site parking facilities. As a result, in the same year, the Government published guidance urging hospitals to cut their parking fees. They said: “Concessions, including free or reduced charges or caps should be available for staff working unsociable shifts, blue badge holders and visitors of gravely ill relatives.”

Although some weekly charges have fallen since 2014, I was shocked to discover last year when we carried out further research that 47% of hospitals have increased the hourly parking charges and nearly half of hospitals charge blue badge holders to park. The average cost to park for a week at a hospital in England is £53.41 and people pay on average £1.98 for one hour stay.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is a fantastic campaigners on such issues and I congratulate him on bringing the issue to the House of Commons. In my constituency, Kingston Hospital just announced with no consultation that it will impose parking charges on blue badge holders, citing that people are doing it everywhere else in the NHS and that it is an NHS-wide issue. Does he therefore not agree with me that it is up to the Government to give a clear lead and, at the very least, get rid of parking charges for blue badge holders?

Robert Halfon: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right. Too often, these charges are imposed without any consultation, or without fair consultation, and they hit the most vulnerable. He will hear later in my remarks that I completely agree with him.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?
Robert Halfon: I will not take too many interventions, but I would be honoured to take one from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Cunningham: I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). A lot of the hospital charges are part of private finance initiatives, and he is right that the Secretary of State or the Minister responsible should now be looking at eliminating those charges. We could argue that they are a tax on illness.

Robert Halfon: That is the sad thing. Many private companies are making profits from the taxpayer and the most vulnerable people in our society. That must stop. The PFI things that have happened under Governments of both main parties have caused huge amounts of problems to many people, particularly when they park at hospitals up and down the country.

There is still a postcode lottery on car parking charges; different hospital trusts set wildly different fees. The core principle of the NHS is to provide free healthcare for all at the point of access but the charges are a stealth tax on drivers using the health service. The parking charges are the bane of people’s lives. No one goes to hospital out of choice; they go because they have to. No one chooses to be ill, and we rely on our doctors and nurses to look after us. I urge the Health Secretary and the Minister to take urgent action to end this social injustice once and for all, and to introduce substantive legislation to ensure hospitals scrap their parking charges.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) rose—

Robert Halfon: Mindful of the advice from the Chair, I shall give way one last time.

Julian Knight: My right hon. Friend is being most generous. I should declare that I am the joint chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers. I have tremendous sympathy with my right hon. Friend in this respect and have campaigned hard on hospital parking charges in my own constituency. However, one difficulty I have in squaring the circle is the fact that my hospital is located right in the town centre and, if it is free, people use it as a base to go off shopping. That has happened in the past. Does my right hon. Friend have any solutions or ideas to deal with that?

Robert Halfon: I am very proud to have worked with my hon. Friend on the FairFuelUK campaign to keep fuel duty low. The point he has just made is very broad, so if he could wait a few minutes, I hope to be able to address the concerns that he has expressed.

I mentioned earlier that, in 2014, the Government had offered guidelines on concessions for patients and visitors. I welcomed that, as it was a sign that the Government were aware of the extortionate costs facing hospital users, but the problem with the guidance is that none of it is mandatory. In fact, the guidance encourages the postcode lottery. The guidelines state that charges should be reasonable for the area. Trusts are free to set their own fees, which means that patients and staff living in London and the south-east are charged the most. I have asked the Government on a number of occasions what constitutes a reasonable charge, and I consistently receive responses along the following lines: first, that hospital car parking charges are a matter for individual NHS trusts; secondly, that local NHS trusts are expected to follow the published guidance; and thirdly, that the Department of Health and Social Care has not discussed car parking charges with local NHS trusts.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Halfon: I will give way one last time, as I want to be fair to Mr Deputy Speaker who spoke to me before the debate started.

Sandy Martin: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the national health service is not best placed for administering car parks, and that if we take car parking charges away from it we should also take away the whole provision of car parking from it and ensure that it does not lose out financially as a result?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The crucial thing is that the NHS does not lose out financially. I think that that is the substance of what he is saying.

Sadly, the guidance is superficial. I have been unable to work out what constitutes a reasonable charge. The Government are not able or willing to keep local trusts in check. Since 2013, the campaign to scrap hospital car parking charges has gained speed, with more and more leading UK charities and associations representing drivers carrying out research into the negative effects of the charges on different groups of patients and drivers.

The sick and vulnerable are disproportionately hit by these charges, particularly those with long-term or severe illnesses who require repeated or lengthy stays in hospital. Research has shown that cancer patients and parents of premature babies face the greatest financial consequences. CLIC Sargent, the wonderful charity supporting young people with cancer, found that families were paying an average of £37 in car parking charges every month, with some families paying up to £10 per day. It also says that more than one in four parents of a child with cancer—29%—are not offered a reduction in parking costs by their NHS trust.

Macmillan Cancer Support mirrors that sentiment, saying that cancer patients in England are paying extortionate hospital care parking charges. Bliss is another very special charity for families with premature babies. Although some babies stay in the neonatal unit only for a few days, some parents will have to pay more than £250 if their baby stays in the neonatal unit for eight weeks. The charity says that many parents cannot even afford to go to see their premature baby because of the cost of hospital care parking.

I have a quote from the charity, Headway, which really sums up the whole debate. Headway does an incredible amount of work with brain injury. This is what it said:

“Recently, we supported a family who had spent more than £1,500 in parking charges in only 15 weeks. They needed to be at the bedside of their son who was fighting for his life after sustaining brain injury. What parent wouldn’t want to be there, day and night? Yet they were faced with a huge bill. These charges are driving families into debt and despair at a time when they already have more than enough to cope with.”
Kidney Care, another charity, told me that dialysis patients have to go to hospital three times a week, and each appointment takes four hours, with the average cost of four hours of parking estimated to be £3.28. Members can imagine how the costs stack up. The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) mentioned disabled car parking. It is extraordinary that, despite the Government guidance, almost half of hospitals inexplicably charge disabled drivers. They do not go to hospital out of choice. It is harder for them to use public transport, yet they have to pay significant charges. Even the hospitals that allow free parking attach a lot of conditions to that provision. Scope, the charity supporting disabled people, shares the sentiment, widely noting that disabled people “have on average £108,000 fewer savings and assets than non-disabled people.”

It is not just charities that do valuable work. The RAC and FairFuelUK have also supported the campaign to scrap hospital car parking charges. I have worked with Howard Cox at FairFuelUK for a number of years in order to freeze fuel duty. The organisation held a poll last year with almost 9,000 respondents, 95.5% of whom wanted hospital parking scrapped or set at a maximum of £1. The RAC carried out a serious survey of more than 1,000 motorists. Two thirds of them named hospitals as the location where they most disliked having to pay for parking, and 41% said that the Government should scrap hospital parking charges immediately. It is clear that support is growing for the campaign to scrap hospital car parking charges, not only from the charities representing the most vulnerable—often with long-term and life-threatening illnesses—but from the two major organisations representing millions of motorists in the United Kingdom.

The support for an end to hospital car parking for patients and their visitors is clear, but we must not forget our incredibly hard-working NHS staff, some of whom are charged to go to work. Other public sector workers such as police officers and teachers are, for the most part, rightly able to park for free on their work premises, whether at a police station or a school. The Government guidance suggests that concessions should be available to all hospital staff—nurses, porters, cleaners, occupational therapists and doctors—working shifts that make public transport use difficult, but so much of the hospital workforce cannot rely on public transport to get to work.

Let us take the example of a hospital worker living in Pocklington in Yorkshire. He or she would either have to make the 15-mile drive to work at York Hospital and pay £2 to park during the shift, or spend more than an hour on two buses to get to work. If staff are working shifts at unsociable hours—as, of course, many do in the health service—they have no choice but to use hospital car parks.

Although all hospitals seem to offer a discounted parking scheme based on pay band or salary, or by allocating a limited number of discounted staff spaces, NHS staff are charged to work unsociable hours. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) was told by hospital staff that they cannot afford the charges at hospital car parks, so they have to park on unlit nearby streets, which leaves them vulnerable when leaving the workplace at night.

Interestingly, staff car parking charges are a nuisance not just for hard-working NHS staff, but for residents too. I was recently contacted by a resident of Scarborough. This person was delighted to hear of the campaign, but came from a rather different angle. Staff park in the residential areas around Scarborough General Hospital to avoid being charged to go to work. The influx of cars every day means that driveways are blocked, there is more traffic on the road and residents are unable to go about their daily business.

I realise that hospital parking charges can be a source of income for hospitals. They are certainly a goldmine for some private companies, but the Government have previously stated:

“Providing free car parking at NHS hospitals would result in some £200 million per year being taken from clinical care budgets to make up the shortfall.”

I have a number of things to say about that. When considered in the content of the £120 billion-plus to be spent on running the NHS, the figure of £200 million is put into perspective. Going on the assumption that free hospital car parking would cost £200 million a year, I think that there are a number of funding options that would not leave hospitals out of pocket or affect clinical care budgets. The Government themselves have published a report saying that better procurement in national health service hospitals would bring in more than £1 billion a year. I am just asking for £200 million to scrap hospital parking charges.

The Department of Health financial accounts for 2016-17 suggest that the Department underspent its revenue budget by £563 million, which is about 0.5% of the total budget. Could some of this money not go towards covering the parking costs of patients and hospital staff? It might also be time to look at other areas of government where we spend a significant amount of money and look at reallocating the very small amount of that money—£200 million—that it would take to scrap hospital car parking charges.

Another concern, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), is that free parking at hospitals would be exploited by shoppers. However, this could easily be solved by using parking tokens validated by ward staff. Some NHS hospitals in England do the right thing and provide free parking, including Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust. That shows that it is possible to deliver free parking for patients, visitors and staff while discouraging abuse of the system with tokens or barriers. Having contacted hospitals in Scotland and Wales directly, I know that there are numerous parking solutions to ensure that free parking is not exploited. Alongside the abolition of hospital car parking charges, a system could be introduced whereby a ticket or token is presented to ward staff at the beginning of the visit and validated at the end.

It is time to end the hospital car parking rip-off once and for all. The NHS is supposed to be free at point of access. It was never envisaged that people with cars would have to pay on top of their taxation for the national health service, yet patients and visitors are charged for access to vital services. That causes a huge amount of stress to many. It affects the most vulnerable: parents with sick children, patients suffering from long-term illnesses, and staff without access to public transport. These charges are a cause of major social injustice.
Clearly, the Government guidance is not working. I urge the Government to look into the most efficient way to scrap hospital car parking charges and bring an end to this stealth tax on drivers once and for all.

**Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab):** I am very grateful to be able to take part in this important debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), and my neighbour, the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), on securing it.

Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital in my constituency provides a range of helpful wellbeing services. The site has an A&E, a dialysis unit, a child development unit, a nursery, an eating disorder unit, and health education spaces. It covers a huge range of services that deliver to a very wide community. There are two main areas that I want to address: first, the difficulties and challenges for patients caused by ever-increasing parking tariffs; and, secondly, car parking issues for staff, which have been raised with me on a number of occasions when I have been at Grimsby’s hospital.

In Grimsby, I can go and park in the Iceland car park, in the centre of our town, for £1 an hour. If I need to park for more than two hours, I might go to the Abbey Walk multi-storey, again in the centre of town, and pay £3.50 for the privilege of four hours’ parking. Having worked in places like York, I know that I should be very grateful for the seemingly small amounts that it costs to park in the centre of our town, so I count my blessings. When those smaller amounts are set against what people are expected to pay in hospital parking charges, it feels very much to my constituents as though the NHS is over-inflating the expense and putting an unnecessary burden on patients and families.

The charge for an hour’s parking at Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital has recently increased to £2.10—£1.10 more than in the centre of our town. If I go to the hospital to pick up a prescription, it might take—on a good day, admittedly—just a few minutes to collect the prescription, but on top of the prescription cost, I am paying another £2.10 to do so. Last week, I went for a blood test. I walked in, got my ticket, checked on the screen, and saw that there was a wait of about 68 minutes. It took me a matter of minutes to get the blood test, but the sitting in the waiting room lasted about 68 minutes. The cost of that visit was therefore £3.50. I am not bemoaning the cost to my personal pocket. I can afford it, but many in my constituency cannot, and the cost is prohibitive.

**Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):** Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as the issues that have been raised powerfully so far, the example she gives shows the opportunity for greater flexibility? In Hounslow, for example, free half-hour parking has been introduced to support local businesses. It is the same for leisure centres. We need to be proportionate as we consider the overall issue, and that is what was done today.

**Melanie Onn:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is room for flexibility, and all trusts should be looking at what they can do to make parking less prohibitive so that people are not put off.

It is galling for my constituents to know that parking charges are much lower in other areas of the town. Local authority car parks, shops and private parking companies all have the same issues of maintenance, lighting and security, albeit to different degrees, but they are not charging that high rate. It feels very much like profiteering off the back of people who have no choice but to be at hospital, whether that is for themselves, their friends or their relatives. The trust offers concessions through lower costs for blue badge holders, although they are not exempt from charges, as well as for parents who are staying overnight with poorly children and those having cancer treatment. That is, of course, incredibly welcome. However, when the justification for the charges is that they pay for the maintenance of the site, it really does not stack up, given the costs of other paid parking sites in the town.

An automatic number plate recognition system was recently installed at the Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital, which led to even more frustration and concern for constituents. While that fantastic new automated system was supposed to make the process a lot quicker and easier for people, all it did was to cause additional delays and costs. After spending time in the waiting room, as I had to, people had to come out to try to pay for their parking with the new machines. It caused absolute havoc, and there were queues going around the block, and people ended up tripping over into the next pay band and paying even more. The process caused an extraordinary amount of frustration and reflected very poorly on the trust, which is a real shame.

The knock-on effect of the charges is that surrounding streets, such as Second Avenue, Edge Avenue and Limetree Avenue, which are all residential streets with limited on-street parking, get filled with the cars of patients, staff and people attending the hospital. I know that there is nothing illegal about that. There is nothing wrong with people parking in those residential streets, but it really irritates residents if a parked car crosses a dropped kerb or impinges on people’s driveways. That is not only incredibly frustrating, but it gives rise to increased concerns about road safety, especially in school hours.

The right hon. Member for Harlow addressed very well the broader point that people with disabilities or long-term illnesses are generally financially worse off than the rest of the population. The additional cost represents a significant inconvenience and potential hardship for people who can least afford it.

Hospital staff have increasingly been talking to me about this issue. There have been discussions with staff about increasing the amount that they already pay to go to work. An increase has been postponed for now, but the opportunity for it to be brought back next year is, I understand, very much on the table, and the increase will be significant. As the right hon. Gentleman indicated, the people affected will be not just consultants or senior executives who might be earning a very good wage. We are also talking about porters, healthcare assistants and...
medical secretaries—all the people behind the scenes who keep the hospital going—being expected to pay even more.

The frustrations for staff are immense. They say that they already struggle to get a parking space, not least because some shifts overrun. The likelihood that someone might do an eight-hour shift in the NHS at the moment is frankly negligible. Most people, through their own good will, are giving more to the NHS and working beyond their shift. They do not want to leave their patients in the middle of an incident. The number of parking spaces available is therefore reduced, and people are leaving home an awful lot earlier—an hour to an hour and a half earlier—than their shift starts, which increases their working day immensely.

Most of this is not just about travel time. I know that the roads are congested around the Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital, but that is not the only issue. There is also the problem that people are driving around car parks trying to find a space. It is incredibly frustrating that people are paying for a space at work and cannot get one, and sometimes that is even making them late for work.

**Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): The hon. Lady makes a very good point about congestion, with people trying to find parking spaces and there not being enough. Would a compromise be for hospitals to charge a reasonable flat rate, rather than abolishing charges completely, which would exacerbate the very situation she is describing?

**Melanie Onn**: That is certainly worth looking at. We need a system that does not put people off attending their appointments, and that certainly does not prohibit people going to work or cause them to arrive late. Any suggestions that would allow us to reach a sensible solution would be very welcome.

Finally, I will conclude by saying that all car parking charges should be set in the context of a long-term transportation plan that includes park and ride systems, as well as increasing people’s ability to use public transport, cycles and everything else. The reality is that not enough has been done on any of those things to enable people to use alternative methods of transport that will get them to work at the time they need to be there, or to appointments at the time they need them, so it has all been for nothing. The charges are incredibly prohibitive because no other methods of easy, regular transport suit the patients and the staff.

3.16 pm

**Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who made a very thoughtful and engaging speech on this important issue. I am very glad that so many Members are in the Chamber to take part in the debate.

I particularly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on steadfastly championing this issue in Parliament for many years. He is much admired across the House for taking up issues that not everybody chooses to champion, but his work on such issues so often makes the lives of the people he and I represent much better, so I thank him for it. Indeed, I was inspired by his efforts in this area when, before I became an MP, I campaigned in my constituency of Telford on the whole issue of parking charges after they went up by 75% at our Princess Royal Hospital, creating a great deal of local upset.

My constituents, like my right hon. Friend, raise their concerns about this issue frequently. During the time I have campaigned on it, I have received over 5,000 letters—letters, not emails—on this specific issue. In Telford, we really care about this, and that is why I am here today. I was supposed to giving a speech at Thomas Telford School’s ethical debating society but, unfortunately, I had to cancel at short notice so that I can be here, because this matters so much. I apologise to the students at Thomas Telford School.

I was told by my hospital trust in 2014 that it was not possible to change the existing arrangement because of the long-term nature of the trust’s legally binding contract with CP Plus, a parking contractor. Even poorly negotiated long-term contracts eventually expire, so we must look forward to what we will put in place when they do. It is not acceptable for those who can effect change simply to stand back and wait for onerous contracts with parking contractors to be renewed.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): As my hon. Friend says, part of the problem is that so many hospital trusts are locked into long-term PFI contracts. Many of them were negotiated in the late 1990s or early 2000s and will shortly be coming up for renewal or expiry. Does she agree that now is the time to look at what provisions we can put in place to ensure that, as the contracts are renewed, they do not contain exploitative provisions that allow hospital trusts to take patients, as well as their families and visitors, for mugs by overcharging them for parking?

**Lucy Allan**: My hon. Friend eloquently makes a very important point, and I am very glad that he has raised it. The debate is timely, and it is important for us to be here to make this case.

Sadly, my local hospital trust has continued to increase hospital parking charges in a way that some feel thoughtless and has been described to me as cavalier. Following the rises in 2017, it is cheaper to park in Southwater shopping centre in Telford than to go to hospital to visit a sick relative. There is clearly something wrong with a model that operates in that way, because, as many hon. Members have said, no one chooses to go to hospital.

Telford is a new town, much like the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow. There are problems to do with the way in which many new towns were designed because, rightly or wrongly, they are all about road users. Major roads and roundabout systems are much loved in Telford. Everything is focused on the car, and it was never intended that the pedestrian should be able to walk from A to B. That is one of the problems that makes this such an important issue locally.

We do not have good public transport. We cannot just hop on a bus, jump on a tube or walk to the local hospital, as people might in other areas; instead, we have to take buses changing a few times. Many people are therefore driven, or drive, to hospital, and they have to pay. My trust gave several reasons why its charges increased, one of which was that they were lower than
those elsewhere in the country. That argument does not have a lot of teeth to it, because London is very different from Telford, in terms of income and accessibility of transport. Trusts need to consider local factors when setting charges.

It is good if concessions are offered, and there are concessions at the Princess Royal in Telford, but they are complicated to administer and operate. People have to prove that they are eligible for benefits, that they have had an appointment, and that they have paid their charges. Healthcare staff have to administer that system. They have to cancel charges and give out refunds and concessions, but that is not what they are there for. It is no good saying that if there was more money for hospitals, they would not need to charge for parking, because we all know what happens in many cases. In my local hospital, 50% of the revenue goes to CP Plus, the parking contractor, which has to be wrong.

Another argument that we have heard today is that if there were no parking charges, there would be nowhere for people to park, because anyone who wished to could use the hospital car park. It is argued that charges are a disincentive to parking. My local hospital trust says that without charges, people might stay all day in the hospital cafés, having refreshments, rather than leaving the site. Clearly that is complete nonsense, because even with incredibly high charges, there is nowhere to park. All the spaces—and the grass and concrete—are filled. The argument that everyone is sitting in a café is simply beyond my comprehension. This issue needs to be addressed with careful thought, rather than charges being seen as an instant panacea to a problem, when they clearly are not.

Bizarrely, my hospital trust tried to justify the increase by talking to residents about the number of nurses whom the parking revenue has paid for. I do not like that argument, because nurses are paid for by taxpayers through Government funding, not by parking charges. The increase that it implemented was in the contractual agreement, and nothing whatever to do with the number of nurses whom it employed.

I worry when hospital managers think that the charge is not that big a deal because parking is cheaper than somewhere else; that transport is not really their problem; and that if people are spending too long in cafés, managers need to move them on by putting up the charges. That shows that they probably do not understand the people whom they serve as well as they should.

If we dig a little deeper, we see the reason why it is not possible to park at the Princess Royal is that there has been a huge increase in the number of staff working on the site and therefore parking in the car park. We need to look at ways of helping staff to reduce car park use, as that would free up many spaces for patients to use throughout the day. We need to think imaginatively about how that might be done. Perhaps park and ride schemes specifically tailored to shift times might help. It is a surprise to find that hospitals are not looking at that.

We have heard today that this is a tax on the sick. Most taxes take account of people’s ability to pay; as is absolutely right, yet hospital managers and porters pay the same to park at work. It is always the least well-off who are hit the hardest. If the aim is to tax people and then give half the tax revenue to a car parking company—that is a bit senseless in any event—do it through pay-as-you-earn, and do not get nurses and other healthcare staff involved in the enforcement. It is completely inefficient to operate the system in this way.

Others have touched on the rigmarole that goes with paying for parking. Whether that means people paying with coins, typing in their number plate, or being videoed as they go in or come out, there is a punitive element. When a person is rushing to see someone who is extremely ill, or if they are waiting for an appointment and the consultant is running over time, it all adds to the anxiety, and in this context, it is completely inappropriate.

No one really wants to own this issue, so we all end up accepting it rather than solving it. Too many people say, “It is not our problem, it is too difficult to fix and actually, it is not really that important, because it is only £8 a day.” Too often, people in power look at the world through their own eyes and not through the eyes of those whom they serve.

There is little appetite among hospital management to deal with this. It is not a big-ticket issue. It is not exciting. It is not a shiny new hospital. It does not cost £300 million—in Telford, we spend a lot of time talking about our new emergency unit—so that is why I am here today. I want the Government and hospital managers to sit up and take notice. Do not brush this off as a non-issue—it is not. Try to see it through the eyes of others and tackle the issue that is facing everyday users of our hospitals. It can be fixed and it will make a difference to the lives of those who most need hospital services. For that reason, we should all care about it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow does a great service to his constituents. I thank him for securing this debate and I support him entirely.

3.25 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). We all know that our NHS is underfunded. The hospital trust in my constituency, the Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, received more than £1.5 million in car parking charges in 2016-17, according to data released under a freedom of information request, so it might seem unusual for me to be calling for the abolition of car parking charges. We know that they can provide an income for hospitals, but I agree with the hon. Lady: much of the money does not go to the hospital, but often to the private operator of the car park.

It is the Government’s responsibility to ensure that our NHS has the money it needs and not that of patients, staff or visitors. We should not expect vulnerable people to pay a sickness tax through car parking charges. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) about the impact on residents living in the local area. In Walker Street opposite my hospital, resident permits have had to be introduced to try to stop other people parking on those streets. In effect, the residents who live there have to pay to park their cars, because staff cannot afford to use the car park and park their cars on those streets. The whole system is complete nonsense.

I am incredibly proud that our Labour manifesto pledged to scrap car parking charges. Our suggestion was that any loss in income could come from a hike in the tax on private healthcare insurance. That would meet the £162 million cost of free parking at all NHS hospitals across England.
The unfairness of the sickness tax, from having car parking charges, must be felt in context. Let me tell the Chamber about a dear friend of mine—a man called Dermot—who has been in hospital for well over 28 days. I am not sure whether hon. Members are aware of this, but a particularly cruel and unfair consequence of him being in hospital for more than 28 days is the ending of his payments for disability living allowance and attendance allowance. If he had been receiving personal independence payment instead of DLA, that would have been stopped as well. His wife’s income has also been affected because she is his carer; she has stopped receiving her carer’s allowance, because Dermot has lost his DLA.

The nice bit to this story is that friends have rallied round and organised a fundraising concert for Dermot called—I have to make sure I pronounce this carefully—“Folk the 28 Day Rule” to raise money to support him. However, friends should not have to arrange folk night fundraisers to compensate for the welfare system’s failure to support people. The dramatic fall in his family’s income makes the added travel and car parking costs particularly cruel. They are not the only family facing this situation, but their story highlights the unfairness that many families face in having to park every day to visit loved ones at a time when their income may have dramatically fallen.

We all hate to think what would happen if one of our loved ones ended up staying in hospital for a long time. One of the saddest examples of the sickness tax, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is the effect on parents of premature and sick babies. We know that if premature and sick babies are to have the best possible outcomes, they need hands-on care every day. The daily costs of travelling to hospital can present a barrier that prevents parents from being with their babies. Parents surveyed by the charity Bliss said that they spent an average of £32 a week on car parking charges when visiting their babies. That is an unacceptable cost. All new, precious babies have the right to be with their parents—and not just the parents who can afford to pay to park their cars.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I think that this is grossly unacceptable, in the case of people visiting sick babies and, indeed, in the case of men who are waiting for their wives or partners to give birth. How often do people who have paid for three hours find that they require much longer? Then they are stuck. The man is required to stay with the lady—the woman—who is giving birth, but he is worried about paying the flipping parking charge. That is wrong. There must be a way around this one.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree. I have accompanied my parents to hospital appointments. My mum sits there and sets the alarm on her phone, and then starts panicking: “We have to go back to the car park. Have we enough change?” That is not what people want to be thinking about when they are visiting a hospital.

The unfair cost is felt not just by visitors and patients, but by staff. It was during my local “big conversation” event that I became aware of the difficulties experienced by nurses and other NHS professionals in my local hospital. The financial squeeze faced by NHS professionals has been well documented. For example, midwives have lost an average of £6,000 a year in real terms since 2010, and the additional cost to them of parking their cars seems particularly unfair. An investigation by Unison found that some nurses were having to rush out between appointments to move their cars and avoid fines. That is a ridiculous situation.

Our hospitals are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and staff finish their working shifts at different times. We have a duty to keep them safe. When they have just spent a shift caring for us, they should not have to return to cars that are parked in dark and isolated streets because they cannot afford to pay to use the hospital car park.

I urge the Minister to adopt this motion and to take action. As has been clear today, it has cross-party support, and it would make a real, positive difference to so many people’s lives.

3.32 pm

Martin Vickers ( Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who represents the other side of the Humber bridge, and it is a particular pleasure to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). He was an asset to the Front Bench, but he has also shown his campaigning skills when dealing with issues such as this on the Back Benches. We are very pleased that he is once more among us. Let us hope that we can be as successful with this campaign as we have been with one or two in the past. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), whom I will call my hon. Friend. On this occasion, I agree with every word that my Member of Parliament has said. That does not always happen.

As with so many financial matters, it is a question of getting the balance right. Should we place an additional burden on patients and their families, especially at a time when they are particularly stressed and perhaps in great distress, or should we place the burden on the very limited NHS resources that our hospital trusts are having to manage? As has already been pointed out, some patients and their families can afford to pay, but if they are visiting, for instance, a parent who is coming to the end of his or her life, they will suffer just as much distress regardless of their financial circumstances.

In 2017, the trust that serves Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital in my constituency had an income of £2.28 million from car parking charges. It tells me that there was a surplus of three quarters of a million pounds which was spent on patient care. That is good news in the sense that that is three quarters of a million pounds that it desperately needs, but it has come out of the pockets of people who are visiting the hospital or patients at particularly difficult times. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned, we live in an area with many low-paid jobs and this is a real burden on many hard-working families.

I am not going to detain the House for too long, but I would detain it for a great deal of time if I were to read the 64-page guidance the local trust produces for parking on its hospital sites. It is an appalling burden that we place on organisations, be they in the public or private sector, when they have to go to such trouble as to produce guidance of that length on how they operate their car park. It is complete madness.
I also draw attention to the fact that patients in my constituency and the neighbouring areas in many cases have to travel much further than others for their treatment, specifically across the river to Hull. That is an additional cost; they have the burden of the petrol or of bus fares, although public transport is almost non-existent for many of the rural villages in my constituency and the wider area served by Grimsby’s hospital.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a good point: the cost falls disproportionately on those who live in rural areas.

Martin Vickers: I thank my right hon. Friend for emphasising the point I am making. Many patients have to travel for perhaps 15 or 20 miles to get to the hospital, and that is an additional burden that they can well do without.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned the fact that there is a problem with management, and she mentioned parking in neighbouring streets. I will add the names of a few more of them: Cragston Avenue, St Helens Avenue, Charles Avenue. We know them very well; when I was a councillor for that area people used to complain about cars blocking their streets, and I am sure they complain to their Member of Parliament today.

That is a problem I recognise, and there is also a problem with commuter parking, which has to be dealt with. Tokens have been mentioned, and simple time limits of two or three hours before charges kick in might be another alternative, as well as the flat charge that my hon. Friend the Member for Southampt on, Itchen (Royston Smith) mentioned.

I urge the Government to tackle this; it needs Government action to resolve it. It is unreasonable to expect trusts—particularly those like Northern Lincolnshire and Goole, which are in special measures and have major challenges of their own—to do so. An extra burden such as this is something they could well do without. As has been said, savings can be made through better procurement procedures, and that is one possible route. I am sure every Member in the House today could identify one particular saving to meet the £200 million-plus that the NHS would have to find. But this is a major problem and a burden on our constituents and it could be easily resolved, and I urge the Government to get on with resolving it quickly.

3.38 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this important debate on one of the many issues facing carers, families and staff who visit our hospitals.

If I parked at the hospital car park in my constituency of Colne Valley, it would cost me a third more than if I parked in a council-owned car park. How is that acceptable? Is this not NHS trusts profiteering from the sick and vulnerable? When people are in a rush taking a sick friend or relative to the hospital, they will not necessarily consider where is cheaper to park; they will park in the closest car park and then sort it out later. Even people who have to attend hospital regularly will not get free parking. At the Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, a two-and-a-half-hour stay, three times a week, 52 weeks a year will cost £780. That is £780 to support someone who is receiving medical treatment. Even some who are disabled blue badge holders have to pay this.

Bob Stewart: I think I speak on behalf of all of us when I say that I find it iniquitous that anyone with a blue badge should have to pay a penny when they go to a hospital.

Thelma Walker: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

How are my constituents meant to afford these excessive costs? Hard-working nurses, doctors, porters, cleaners and receptionists go to work to help people. Those hard-working staff are paying £1,680 a year to support families whose loved ones are dying. They are paying £1,680 a year to work a 12-hour shift caring for people. They are paying £1,680 a year to save lives. How is that acceptable by anyone’s standards? How can anyone think it is right that those hard-working professionals are paying nearly £2,000 a year to help and care for people? I can tell the House that it is not.

I appreciate that trusts, including the Calderdale Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, are following national guidelines, but patients and staff feel as though they are treating them as cash cows. In 2016-17, my local trust remained nearly £15 million in deficit. In the CHFT annual reports for 2014-15, the trust recorded £1.4 million income from car parking. In 2016-17, that figure rose to £2.7 million. Yes, the extra money that the trust makes helps to plug the hole left by Government underfunding, but it should not have to. Our NHS should be fully funded; it should not have to depend on car parking fees. I urge the Government to consider the comments being made today by Members across the House, and to act swiftly to resolve this issue.

3.42 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. This takes me back a long way, to 2006, when you were a Health Minister and I shadowed you for some four years. The issue of car parking charges was around at that time, and successive Governments have talked about addressing it. This is a regressive tax. It is a tax on everybody, because everybody needs the NHS—that is why it is there. It is even more regressive for NHS staff, who are taxed even more just to go to work their difficult shift patterns. That is completely unacceptable.

I have raised this issue many times before. Members might remember that I used to be a firefighter. Firefighters do not pay to park in the yard at the fire station. Our ambulance service is part of the NHS in my constituency, and its staff do not pay, either. They drive to work and they go to the pound to pick up their ambulance. So why should other emergency workers be charged in this way? It is fundamentally wrong.

This issue has gone back and forth across the Floor of the House, no matter which colour Government we have. Contracts have been signed, by previous Governments and by ours, that have locked us into hugely expensive agreements, particularly the private finance initiatives. We need to do something about that, and I will say more about it in a moment.
**Bob Stewart:** It seems to me that there should be staff car parks. There should be a set-up in which staff have separate parking arrangements so that they do not block public parking spaces. They should also have guaranteed slots, so that they are not late for their shifts.

**Sir Mike Penning:** That happens in some parts of the world. For example, that is what they do at the Luton and Dunstable University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, which looks after part of my constituency. I went there the other day to visit someone who was in palliative care. I did not know how long I was going to be seeing them, or whether I would see them again. The fantastic news is that they are now at home, being looked after by the hospice movement, of which I have been a member for 40 years. That is what the hospice movement is very much for.

Interestingly, I parked and paid in what I thought was a public car park, but I was in the staff car park. So, when I went to try to get out, the barrier would not go up. I pressed the button to talk to someone, and they said, “You’ve parked illegally.” I said, “How have I parked illegally? I’ve got a ticket.” Fortunately, they had no idea who I was, because they probably would have just lifted the barrier to get the MP out of there as fast as possible, which is normally what happens when we visit our hospitals, isn’t it—everything is brilliant, rosy and shiny and everything is great. I said to the person, “No. If you’re going to fine me, fine me. I’ll see you in court, because I have paid in an NHS public car park that you have designated.” They eventually just said, “Oh, go away.” I have been waiting for the fine to come through—it probably will now—and I will see them in court, but the charging is morally wrong.

The situation is even more difficult for patients. The previous debate was about babies and parenting. Babies come out when they want to, usually; not when we want them to, and not based on how much time is left on a car parking ticket. That is what happens, and yet people are getting fined every day because they have outstayed their time in the car park. How can that be right?

A Member who could not be in the Chamber today because they had to attend another meeting, asked me to mention volunteer drivers. What would we do without them? They are fantastic, but they have to pay to park in some hospital car parks before they take patients home, which they do as volunteers because the patient ambulance service is struggling so much. In some parts of the country—I know that it is happening in my area—people are actually asking for patient transport because the car parking facilities are so bad. They are putting more of a burden on patient transport because they cannot find a parking space and they are petrified of being late for their appointment. If they are late for their appointment owing to patient transport, that is okay, but if they cannot find a parking space, they hear, “Oh, you’re a bad person.” We have heard that people are parking outside hospital car parks. Blue badge holders are being charged to park in a car park when they can park for free on the road, so that is what they do. We know that is happening, and it is really very wrong.

I know that the Minister is a good man, and an honourable man, but when he stands up to reply he will almost certainly say that parking is devolved to NHS trusts, and that it is for them to decide how they run their facilities. But for those of us who are Members of Parliament, NHS trusts are completely unaccountable.

We can moan about this, but they will not listen in the slightest. They will be looking at whether they can get away with it and how much they can raise.

This is not just about money; it is about space. We have heard that if car parks do not charge, they will be full of people from the town centre. When the acute facility at the excellent Hemel Hempstead Hospital was closed, it was moved to the middle of Watford town centre, next to a football stadium. Apparently Watford play there, and a lot of my constituents will be very upset when they hear about me being derogatory about Watford, but they have a huge number of fans. I went to Watford General Hospital on a Saturday morning to visit a constituent, a good friend of mine, and I parked and paid. When I came out, there was a group of parking people around who clearly wanted to give me a ticket. I had paid in the football bit that is designated for use by Watford football club when they are playing at home. What has that got to do with going to see someone at an NHS hospital, or go to that hospital?

Unfortunately, the parking attendants did recognise me, and they were very apologetic, but I do not think that is right. What would have happened if they had not known who I was? The ticket was coming. How on earth can we have a full acute hospital in the middle of a town as big as Watford, next to a football stadium, and then call that a modern NHS hospital? The parking facilities there for staff and patients are frankly almost non-existent, not least because tons of it has been carved off for the football club. I want Watford to be very successful, but what I want in our part of the world is a brand-new hospital, with proper parking facilities, on a greenfield site away from the town centre, so that we do not have any concerns about whether people will park there all day in order to go shopping. At the moment, though, I do not have that.

There is the acute hospital in Watford, which struggles—it has just come out of special measures and I wish it well—and Hemel Hempstead Hospital, which is basically a clinic these days. We have out-patients; we have a few intermediate wards. They charge the staff, and patients with out-patient appointments, to park there. The car park is empty. Hardly anybody parks there because there is nothing on the site any more, but the hospital still insists on charging. That pushes the patients outside, so there is restricted parking outside, which is also an issue. It is cheaper to park in the council car park in the town centre and walk 400 yards up the hill than to park in a car park that is empty because there are so few facilities at the hospital.

This problem has to be sorted out from central Government, and the central Government guidelines have to be enforceable. I was a Minister for many years: Departments can issue as many notices as they like, but nothing will happen if they do not come out with the stick. Could the money be raised in other ways? Could there be savings in the NHS? As we have heard, the amount of money being raised, compared with the overall pot, is peanuts. One of the more recent chief executives of my very small acute trust was on a package of over £300,000 a year. If we want to save money instantly, let us take a look at the salaries of the really top people in the NHS and let us look after the people at the bottom—we certainly should not charge them to park when they go to work.
3.50 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). Much of what he said echoes the complaints that have come to my constituency office.

I thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this debate. This subject is close to my heart because I used to work for the NHS. I well remember when car parking charges were introduced for patients, carers, visitors and staff. I remember the controversy it caused at the time, and it still causes controversy now. This issue has not gone away.

I worked for the NHS as a clinical scientist, but I was also a workplace rep for Unite, the trade union. I remember the resistance that all the health unions put up against the introduction of car parking charges, which we saw then, and still see now, as a tax on staff coming to work and on patients, visitors and carers.

The practice of charging for car parking in my area was started by Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and the issue of people using the free parking at the hospital and then going elsewhere was the reason for introducing those charges, but once Central Manchester University Hospitals did that, all other hospitals in Greater Manchester followed suit.

The only reason anyone would go to North Manchester General Hospital, where I worked, is because they work there, because they are getting treatment there or because they are visiting as a friend, a relative or a carer. There is no other reason for someone to visit that hospital, so there was no real reason to start charging people to park there.

The trust claimed that the moneys taken would be put towards improving the car parking facilities, which I admit were absolutely dire. We used to park on unsurfaced, potholed areas, which were eventually improved once the charging system became embedded—that is one positive thing that came out of it.

The trust initially purchased some wheel clamps and threatened to clamp the car of those who did not pay. I worked with some interesting people in the NHS, and one colleague decided to buy his own personal wheel clamp, which he attached to his car when he parked in the morning. The hospital is not in the most salubrious of areas, so the clamp served two purposes: it immobilised his car and kept it secure; and it gave the impression that he had been penalised for not paying to park. Within a few weeks his wheel clamp had paid for itself.

Not everyone was that inventive, however, and gradually the idea of paying to park at the hospital became commonplace, if not accepted, although the trade unions always strongly opposed the practice. The wheel clamps were quickly phased out—rumour had it that the trust had been successfully sued, although we never found out the full facts—and the trust began to impose fines on those deemed to have breached the rules.

The whole issue of car parking fees and fines generated a huge amount of controversy, discussion and debate, not to mention a huge number of visits, phone calls and emails to the trade union office. Anyone who might question the need to give trade union staff time to do their job might like to reflect on the massive pressure put upon them by issues such as this. When I left the trust, having been elected to this place, I was paying £20 per month in car parking charges, which was taken directly out of my salary. That staff fee is now £22.10, which might not sound a lot, but represents an increase of more than 10% over the past three years. That pays scant regard to the fact that NHS staff have had their pay either frozen or capped to a maximum of just 1%—this is completely disproportionate.

As an MP, I have helped many constituents who were sent demands for car parking fines by a company called Civil Enforcement Ltd, which is contracted by my local Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust to pursue those deemed to have breached car parking regulations. I have had constituents aggressively chased for payment when they have parked in a staff parking space by mistake, and the practices of this company do seem to lack the human touch. Most people attending hospital usually have more important matters on their mind and could be forgiven for being slightly distracted while trying to work the myriad instructions posted in a hospital car park prior to visiting sick relatives or going for treatment themselves.

The charges can be prohibitive: £1 for one hour, £4 for 8 hours and £8 for up to 24 hours. As many Members have pointed out, most of the time the patient or visitor does not know how long they will be in the hospital or, so most will err on the side of caution and pay more than they should. The ticket machines also do not take banknotes. When I worked at the hospital, I was regularly asked for change by patients and visitors struggling to feed the machines. I am sure that all those people had more important things to deal with and could have done without that additional stress. I accept that my local trust will provide a weekly ticket for £15 and will make arrangements for those with long-term illness, but that is not immediately clear to patients and visitors, and it requires action on their part at an already stressful time.

The motion calls on the Government to provide a means whereby car parking charges may be abolished and I fully support that, but hand in hand with that has to go an improved public transport system, so that staff, patients, carers and visitors are not as reliant on private cars. Sadly, in my constituency, we have just had a bus service between Rochdale, Middleton and North Manchester General Hospital withdrawn. Retrograde steps such as that do nothing to reduce the demand on hospital car parks, and we absolutely need a comprehensive public transport policy to support the abolition of hospital car parking charges.

The other step we need to take is to reduce NHS trusts’ dependence on income from car parking. Department of Health guidelines used to stipulate that income earned from car parking should be spent only on the maintenance and running of car parks, but those guidelines now appear to have been relaxed, and cash-strapped trusts are now using that income for patient care. In fact, when I visited North Manchester General Hospital recently I was disappointed to see that a staff car park that had been in a very poor state when I worked there many years ago had been allowed to deteriorate even further. Clearly, no income had been spent there on improving conditions for staff. The Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust alone made £3 million from car parking charges last year. The NHS underfunding issue must be addressed in any consideration of the abolition of car parking charges.
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): First, I wish to thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for having secured and initiated such an important debate, which affects so many in my constituency and across our country. For many, attending a hospital is a vulnerable time, whether we are seeking treatment for ourselves or for a loved one. Our hospitals are indeed underfunded and overstretched, but it is not for sick patients, anxious relatives and already hard-pressed NHS staff to be filling the funding gaps.

We have heard that hospital car parking charges raise funds, but many hospital trusts up and down our country have increased their charges without consulting the public—the very people they are there for. Some trusts allow private contractors to manage car parking sites, which is leading to penalties and fines for patients and visitors, as we have heard in this important debate. At a time when the cost of living is increasing and those who work in the public sector have had their pay capped, the rising cost of hospital car parking only increases the financial burden on many in our constituencies.

It is not just the patients who are deterred by higher charges; families and friends might be discouraged from visiting patients at their bedside, which must surely have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of patients and lead to increased pressure on nursing staff. From personal experience, I know that many patients rely on relatives and friends to act as interpreters or advocates. Such elements are seemingly overlooked when surveys and reports are undertaken, but patient care can be impacted where higher charges deter people from providing such crucial assistance.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): We have heard a lot about staff and patients and families. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) mentioned volunteers earlier, and the hon. Gentleman is talking about the importance of patient support. Does he agree that it is particularly short-sighted of any hospital trust to seek to charge volunteers, who give of their time, for parking?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent intervention, and I could not agree more. We have heard previously about volunteer drivers. It is just not fair. It is nonsensical to ask them to dig further into their pockets. It also places an unfair and unnecessary burden on hard-working staff who have gone for years without a decent pay rise. While some hospitals offer free or discounted parking for specific kinds of treatment or for people in receipt of specific benefits, there are significant variations in fees across trusts in the same region. Wexham Park Hospital in my constituency has some of the highest parking charges in the region: £3.30 after the first 15 minutes and an increase, in stages, to £8 over five hours. That is the situation in my constituency, but that trust is only doing what other trusts are doing. I do not doubt and it is within Government guidelines. I do not want older and vulnerable patients to be deterred from attending hospital. They should be able to get to their appointments in a comfortable, dignified, affordable manner and within a reasonable time.

Most NHS car parking charges have been abolished in Scotland and Wales, and I know that the Government have issued guidance to NHS trusts on the implementation of car parking charges, including the provision of discounted or free parking. These guidelines are not based in legislation and appear to have had little effect. The Labour Government in 2010 left fully costed plans to phase out charges for in-patients and their visitors, and in 2015 a private Member’s Bill on this subject gained cross-party support but was talked out. Clearly, many across the country and the House want an end to hospital car parking charges. Let us send a clear message today that there is another way forward and that this unfair stealth tax on the vulnerable must end.

4.3 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on his extremely powerful speech and on raising this important issue. I want to start with an experience that our family recently went through. My daughter started to show signs of acute appendicitis. As any family could imagine, we quickly bundled our daughter, who was in agony, into the car and drove to the hospital—it was not a very calm journey. I am sure that many Members will have had a similar experience. We were panicking and scrambling around for change so that we could park the car, then taking turns to pop out every few hours to move the car or top up the ticket. That was obviously a one-off and unbearable, but for many a trip to the hospital is sadly not a one-off experience, and they are forced to take several trips a week because of chronic illness. They are people going through the worst of times, and the cynical approach of charging them to park is unacceptable. It is not anyone’s choice to be ill, and they should not be exploited.

New figures show that the money raked in from NHS car parks in England run by private firms has increased to £500,000 every day. The £175 million that was made from hospital car parking charges in 2016-17 is equivalent to only 0.001% of the total health spend, but still, ruthless private car parking firms pocket most of it. It cannot be fair that worried family members who visit their loved ones can end up with eye-watering fines if they arrive late back to their cars. As my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said, it cannot be fair that NHS staff who have parking charges deducted from their wages are fined for parking in the wrong bay when they cannot find a space in the correct bay.

Some may recommend that regular hospital visitors use public transport, but in my constituency, Batley and Spen, the bus that used to connect Birstall with our local hospital has been cancelled, as have local bus services in many smaller communities. That has forced more people to use a car and thereby incur parking costs. My local hospital, Dewsbury and District Hospital, charges after 20 minutes, so people get 20 minutes for free. There is a reduction for blue badge holders, but they still have to pay. There is a stress-inducing pay-on-exit system, and it is quite complicated to get car parking concessions approved by hospital staff on the day. It is not an ideal situation.

Sir Mike Penning: Does the hon. Lady agree that in the 21st century, means-testing at the point of delivery, which is what we are talking about here, is morally unacceptable in an NHS of which we should be and are proud?
Tracy Brabin: I am so glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that issue, because the concession that I was talking about is available only to the patient, not to the low-paid person who may have driven the patient to hospital. The poorly person has to go and get the car parking concession. It is absolutely unfair.

A freedom of information request by Unison revealed that some hospitals charge nurses and health professionals who regularly visit hospitals up to £100 a month. As other Members have said, the cost of parking also has wider effects on the surrounding streets. I have been contacted by many constituents living around Dewsbury and District Hospital who complain that those who cannot afford car parking charges, or who think they might have to stay for several hours, park on residential streets, blocking people’s drives and making it difficult for people to park outside their own homes. Free hospital parking would end that.

We know that trusts are struggling to balance the books after years of being underfunded by the Government, but we must ensure that they are not forced to fill the funding gap by charging sick and poorly patients, their visitors and anxious relatives, and already hard-pressed NHS staff.

Car parking charges are a tax on serious illness. Labour would scrap car parking charges at all hospitals. We would fund that by raising insurance tax on private healthcare to 20%, to meet the £162 million cost of providing free parking at all NHS hospitals in England. Charities, trade unions, the British Medical Association, the Society for Acute Medicine and the public are all calling out for the Government to listen. In Scotland and Wales, car parking charges have been abolished in all but a handful of hospitals. We should show some humanity and do the same. I support the motion.

4.9 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halton) on securing this important debate.

It is clear from hon. Members’ speeches that the scandal of hospital parking charges must come to an end. Gravely ill people and people visiting relatives while in a state of distress should not be treated as cash cows by hospital car park operators. It is shocking that half of all trusts last year charged disabled people to park in some or all of their disabled parking spaces. We need to address the ridiculous inconsistency whereby hospital parking is mainly free in Wales and Scotland while trusts charge for parking in Northern Ireland and England. It is time that all hospitals abolished parking fees. Drivers must not be punished for being sick, visiting loved ones or attending medical appointments. People do not choose to be ill and should not be asked to pay for a no-choice hospital visit.

Many of my Enfield, Southgate constituents have approached me about this issue. A mother contacted me to say that after her husband took their son to the North Middlesex University Hospital accident and emergency unit with breathing difficulties in the middle of the night, he was later presented with a parking charge notice. I do not believe that people rushing to hospital with gravely ill children should be put into the position of having to worry about such matters. Imagine if my constituent had spent extra precious moments scrambling for change for parking while his son struggled to breathe. Would that have been a sensible and responsible thing for the parent of a seriously ill child to do? Of course not. That is exactly why we must get rid of these charges.

I have also been contacted by a father who had to take his young daughter to the emergency department. Throughout the evening and into the night, my constituent had to leave his daughter to feed more money into the car park meter because she was being kept in for such a long period of time—it ended up being overnight. My constituent reported seeing other people in various states of distress walking around the car park and seeming unsure of what to do. Two weeks later, my constituent received a notice telling him that he had not paid for all the time that he had been in the car park. Again, we must ask whether this is an appropriate way to treat the parents of very ill children.

We have all heard in the press about desperately ill patients who have been forced to quit work and left with bills for hundreds of pounds due to their frequent visits to hospitals. Then there are hugely unfair cases of NHS staff who have had parking charges deducted from their wages, but then have been unable to get a space and have been fined for parking in the wrong bay. Several elderly constituents have contacted me to say that they face relatively high parking charges for their regular hospital attendances.

This Sunday, 4 February, is World Cancer Day, and many of us know people who have had treatment for cancer. Anyone who knows the effects of chemotherapy will be aware of how debilitating the treatment can be. People often need a carer to help them to make the journey home. Considering the frequency of treatments for cancer and other illnesses, surely car parking charges are nothing more than a tax on the sick. As the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) pointed out, many people have no choice but to drive to their local hospital due to the infrequency of public transport.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about travel difficulties. Does he agree that reductions in the number of bus services in many areas mean that there is no alternative to parking in hospital car parks? In constituencies such as mine, which has no hospital, that means frequent journeys for people who require treatment.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. People in rural areas or who live far away from their local hospitals are unfairly affected by having poor transport networks to ferry them to hospitals, so they have no choice but to travel by car.

The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) made the excellent point that other emergency workers are not being required to pay to park at their police or fire stations. In addition, hospital staff, by taking up parking spaces, are reducing the number of spaces for patients and visitors. NHS staff should be able to park for free, but they should also be able to afford to live nearer the hospital. It is therefore ironic that we are in a situation in which NHS trusts are forced to sell land that could have been used to house NHS staff locally.

Another pressure on North Middlesex Hospital has been the fact that the closure of the accident and emergency unit at Chase Farm has resulted in far more
visitors to its A&E unit. Those additional visits meant that, between Christmas and new year, the hospital ran out of acute beds. One can only imagine how busy the hospital car park was during that period.

Many hon. Members have made excellent contributions about the need for the Government to abolish hospital parking charges. It is time that those unfair charges were scrapped and the NHS properly funded. For the sake of NHS staff, parents and visitors, I ask the Minister to bring forward measures to scrap car parking charges as soon as possible.

4.15 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an honour to speak in this debate, and indeed in any debate in which the NHS is at the heart of what is being discussed. I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing the debate to the House. As has been discussed, the matter is extremely important to patients, charities, emergency workers, volunteers, carers and NHS staff, so it is a credit to him that he secured this debate. He set out his case most eloquently and comprehensively.

The SNP Scottish Government scrapped hospital car parking charges approximately 10 years ago in all car parks that are owned by the NHS. I urge the UK Government to follow both this principle and policy.

As an NHS employee for more than 20 years, I must declare an interest. I was part of the campaign, all those many years ago, as a Unite rep, to scrap NHS parking charges. I was so pleased when we succeeded, because that has made a great difference to many people, and has saved some of the most vulnerable who are already facing so many financial difficulties from spending money on parking.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Lady has been very generous in giving way, and I thank her for her kind remarks. Given that, for the most part, hospital parking charges have been scrapped in Scotland, she must have heard about how the problem of people perhaps misusing the car parks to go shopping or whatever was dealt with.

Dr Cameron: Indeed. Where there is a will there is a way. It can happen; it can be done. Basically, it is a matter of prioritisation and making things happen. That issue can be raised with the Minister today.

Hospital car parking charges hit the most vulnerable people in our society: disabled people; those who are chronically and even terminally ill; families caring for terminally ill children; and those who require repeat appointments and lengthy hospital stays. Before the change in Scotland, I heard about families and couples who had had their cars impounded because their partner was giving birth in the maternity unit and things did not go quite to time, as happens so often in these cases, and they were unable to feed their meter. At a time of utmost importance for the family, that is one of the last things that we would want to have on our mind.

NHS staff, particularly those on community-based shifts, are also penalised. They often have no choice but to use their cars to travel from the hospital to make community visits, so they cannot travel by public transport to their hospital base. There is something fundamentally wrong with charging our valued NHS staff to get to their work of saving lives when their pay has already been affected for so many years by caps.

The SNP is clear that the founding principle of the NHS is services that are free for everyone—services that are not out for profit. We have heard today from hon. Members that it is sometimes cheaper to park in town centres than to park at hospitals. That just cannot be right. By 2015, getting rid of hospital car parking charges had saved patients and staff in Scotland more than £25 million. Parking charges are basically a tax on NHS treatment, and that cannot be allowed to go on. As chair of the all-party group for disability, I am particularly concerned that people with disabilities, who we know are more likely to experience poverty, are being doubly financially penalised if they require medical treatment, as in England they have to pay for hospital parking—should they have retained their Motability vehicles of course.

The right hon. Member for Harlow is right that there are pragmatic ways to address the issue. The things that are said to prevent change from coming about can be overcome. He discussed tokens and other pragmatic ideas that can be put in place and that can work. We have made this work—we made it a success—so it can happen. With the will, there is the way.

I will take a brief moment to extend the issue from hospital parking charges by addressing parking for NHS staff in health centres. I believe that all health centres in my constituency have free parking, aside from the new Hunter Community Health Centre multi-storey car park. I have been in a somewhat intransigent negotiation with NHS Lanarkshire for more than a year, as only a limited amount of permit parking has been made available for staff. This has unfortunately meant that some staff—often those in lower pay bands, such as admin staff—face extortionate weekly charges for getting to work. That is unprincipled and unfair. Why should we penalise only staff who work in a particular health centre?

On Fridays, I have taken to monitoring the free spaces in the car park. I can assure the House that it is half empty every single Friday, which is usually an extremely busy day for car parks elsewhere, so there are enough spaces for the staff. I once again urge NHS Lanarkshire’s chief executive, Calum Campbell, to reverse this decision and ensure that permits for staff, as requested, are restored and that this principled step is taken. I will be writing to him after the debate, which I am sure he will look forward to, as he always does. I will let him know that he has been mentioned in the House of Commons once again.

I thank hon. Members from all parties who have taken part in this debate: the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for Telford (Lucy Allan), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous); the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who raised an important point about people in rural areas being badly affected; the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who made an extremely pertinent point about volunteer drivers; and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who worked for the NHS as fellow Unite rep in my time, and who has done great work for the NHS.

Everyone who has spoken has urged the Government to act. We do not need any superficial rhetoric, but we need action. I ask the Minister and the Government
to act by putting NHS patients, staff, carers, relatives, volunteers, emergency workers and those who care about the NHS first. We are all requesting change. This request must be taken forward, and I trust that the Minister will do so.

4.22 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this debate on a very important subject. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing this subject forward. He and I agree on most aspects of the issue, and he has campaigned passionately on it for so many years.

Robert Halfon: As you have.

Julie Cooper: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that comment.

I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House because it seems that there is much agreement on the matter. It is heartening to hear Members mentioning—and fully understanding—its impact on patients, visitors, carers and NHS staff. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) mentioned the effect on the greater transportation system.

The hon. Members for Telford (Lucy Allan) and for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) made powerful speeches, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who accused the system of profiteering. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made an important point on behalf of staff. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) referred to the burden of having to pay to go to work. My hon. Friends the Members for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned personal family issues when people are taken away from a sick family member’s bed to replenish parking meters.

No one likes to pay to park, but to pay to park at a hospital really does add insult to injury. We are not talking about a luxury experience, a shopping trip or a fun night out; we are talking about paying to visit a hospital. People are not queuing up to go to the hospital café, as the hon. Member for Telford pointed out. No one goes to hospital because they want to. People go because they are sick. They go for treatment, for surgery, for chemotherapy and for kidney dialysis, and they go to visit loved ones. In short, hospitals are not destinations of choice: people go because they must. I am quite shocked that it is free to park at Trafford shopping centre yet I must pay to park at my local hospital.

During the past three years, I have spent hours and hours visiting my mother in hospital. I have often gone backwards and forwards two or three times a day, juggling hospital visiting around work and other commitments. I have to say that it has all been very distressing. As I leave the hospital each night worried, wondering what tomorrow will bring, the last thing I want to do is to stand outside in the cold queuing to pay for my parking. This burden is, of course, in addition to the actual cost.

Some hospital car parks demand payment in advance, as we have heard. This brings its own set of problems, because patients and visitors have to judge how long each hospital visit will last, and then often have to leave the ward or treatment room to feed the ever-hungry parking machine. Of course, running to and fro between the car park and the hospital is impossible for someone hooked up to a dialysis machine. Many dialysis patients suffer with multiple conditions and are unable to work, so paying to park three times a week for dialysis sessions that each last four to five hours is a real financial burden for them and their carers.

Paula in my constituency relies on the weekly £62.70 carer’s allowance she has received since she was forced to give up work to provide round-the-clock care for her husband, who suffered a severe stroke. He has been in hospital for the past month. She has visited every day, often staying for two to three hours to support and comfort him. This costs her more than £20 a week. By the time she has paid for her petrol, half her carer’s allowance is gone.

We have a national health service that was set up to be free at the point of delivery. It was established in 1948 to make healthcare a right for all, but that is not what is happening. Even though hospital car parking is free in Scotland and Wales, here in England, hospital users are forced to pay often extortionate rates, with charges varying from £1.50 an hour to £4 an hour. We are charging the chronically ill, the terminally ill, and their carers and visitors. More than half of all people over 76 have conditions that require regular hospital appointments, and hospital car parking charges are an extra burden for them and their families. The Alzheimer’s Society reports that patients with dementia stay five to seven times longer in hospital than other patients aged over 65. Hospitals can be frightening places for people with that condition. They rely on family and carers visiting them to give support. Parking charges are an extra burden that these families could well do without.

The Patients Association has commented:

“For patients, parking charges amount to an extra charge for being ill….Hospital appointments are often delayed or last longer than expected, so even if you pay for parking you could end up being fined if your ticket runs out. Visiting a hospital can be stressful enough without the added concern of whether you need to top up the parking.”

Macmillan Cancer Support says:

“The core principle of the NHS is to provide free healthcare for all at the point of access. But sadly some cancer patients in England are paying extortionate hospital car parking charges in order to access treatment for a life-threatening illness.”

Bliss, the charity for babies born prematurely or sick, says in its “It’s not a game: the very real costs of having a premature or sick baby” report that these charges can contribute to the financial burden that many families face when their babies need neonatal care.

In the midst of all this misery, the average hospital trust is making £1 million of profit from car parking charges, and several hospitals the length and breadth of the country report profits of over £3 million. Last year, NHS hospitals made a record £174 million from charging patients, visitors and staff. In addition, 40 trusts report additional income from parking fines.

Some people point out that public transport is an option that avoids parking charges. Public transport provision has been reduced in response to funding cuts, but even where it exists, there are many for whom it is not an option. Some patients are too unwell or too frail
to travel on a bus. Others, including cancer patients attending for chemotherapy, have reduced immunity and must avoid contact with the general public.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Lady is making a compelling case, as have most Members. Public transport has its place for out-patients and so on, where it is available, but imagine someone going into labour and saying, “Can I wait for the No. 2 bus, please?” This is farcical. We need car parks to be there for people when they need them, rather than being a cash cow.

Julie Cooper: I entirely agree and thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Patients and carers are often balancing work and other commitments, and have tight time schedules that preclude public transport. I have spoken to the parents of a terminally ill child who left their child’s bedside only to tend to the needs of their other children. They do not have time to wait for a bus.

No discussion of hospital car parking charges would be complete without a consideration of their impact on NHS staff, which Members have spoken about eloquently. These staff pay to go to work and are still not even guaranteed a space. That can lead to them being late for the beginning of their shift. Some hospital staff whose shift overruns because they are tending to patients needs face fines for overstaying their parking time. That is clearly no way to treat our health professionals. It is no wonder we face a crisis in recruitment and retention.

Government action to date has been limited to a series of recommendations on hospital car parking. Currently the Government recommend that hospital car parking charges should not be applied to blue badge holders, carers, visitors of relatives who are gravely ill, and patients who have frequent out-patient appointments. In reality, those recommendations count for very little. In fact, the trend is to increase car parking charges and reduce the number of those who are exempt. Many hospital trusts have even begun to charge blue badge holders.

It is not good enough for the Government to abdicate responsibility. This is a matter of principle. Scandalously, Conservative Members have previously argued in the Chamber that the NHS needs the income from parking charges. I have no doubt that the NHS needs this revenue, as it is common knowledge that the service has been starved of funding since 2010, but is it right that we fund our health service by taxing the sick?

Labour Members will have none of this. I am proud that the next Labour Government will ensure that our NHS is properly funded and will abolish car parking charges at all hospitals. To pay for that, we will increase the premium tax on all private health insurance policies. Crucially, no hospital will lose funding as a result of our policy.

In 2015, I asked the Government via a private Member’s Bill to exempt carers from hospital car parking charges. At the time, that relatively modest proposal was met with derision from Government Members. My attempt to remove this financial burden was dismissed as a worthy aim, but not worthy enough for the Government to support. Indeed, Conservative Members went to great lengths to talk the Bill out.

Times, I hope, have changed. Today I am asking, along with the right hon. Member for Harlow, that the Government remove all car parking charges at NHS hospitals. Today, we ask the Government to do the decent thing by removing this tax on the sick and taking action to ensure that we truly have an NHS that is free at the point of access.

4.32 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): May I begin by commending my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing the debate? Members across the House recognise that he has campaigned assiduously on this issue for some time, as he has on many campaigns, and he has already had some success, as reflected in the Government guidelines issued in 2014. However, it is right, in the light of the concerns raised across the House, that the issue is revisited. This has been a very constructive debate, granted by the Backbench Business Committee, and I commend all Members who have contributed and informed the House of what is happening in their constituencies.

I do not think anyone in the House has any issue with the desirability of scrapping car parking charges. As English Members of Parliament—it is different for our Scottish National party colleagues—we all pay these charges, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said in a constructive way. We all know that they are unpopular with our constituents and are a concern for staff working hard within the NHS.

For my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) highlighted, the charges predate this Government. This issue has long been debated in the House, by parties on both sides. The issue is not the desirability of what is sought by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow. The issue is the execution and how it would be done in a way that does not have unintended consequences, and how those might be mitigated. I think we got a flavour of some of those unintended consequences in the constructive contributions made by Members on both sides of the House.

Implicit in the motion is the suggestion that car parking charges apply in all NHS hospitals. It is not in the specific wording, but the impression from the debate has been that they apply across the NHS as a whole. However, as hon. Members will be well aware, 67% of NHS sites do not charge at all at present. We are talking about a subset of the NHS where charges apply, albeit that the subset is particularly concentrated in the acute sector, from which many of the examples we have heard come. For example, mental health patients, who are often among the most vulnerable of our constituents seeking the support of the NHS, do not on the whole face charges because those parking facilities are not charged for. This tends to be an issue in the acute sector.

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, but I must say that I disagree with what he has said. Hospital car parking charges in England are widespread, and we just have to go from one hospital to another to see that. As I said, nearly 50% of hospitals are charging the disabled, for example.

Stephen Barclay: With respect to my right hon. Friend, it is a statement of fact, as confirmed by my officials—I am very happy to correspond with him further about
it—that 67% of NHS sites do not charge. If one wants to get into the definition of a hospital, it actually covers more than acute services. I do not want to get distracted by that point. The one I was seeking to make is to recognise that this issue is particularly concentrated on acute hospitals, and that is the issue before us.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby recognised that there is considerable room for flexibility within trusts. One of the key issues in this debate is the distinction between charges covering the maintenance of car parks, and how a reduction in charges may lead to a reduction in the number of spaces and the quality of the facilities—we heard, for example, about the state of the car parks in north Manchester—and those involving profiteering, with charges going beyond of the cost of maintenance. The hon. Lady is concerned about that, and the interplay with the current guidance. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) also mentioned that when she highlighted the distinction between the charges at her hospital and those of the local authority, and raised the issue of transparency.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) expressed concerns about transparency in relation to blue badge holders. They are not means-tested, so an affluent blue badge holder could be spared a charge while a less affluent visitor to a hospital is charged. Transparency about how the guidance is applied is therefore a factor, as has been recognised.

Sir Mike Penning: May I push the Minister a little bit on blue badge holders? Quite rightly, blue badge holders are not means-tested. The key is their ability to access services. It does not matter how much they have in the bank. If they need to go to a hospital and they have a blue badge, surely spaces should be free and as close to the point of entry as possible.

Stephen Barclay: Absolutely. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the guidance speaks to that. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned the 64 pages of guidance. I am very happy to take away and look at why there are 64 pages of it. Blue badges are part of the conversation that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow began in 2014.

Robert Halfon: I have huge respect for my hon. Friend, but the fact is that the guidelines in relation to blue badges are not working. According to the FOI request—this is backed by charities such as CLIC Sargent—up to 50% of hospitals are still charging disabled people to park. There is no point talking about the guidelines if people with disabilities are still being forced to pay to park at hospitals in England.

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to look at such cases and to speak to those trusts to understand this better, but I was making a point about the complexity of the issue and how to manage reducing the charges. For example, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) will no doubt be aware, there were local media reports over the summer about a hospital car park in Inverness being used by those going to the airport; there was displacement there. We do not want a solution that constrains capacity for those using the hospital and makes access more difficult.

Some of these issues have a very local flavour. That was recognised in the debate: the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said that shoppers do not seek to use the car park at the north Manchester site, whereas my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) was concerned that simply removing charges would cause displacement at his hospital. The point is that there are local factors, just as there are with legacy PFI contracts, including in Scotland and Wales, where charges are still made under contracts going back to 2008.

Julie Cooper: Would the Minister accept, though, that people being ill and suffering distress at hospitals is not a local issue? It is a national issue. The burden of hospital car parking charges, wherever they occur, ought to be a concern of the Government.

Stephen Barclay: Of course, but equally the hon. Lady must recognise that the fact that charges are still being applied under PFI agreements put in place by a previous Government in 2008 signals that there are often complexities, in terms of what can be done when different factors apply. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull highlighted, there are factors relating to displacement. That is why trusts have local discretion, but as the House has discussed today, we need to understand the transparency around that and how it is applied.

Sir Mike Penning: Will the Minister give way? He is being very generous.

Stephen Barclay: I will, but then I will press on, because I want to give my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow some time.

Sir Mike Penning: I am sure we have time, on this important issue. The Minister raised the issue of complexity. Clearly, as has been shown by Members across the House today, some cases would be easier to address than others. I fully accept, as I said in my speech, that some ludicrous PFIs were put in place, both before the present Administration came to power and since. Do the easy ones first; that is the answer. That is what Scotland did. Then come to the more difficult ones. Ruling out any change at all because there are some difficult issues is surely not the way forward.

Stephen Barclay: A point was raised about whether free parking could be addressed through tokens and barriers, but colleagues in the NHS raised concerns about how that would apply, in terms of any burden on staff. We heard examples of frequent users of a hospital being able to access concessionary schemes, but staff have raised concerns about the impact on them, and how they might be expected to assist in the administration of the scheme in regard to those visiting hospitals as a one-off.

The pertinent point about the impact on staff was raised by Members from across the Chamber. Many Members have been visited recently by representatives from the Royal College of Nursing, regarding the wider discussions between NHS employers and the RCN on pay. It was helpful to hear in the debate contributions about the RCN’s understanding of the benefits, pressures and issues.
Across the House, there is no question, as was reflected by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, about the desirability of addressing iniquities and variance, and about the scope to ensure compliance with the guidance, but we need to be mindful of unintended consequences, and particularly about constraining the car parking available for those who need it. I am happy to continue my discussions with my right hon. Friend on this policy. I commend him and colleagues on a very constructive debate.

4.44 pm

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Members who have spoken from both sides of the House. The Minister has heard about the madness of the guidelines not working, the problems with public transport, parking being given over to football club supporters, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, and the moving stories of families and the problems that people with severe illness have had to face.

I have to say, I am incredibly disappointed with the Minister’s response. I gave him my speech in advance because I wanted him to look at this seriously, but a lot of what he read is very much what we might think would come from officials. It is a great disappointment. He opened his speech by saying that he believes in the desirability of this, but then gave no indication of how. Many hospitals have hospital car parking charges, as figures show. It is not beyond the wit of man to develop a number plate recognition system to deal with the problems of people misusing hospital car parking.

The Minister said that we will just try to make sure the guidelines work. Well, even if the guidelines were working, they would still mean that many hospitals charge millions of patients and visitors. On both sides of the House, we constantly talk about the billions being spent on the NHS and whether they should be. Most members of the public find that hard to understand, but this is real and it affects millions of people who go to hospital regularly—as has been said again and again today, not out of choice, but because they have to. This is real and substantive, and a solution would not cost a huge amount of money in terms of the overall NHS budget. There are different solutions to pay for it, so that the NHS is not harmed.

I strongly urge the Minister to look again at this issue and realise that there is cross-party consensus in the House. Many Government Members want the situation changed. When this issue comes up again, I urge him to come back with a more substantive solution to scrap hospital parking charges. That is why I moved the motion today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House calls on the Government to undertake a consultation to identify the most efficient means of abolishing car parking charges at NHS hospitals in England for patients, staff and visitors and to provide the timescale for its implementation.

PETITION

Myanmar’s Muslim Ethnic Minority

4.47 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents; it has 356 signatures from people seeking an end to the violence and persecution of the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar.

The petitioners request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to make representation to the government of Myanmar to cease all violence in Myanmar; further to call for immediate entry aid into Myanmar; further to call for the UK not to supply arms or military training to the military; and further to call on the UK government to do all within its powers to ensure the perpetrators are brought to the international court of justice to be tried for crimes against humanity.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Stretford and Urmston, declares that urgent action should be taken to stop the violence against Myanmar’s Muslim ethnic minority, the Rohingya, including genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; further declares that the petitioners cannot continue to stand by and watch the displacement of hundreds and thousands as a genocide unfolds; further declares that the petitioners note that the Rohingya Muslims are not currently recognised as citizens in Myanmar; and further urges the implementation of the Rakhine commission recommendations chaired by Kofi Annan.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to make representation to the government of Myanmar to cease all violence in Myanmar; further to call for immediate entry aid into Myanmar; further to call for the UK not to supply arms or military training to the military; and further to call on the UK government to do all within its powers to ensure the perpetrators are brought to the international court of justice to be tried for crimes against humanity. And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Housing, Planning and Infrastructure: Essex

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

4.48 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate. I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his role, and the opportunity to hear about my constituency.

My constituency covers three lower tiers of local planning authorities while Essex County Council has responsibility for waste and minerals, which partly explains why the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government holds such a high volume of correspondence from me on behalf of my constituents. If the Minister visits Witham, which he is very welcome to do, he will see at first hand the boundless economic potential of this part of Essex and of the entire county. He will also note the appetite among our local communities to take a positive, proactive approach to housing, planning and infrastructure. Many parishes are working on neighbourhood development plans and want to deliver on the localism agenda advocated by our Government. They want to exercise the powers at their disposal to allocate preferred sites for housing and business uses, and for protection.

We want to deliver ambitious plans to support economic growth and bring more local homes to our communities. We want and need infrastructure to support growth, including the widening of the A12, the upgrading of the A120, and investment in the Great Eastern main line. I welcome today’s announcement of more than £7 million for the Heybridge flood alleviation and regeneration scheme, in the district of Maldon just outside my constituency, and I hope for more investment rounds to support planning and development.

We recognise that development brings with it employment opportunities, investment in infrastructure and new public services, including schools and GP services, but that should not mean housing at any cost and in any location. I want to draw the Minister’s attention to some issues and causes of concern in which localism is being undermined and opportunities to deliver locally led planning are being missed. I appreciate and respect the fact that the Minister cannot give detailed responses on specific planning cases that are live and under consideration, but I hope that he and his Department will reflect on them.

First, the Minister will be aware of the Secretary of State’s decision to call in planning applications for up to 260 new dwellings on two sites in Hatfield Peverel, at Stonepath Meadow and Gleneagles Way. A hearing took place in December, and I pay tribute to the residents in Hatfield Peverel and members of our parish council who came together to oppose those unwelcome developments. Their dedication to their local community has been outstanding. Both developments are outside the settlement boundary in the current and emerging local plans and the emerging neighbourhood plan, because they would be detrimental to the countryside. They would also place unacceptable pressures on an already full general practice, with no guarantees of any financial contributions to enhance the service.

Our local schools are also full, but no contributions are being sought because of the community infrastructure levy pooling restrictions. The applicants seem to think it acceptable for primary school pupils—children—to be forced to walk more than two miles along the busy A12 to a school in Witham. As for secondary school pupils, First Bus is axing the 72 bus route, which connects Hatfield Peverel with Maltings Academy and New Rickstones Academy in Witham, so there will be no direct bus service for pupils in the village to use.

We are not opposed to housing in Hatfield Peverel—quite the reverse. That wonderful village is already set to accommodate new housing in an emerging local plan focused elsewhere in the village in the comprehensive redevelopment area covering land between the A12 and the Great Eastern main line. Some 250 new dwellings are already—and rightly—going through the planning process. However, the village is taking its fair share of new housing and cannot take any more.

There are many other reasons why the two applications are totally unsuitable for development. I trust that the Secretary of State will consider those points, and the strong objections that have been made, when the inspector hands him the report of his findings.

Although the Minister cannot comment on the specifics of the two applications, I would welcome his clarification of some wider issues that have arisen. First, councils such as Braintree, and parish councils such as Hatfield Peverel, which are in the process of putting together local and neighbourhood plans that embrace the principles of localism, are being undermined by planning applications many of which pre-empt and undermine those democratic processes. Other villages, such as Kelvedon and Feering, have been similarly bombarded with applications. Those communities need to be protected, and they need the Government to allow them time to put their plans in place.

Secondly, the issue of the five-year land supply of deliverable sites has arisen. Speculative, predatory developers are seeking to exploit the council’s claim that it does not have a five-year land supply. The main reason for Braintree’s identified supply shortfall is the failure of the last Labour Government’s regional spatial strategies, whose housing targets were lower than those in the most recent objectively assessed housing need research. I hope that the Minister can assure communities in the district that they will not be punished because of the last Labour Government’s failures, and that decision makers can exercise discretion over the housing supply figures. Councils need flexibility on this issue, and that includes the ability to use the Liverpool method when it best suits them, in respect of, for instance, sites in draft allocations. I hope that the Minister will be able to give some assurances about that as well.

My third point is on the effectiveness of pre-application consultation. In Hatfield Peverel, one applicant issued a so-called consultation that contained false information about education and health provision—which the applicant had not bothered to check—and sought to frighten residents. It also submitted a planning application within a few weeks of securing rights from landowners to promote the site and less than two working days after holding a pre-application discussion with council officers; that is not nearly enough time to take account of local comments. Then, when the council and local community were taking time to resolve issues that had been raised...
as a result of the applicant’s failures—such as the impact on schools, the NHS and landscapes—the applicant had the audacity to threaten to take the application to the Planning Inspectorate for non-determination.

For other sites in the district, such referrals to the Planning Inspectorate to deliberately bypass local decision making have been made. This abuse of the planning system must stop, and I hope the Ministry will consider how to address these problems. There are some good examples of positive developer engagement with local communities and we need to make sure that more of that happens. Those who fiddle consultations and circumvent pre-application engagement should be sanctioned for doing so.

Another major development issue affecting my constituency is the proposed garden settlement for the Colchester Borough Council/Braintree District Council border. That proposal has the potential to deliver thousands of new homes and bring in urgently needed infrastructure upgrades and public services. The Government have recognised this and provided over £1.3 million to Colchester Borough Council to work on this project.

However, a number of questions and concerns have been raised about the proposals. Primarily, these relate to infrastructure and public services. Residents want to be assured that if this project gets the green light, significant new infrastructure and public services will be put in place and phased in to meet future demand. It is pointless to put in the infrastructure and services once the developments are being occupied; they must be put in in advance, and to a clear timetable. That means that the Ministry, the Department for Transport, the Treasury, local councils and the private sector will need to come together to ensure that the funding is in place to upgrade the A120, widen the A12 and increase capacity on the Great Eastern main line with a passing loop, as well as providing for new GP surgeries and schools.

Questions have also been raised about the delivery vehicle, local engagement, availability of employment opportunities and how the councils have spent the moneys provided to them by the Government. The garden settlement proposals are in the process of being examined as part of the local plan process, but I urge the Minister and Secretary of State to look carefully at these matters. Some residents are opposed to this project; others are in favour. However, it is essential that if this major project goes ahead, it is done correctly and done in the right way.

One of the other reasons why there are concerns about garden settlements is the appalling record of Colchester Borough Council. On planning matters, this Lib Dem and Labour-run council is rotten to the core. The Minister has the background on this and will know that last year, the Secretary of State granted planning permission for a new leisure and retail development known as Tollgate Village in Stanway. The development was supported by an overwhelming majority of local people and transforms a derelict site into a development creating hundreds of new local jobs and tens of millions of pounds of inward investment.

However, Colchester Borough Council tried everything possible to block it. It claimed it would be a loss of employment land, even though there was no interest in using the site in that way. It tried to pit Tollgate Village against Colchester town centre, and it even tried to smear me by making up a false claim that my representations in writing were somehow improper, and leaked that to the local media. It behaved disgracefully and yet not a single senior officer or senior political figure has taken responsibility. They blocked the creation of jobs, prevented investment and wasted public money.

Close to that site, the council acted in a similar way on the Stane Park scheme, another private investment project which it blocked but which was granted consent on appeal. Also in Stanway, on the Lakelands housing development, the council completely neglected and ignored residents in causing the loss of a green space at Churchfields Avenue and Partridge Way, in an area of land known as parcel SR6.

That area of land should have been landscaped; it was not, as the council failed to enforce a planning condition. It was then designated for protection as open space in the council’s local plan. However, behind closed doors and without any consultation, the council allowed a new masterplan to be approved that designated the site for intensive housing. Residents were made aware of this only when the reserved matters application was made in 2015. Despite complaints and concerns about the process, the council approved the construction of 27 new dwellings and the loss of that space in autumn 2016.

The matter has been with the local government ombudsman for over a year due to the complexities of the issues involved. This shows once again how Colchester Borough Council is problematic and not fit for purpose. It allowed an area that should have been green open space to be lost without any consultation, and kept residents in the dark for years.

5 pm

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

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

Priti Patel: I shall move on to another planning area outside Colchester borough. Thousands of my constituents and residents across Essex and beyond are deeply concerned about the prospect of the Rivenhall incinerator receiving further planning consents and becoming operational. The incinerator was originally granted planning permission by the last Labour Government in March 2010, just weeks before the general election. Since then, however, the applicants have made a number of changes to the site. It has been described as an integrated waste management facility, but the recycling capacity has been reduced and the waste incineration capacity increased by 65% from 360,000 to 595,000 tonnes.

Another planning application is being considered by Essex County Council to increase the stack height to help the site meet Environment Agency requirements. However, given the concerns with the incinerator, the impact on the environment and the new proposals on waste put forward by the Government, the incinerator is not only unwelcome but out of date. It has no energy recovery mechanisms, which makes it all the more damaging to the environment. My constituents would like the latest planning application to be refused, and called in by the Secretary of State to ensure its refusal if necessary. I trust that the Minister will convey that message to the Secretary of State and look at all the submissions that will be coming his way.
My constituent, John Patrick, has had a long chain of correspondence and representations with my hon. Friend's Department. He is well known to the Department. He came to see me (Priti Patel) on securing this debate on housing, planning and infrastructure in Essex. It is great to see her being supported in the Chamber tonight by her county colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and for Colchester (Will Quince) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). She is a strong campaigner for her constituency. The sheer volume of cases and correspondence from her held by the Ministry is a testament to the diligent way in which she pursues these issues. I thank her for the opportunity to debate these extremely important topics.

In her speech, my right hon. Friend referred to a number of planning cases. As she kindly acknowledged, I am not in a position to comment in detail on the merits of the planning applications or appeals that are ongoing. The cases that she referred to that affect sites in the village of Hatfield Peverel are being considered by a planning inspector, who will provide the Secretary of State with a report to consider in due course. All material matters associated with the proposals will be considered as part of the process, and my right hon. Friend can be assured that her comments will no doubt be noted.

In respect of the applications relating to the waste management facility on the former Rivenhall airfield, my right hon. Friend has provided some of the background. The current planning applications that are in train are a matter for Essex County Council, as the relevant planning authority, to consider. However, the Ministry is aware of the requests for the applications to be called in, and they will be considered in the appropriate way.

Turning to John Patrick and my right hon. Friend's points about his case, I can assure her that we will carefully consider and reply to Mr Patrick's correspondence. As an aside, representing as I do a highly rural constituency, I fully recognise the importance of rural enterprise in driving prosperity. I was interested to hear about the case involving Uttlesford District Council. Once again, I am of course not in a position to comment on a current planning application but, on her general points about the provision of affordable housing, we are keen to see approaches taken to deliver more affordable housing. As set out in the housing White Paper, the Government are keen to promote more opportunities for small and medium-sized developers to deliver that housing.

My right hon. Friend made reference to her concerns about Colchester Borough Council. The case of the Lakeland site is currently with the local government ombudsman, and we will take note of the outcome of its inquiries, but we cannot intervene directly in that process. In relation to the Tollgate Village project, an inspector conducting the appeal inquiry produced a report that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State carefully considered before accepting the recommendation to grant planning permission. We are aware of the council's position and of the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham about the council's approach to the application. More broadly, as for every single local authority, ultimate accountability comes through the ballot box, and I know from first-hand experience that my right hon. Friend is a top-rate campaigner.

My right hon. Friend also touched on North Essex Garden Communities, which is one of 24 new locally-led garden cities, towns and villages that the Government are currently supporting. Together, they have the potential to deliver 220,000 new homes across England. In general terms, the Government believe that garden communities offer the potential to secure considerable new housing, employment opportunities, modern physical infrastructure and new public services. That is why the Government provide some funding to support local authorities, such as those in Essex, to develop these proposals.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) gave me permission to intervene, and I congratulate her on securing this debate. We are all here because we are concerned about the effects of these garden communities. They must produce quality communities. I know the Department is concerned that it is about not just housing numbers but the creation of quality communities with the necessary infrastructure. The A120 and the A12 are vital pieces of infrastructure that must be upgraded in advance of the creation of the new homes. Will my hon. Friend include that in his consideration of these matters?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham are absolutely right to raise their constituents’ concerns that the additional
housing must be supported by the right infrastructure and public services, at the right time. The Government and I wholeheartedly agree with that, which is why in the autumn Budget the Government more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund, dedicating an additional £2.7 billion to bring the total fund to £5 billion.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who is also my constituency neighbour, being an Essex champion and initiating this debate. The loss to the Government is certainly a win for Essex. Given what my hon. Friend the Minister has said, does he agree that new housing and infrastructure in Essex should be accompanied by support for substantial regeneration in towns that have real problems, such as Harlow, where the town centre is decaying because everything was built almost at the same time? Many good things are happening but we need desperate help with the regeneration of our town centre, for example.

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Economic regeneration and, indeed, the boundless economic optimism that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham talked about are something the Government are keen to see and should actively support through these proposals and through the infrastructure investment in places, like Harlow, where it can make a difference.

The housing infrastructure fund is designed to provide exactly the kinds of projects that both my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex talked about—key infrastructure that unlocks housing growth. Just today, the Government announced 133 successful HIF projects, which will help to unlock a potential 200,000 new homes. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham mentioned, that includes £7.3 million for a flood relief scheme next to her constituency in Maldon and £5.5 million of funding to unlock more than 500 homes in Colchester by accelerating the delivery of 22 acres for housing development—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester will welcome that investment.

A forward fund element of the HIF will also be available to the uppermost tier of local authorities in England for a small number of strategic and high-impact infrastructure projects for bids of up to £250 million. Expressions of interest for that funding are being assessed, and I am delighted to tell the House and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham that the county of Essex has applied to the fund, including for infrastructure specifically to support the North Essex garden communities. The best proposals from across the country will be shortlisted to go through to co-development in the coming weeks. Local authorities will then submit final business cases, with successful bids being announced as early as this autumn.

More generally, my right hon. Friend is right to highlight that garden settlement community proposals are still subject to examination as part of the local plan process. The hearings with respect to the examination of the local plans were concluded last month, as she will know, but there can be assurance that any responses made by her constituents either to the Planning Inspectorate or to the council as part of the draft plan consultation will be considered by the inspector in his determination.

Further, I understand that the Planning Inspectorate has sought reassurance that all matters raised by consultees on the draft plan have been provided and will hold further hearings if procedurally necessary.

My right hon. Friend spoke in detail about local plans. New homes need to be provided through up-to-date local plans, which are produced in consultation with local people. I welcome the progress that Braintree, Tendring and Colchester Councils have made on their local plan preparations. Up-to-date plans that are produced in consultation with local communities are a vital element of the planning system. They are the starting point for planning decisions by local planning authorities and planning inspectors.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, local authorities are required to identify a five-year land supply of deliverable housing sites. Identifying a five-year supply of housing sites provides clarity to local communities and developers on where homes should be built so that development is planned, rather than a result of speculative application. Where there is insufficient available land on which housing can realistically be delivered, however, there are measures in place that help to identify suitable sites.

As my right hon. Friend acknowledged, Government guidance states that local authorities should aim to deal with undersupply within five years, where possible. However, decision makers have the flexibility to consider each case on its merits, and it is for local authorities to present their particular case to the relevant decision makers.

Our housing White Paper acknowledges that the current policy on five-year land supply has been effective in delivering homes, but has had some negative effects, including an increased number of appeals. Through our White Paper, the Government proposed reforms to how land supply is calculated to give more certainty. The proposal offers local authorities the opportunity to have their five-year housing land supply agreed on an annual basis and fixed for a one-year period. It is intended that this ability to fix will reduce the number and complexity of appeals by providing greater certainty to all parties.

The White Paper also indicated that clearer, more transparent guidance will set out how the five-year land supply should be calculated. The responses to this consultation are currently being considered, and I can tell my right hon. Friend that revised national planning guidance will be published for comment alongside the consultation on the national planning policy framework, before Easter this year.

My right hon. Friend next referred to the production of neighbourhood plans and the role that they play in empowering local communities. I note with delight that neighbourhood planning is being embraced in her constituency, with at least 10 neighbourhood planning groups being active and, as she said, doing their best to support the Government’s localism agenda. The Government want to support such groups, and we have made £23 million available from 2018 to 2022 through a neighbourhood planning support programme. She highlighted her concerns about whether neighbourhood plans in development get the status they deserve in the planning process if comments that are, in her words, “bombarded” with applications. The NPPF is clear that weight may be given to emerging neighbourhood plans. We have also laid out guidance to set out where
circumstances may justify the refusal of planning permission on grounds that an application would be premature in relation to an emerging neighbourhood plan.

On the points that my right hon. Friend made about pre-application consultation, the Government believe effective consultation is an important part of the planning process. We have clear and detailed expectations, both statutory and in guidance, regarding the consultation of parties affected by planning applications. It is for the local planning authority to ensure that this consultation takes place properly and in accordance with these guidelines. If there are points of concern, they should be raised with the authority as soon as possible.

In conclusion, we have covered an extensive range of topics in this short debate this evening. It seems to me that the Business Secretary and Chancellor should take note: my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham is single-handedly doing her bit to drive up Britain’s productivity. In seriousness, this is a testament to the energy and passion with which she cares about her constituents, and wants their concerns aired and listened to by Government. I commend her for achieving exactly that this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

5.18 pm

House adjourned.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish to correct the record of my answer yesterday to my hon. Friend. The Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). He is aware of this point of order.

Yesterday, I answered a question based on my honest recollection of a conversation. As I explained yesterday, I considered what I understood to be the suggestion being put to me as implausible because of the long-standing well-regarded impartiality of the civil service. The audio of that conversation is now available, and I am glad that the record stands corrected.

In the context of that audio, I accept that I should have corrected or dismissed the premise of my hon. Friend’s question. I have apologised to Mr Charles Grant, who is an honest and trustworthy man. As I have put on record many times, I have the highest regard for our hard-working civil servants. I am grateful for this opportunity to correct the record and I apologise to the House.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill

Second Reading

9.35 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move, That the House be now called into Committee.

It is good to see you in your place for this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. In proposing this Bill, I have not made things easy for myself. It contains four separate main proposals spanning four different Government Departments and potentially four different Ministers. It is not a Government handout Bill, and to complicate matters, three of the four original Ministers involved were moved as a result of the recent reshuffle. It has been a stressful few weeks. I know how hard it is to get a private Member’s Bill on the statute book, even when it contains a straightforward single measure, let alone four, so on the face of it I am being greedy—but for good reason.

In more than 20 years of entering the private Members’ Bill ballot at the start of the Session, my name has never once come out of the hat, and it probably will not again in whatever years or months I have left here. So as this is likely my only opportunity, I have been ambitious in trying to include as many of the good causes that I have tried to promote in this place, in two cases through ten-minute rule Bills in recent years. So I am a private Member’s Bill novice after almost 21 years in this House and I ask the House to be gentle with me.

It has not been easy to keep all the ducks in a row across four Government Departments, but I am grateful that they have all in turn met with support from Ministers such that the Bill can now proceed into Committee, with the will of the House. I freely admit that it has not been an easy process and at times it has been a very frustrating one. I place on record my thanks for the advice, support and patience of Farrah Bhatti in the private Bill Office, which has been invaluable.

The frustration has been that, from the very start, I offered to be as flexible as possible with Ministers with the wording of the Bill, and to sit down with departmental officials to agree on the terminology so that we could make progress with a Bill that had Government support. While at various times I secured agreement in principle to the main contents of the Bill from the revolving cast list of Ministers, it has literally been only in the past week that officials have sat down with me to talk turkey and final details have been thrashed out. Hence my apologies for the very late publication of the Bill just in time. It is only in the last week that we have secured the lead Minister, and I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), to the Dispatch Box; I am sure that all is going to end well.

The upshot of all this is that there is not as much detail and commitment in the Bill as I would originally have liked. There will be much work to be done in Committee and thereafter, but I am confident that we have a Bill containing robust principles that we can pass on to closer Committee scrutiny, with the will of the House. Notwithstanding those reservations, I am grateful to all those who have helped to produce the Bill today, especially those individuals and organisations outside this place who have campaigned long and hard on the various issues, based on powerful and often heartbreaking personal experiences.

To summarise, the four component parts of my Bill are as follows. The first is a provision intended to undertake further work on how the Government can extend civil partnerships to opposite sex couples as per my previous amendments, ten-minute rule Bills and presentation Bills. Equal civil partnerships are unfinished business from the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, and change requires only a straightforward amendment to the Civil Partnership Act 2004, which this House enthusiastically passed, with my support.

The second is a provision that mothers’ names, or second parent names, should be included on marriage and civil partnership certificates, based on previous Bills introduced by a number of hon. Members, which would bring England and Wales in line with Scotland and Northern Ireland, for the first time in about 180 years.

The third is a provision on the registration of stillbirths. My previous ten-minute rule Bill would have amended the definition of a stillborn child in the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 to include the formal recording of a child who is stillborn in the usual way but before the current threshold of 24 weeks’ gestation. The fourth is an amendment to the Coroners and
Justice Act 2009 to give coroners the power to investigate late-stage stillbirths if, for example, there is suspected medical negligence.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If the Bill makes progress, people will be able to get married to, or have a civil partnership with, anybody of any sex. I have been written to by two sisters—this is also a long-standing campaign of my own—about the burning injustice in this situation. The two sisters have lived together all their lives, but when one of them dies, the other one will have to move out of their home because they will not be able to afford the inheritance tax. Only the Treasury stands in the way of righting this injustice; it is about money. I hope that when my hon. Friend works on the detail of the Bill, he will try to ensure that it helps siblings to stay in the homes in which they have lived all their lives.

Tim Loughton: I understand my hon. Friend’s concern, which has been raised on several occasions. It is not my intention, at this stage, to extend civil partnerships to people other than cohabiting couples who are in a relationship. I want to mirror the existing terminology in the Civil Partnership Act 2004. I hope that we will entertain proposals such as my hon. Friend’s in Committee and on Report, and I have no doubt that he will want to raise the matter.

Sir Edward Leigh: Does my hon. Friend recognise that it is an injustice for everyone apart from siblings to be able to have whatever legal relationship they want? I am not asking him to say now that he will include the matter in the Bill, but does he at least accept that this is a worthy cause, on which I have campaigned for many years?

Tim Loughton: I understand that it is a worthy cause, but it is different from enabling people to have their relationship recognised by the state. There are clear financial disadvantages and implications in the situation that my hon. Friend describes. I entirely sympathise with his view and I think that the injustice needs to be dealt with, but I do not propose to deal with it at this stage in my Bill. Doing so would make the Bill even more complicated than it already is. In addition, it is highly likely that the long title of the Bill will need to be amended in Committee, particularly to reflect the change that will be required to the electronic record of marriage certificates.

Let me start with the extension of civil partnerships to include opposite-sex couples. The 2004 Act was long overdue, and it was enthusiastically supported by me and the great majority of hon. Members from all parts of the House. At its heart, the Act tackled a clear intention, at this stage, to extend civil partnerships to married couples. Alas, for some inexplicable reason, the proposal never made it into the Act. If it had done, the Act would have been better; that is why change is necessary today.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Can my hon. Friend tell the House how many people entered that consultation?

Tim Loughton: Quite a lot, although I have not got the figures. The consultation was one of two, and the result of the second consultation was different. As a result, no action was taken, but this is clearly unfinished business.

Michelle Donelan: To help my hon. Friend, the second consultation had only just over 11,000 entries. One could argue that that is not representative of the population or a gauge of public opinion.

Tim Loughton: Given that there are 3.2 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples, it is a very small proportion of those who might be affected, so this is unfinished business. More than 80,000 people have signed a petition in favour of the change, and that is a small indication of the demand that exists.

There are three main rationales for supporting the measure. First, it will correct the unintended but glaring inequality that results from the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, whereby same-sex couples are entitled to continue in a civil partnership, take up a civil partnership or enjoy the recent extension of marriage while opposite-sex couples have only the single option of conventional marriage, albeit by a larger range of religious institutions. That is not fair, and it gives rise to an inequality in an Act that was billed as promoting equality.

Secondly, a positive reason for pushing forward with the Bill is family stability. As a former children’s Minister, that has always been at the top of my priority list. According to the latest estimate, there are some 3.2 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples in this country. That is more than 4,900 couples per parliamentary constituency, and it is about double the figure that was reported just 15 years ago. Those couples are responsible for more than 2 million children. Some 53% of birth registrations are to married parents, but about a third are to unmarried parents who are living together.

Cohabitation is the fastest growing form of family in this country, whether we like it or not. We need to recognise that our society is changing and we need to adapt in order to promote family stability, in whatever form, to provide a continuum that gives children the best and most stable start in life.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On that point, has my hon. Friend seen the families manifesto by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)? It raises the importance of stability in the family for bringing up children. Does he support that manifesto?

Tim Loughton: Not only do I support it, but I think my name is on it. My proposal will help to create greater stability, with the ultimate aim of giving the 2.2 million children in such relationships the very best opportunities and the best start in life.
The Centre for Social Justice has calculated that the cost of family breakdown to this country is some £48 billion a year, or some 2.5% of gross domestic product. That is a big and growing problem, which is socially and financially costly for our society. Fewer than one in 10 married parents have split up by the time their child reaches the age of five, compared with more than one in three of those who are cohabiting but not married, and 75% of family breakdowns involving children under five result from the separation of unmarried parents. The CSJ has produced a raft of statistics showing that a child who is not in a two-parent family is much more likely to fall out of school, to become addicted to drugs, to get into trouble with the law, to be homeless and not to be in employment, education or training. Let me be clear: that is not to be judgmental about parents who find themselves, through no fault of their own, having to bring up a child alone, but two partners make for greater stability.

We know that marriage works, but civil partnerships are also showing evidence of providing greater stability for same-sex couples, including those who have children through adoption, surrogacy or whatever means. There is a strong case for believing that extending civil partnerships would improve that stability for many more families in different ways. If just one in 10 cohabiting opposite-sex couples entered into a civil partnership, that would amount to more than 300,000 couples and their children. The extension of civil partnerships would offer the prospect of greater security and stability, lower likelihood of family breakdown, and better social and financial outcomes. That, surely, would be progress.

Understandably, some people will ask, “Why can those couples not just get married?” People choose not to get involved in the paraphernalia of formal marriage for a variety of reasons. For some, it is too much of an establishment thing to do. Many identify marriage as an innately religious institution, and even if it is done in a registry office, it still has religious connotations. Some see marriage as having a patriarchal side, and some see it as a form of social control. For others, it is rather expensive. Marriage is not seen as a genuine partnership of equals, as civil partnerships are. Those are not my views, but they represent how many people see marriage. Many people have lobbied me—I am sure that they have done the same to other hon. Members—about why they would like to take advantage of the opportunity to enter into a civil partnership, and why they have not got married.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Some may argue that in effect, the idea of commitment would potentially be undermined, but does my hon. Friend agree that probably in reality, people who might opt for civil partnership might otherwise not have made any commitment?

Tim Loughton: It is interesting. I recorded a television interview this morning with a couple who have been together for 26 years; they have teenage children and, for a variety of reasons, do not want to get married. They travelled to the Isle of Man, which is the only part of the British Isles that recognises civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples, and have become the first couple from mainland UK to have a civil partnership through the Isle of Man. Obviously, it is not recognised in the UK proper.

They made a very interesting point. They said, “We want to show our commitment in the eyes of the state. We want the stability and the protection, and the legal protections, that we just don’t have as a cohabiting couple, but marriage is not right for us. If we are going to be forced into a marriage as the only way of getting that legal protection, we would effectively be undermining marriage, because we would be doing it for the wrong reasons.” Civil partnership is a way to show that commitment and get the protections without having to conform in a way that they do not believe in.

Whether we agree with them, that is their right. Surely in an age when families take many different forms, the key thing that the state should be interested in is doing whatever creates stability and the best opportunities for loving couples to thrive and for children, when they are involved, to be brought up in a stable environment. This is surely another opportunity to get more people to be able to take advantage of such a situation.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Loughton: I will—in for a penny, in for a pound.

Rebecca Pow: The consultation did not have any consensus that we should go down the civil partnership line, but will my hon. Friend comment on the fact that in France, religious marriages are not recognised and have to be preceded by a civil ceremony? I wonder whether any data have been gathered about how many split-up families they have there, or whether they have a better record than we are likely to have, because this is really all about family stability.

Tim Loughton: I have precisely the statistics that my hon. Friend is looking for. If she is patient for a few minutes longer, I will give her exactly that information.

Such people are mostly in committed loving relationships, but if they do not want to go for a traditional marriage, they have no way of having that recognised in the eyes of the state. That brings me on to the third main point—indeed, I promise that this will then come to my hon. Friend’s point. Particularly worrying is the common misconception that there is such a thing as a common-law wife or husband, as a woman typically finds out abruptly on the death of the partner when there is an inheritance tax bill on the estate and potentially on the family home. If a woman has a child with her partner and the relationship breaks down, she is not entitled to any form of financial support if they are not married. There is no automatic entitlement to property, even if she had been paying into the mortgage.

When one partner is much older than the other and there is a reasonable expectation that one will die some years before the other, the long-term survivor would not receive the same tax benefits as a married woman or those in a civil partnership. That would be discriminatory towards the couples’ children. The same vulnerabilities can apply if one partner does a runner. Even a couple engaged to be married have more rights than a cohabiting opposite-sex couple.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to stop the hon. Gentleman’s flow, but he will be aware of the work of Resolution, the family solicitors group,
which has a Cohabitation Awareness Week. It has drawn my attention, and I am sure that of many other hon. Members, to the lack of rights and the fact that people are totally ignorant about their lack of rights, if there is a breakdown or a loss of one of the cohabiting parents. Hopefully this change in the law will put that right.

Tim Loughton: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful for his intervention. I was not aware of the Cohabitation Awareness Week, but many family law solicitors have written to me and support the campaign, because they see the fall-out when this goes wrong. People come to them thinking that they had entitlements and legal status because they had been living together for so long, but they suddenly find out that they do not. They have a tax bill and lots of problems and headaches, and their children do not have a home to live in. If anything, I hope that the Bill will help to publicise that real problem in the law that the Government need to address at some stage. I am giving them the opportunity to take the bull by the horns and get on and do something about it now.

The question is: why should not those who have made a conscious choice not to go for a traditional marriage have the opportunity to have the same legal rights, responsibilities and protections in the eyes of the law that we, rightly and not before time, extended to same-sex couples back in 2004? There are also several further applications. Many people with strong religious beliefs—particularly Catholics who have ended up getting divorced, which is in conflict with certain religious teachings—may not be inclined to get married again if they meet a new partner, because their Church supposedly believes that they should be married for life. In many cases, however, they would be able to reconcile that position by entering into a new formal commitment through an opposite-sex civil partnership. In addition, as it stands, someone admitting to being in a civil partnership currently automatically carries the revelation that they are in a same-sex relationship. That could be an unintended invasion of their privacy when some may wish to keep that private. There are a number of practical, real-life scenarios in which civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples could achieve something very positive and non-discriminatory.

I am pleased with the widespread support that the measure has attracted. The Marriage Foundation, for example, has gone on record as saying that it “fully supports” the Bill “to introduce civil partnerships for heterosexual couples. It is a strong pro-family measure which, crucially, encourages commitment and stability. By making civil partnerships available to heterosexual couples, we would provide a new, formal basis for those who want to make a solid and legally backed commitment to one another but who prefer not to marry for whatever reason.”

I also welcome the support from The Times and the campaign spearheaded by Frances Gibb as part of that newspaper’s family law reform campaign. I see this measure as an important part of reforming family law and making family arrangements fit for the 21st century. We need to grasp the nettle on no-fault divorces and bring relationships into the modern age, and we need to find new ways for the state to recognise committed relationships and give stability, especially to the children within them. Making sure that shared parenting works and keeping warring parents out of the courts, where their children become bargaining chips, still needs further work too.

I come to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). Opposite-sex civil partnerships are not something that has been cooked up in this country. In South Africa, the Civil Union Act 2006 gave same-sex and opposite-sex couples the option to register a civil union by way of a marriage or a civil partnership on the same basis. In France, the pacte civil de solidarité—or PACs, as it is known—was introduced in 1999 as a form of civil union between two adults of the same sex or the opposite sex. A few years ago, marriage was added to that. Interestingly, one in 10 PACs has been dissolved in France, yet one in three marriages ends in divorce. There is evidence that some of those civil partnerships have created greater stability, whether they are opposite-sex or same-sex partnerships, than traditional marriage.

No complications are involved in my proposal. I want opposite-sex civil partnerships to be offered on exactly the same basis as same-sex civil partnerships, notwithstanding the earlier comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). It would not be possible for someone to become a civil partner with a close family member, or if that person was already in a union, and the partnership would need to be subject to the same termination criteria.

It is a simple proposal, and surely the case is now overwhelming. All that would be required is a simple one-line amendment to the Civil Partnership Act 2004. It could all be done and dusted in Committee by tea time—although I guess that by the time drafting officials have got their teeth into it, many more clauses will be required. That is what I originally intended in the Bill and put forward in my amendment to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 and subsequent ten-minute rule Bill and presentation Bills.

I acknowledge, however, that the Government have concerns about taking the full plunge and going the whole hog at this stage, and want to carry out further research about the demand and practicalities for such a reform. I have doubts about what that would achieve, given that, as hon. Friends have mentioned, we have had two public consultations on the subject in the last five years, and we now have 13 years’ worth of civil partnerships for same-sex couples in practice from which to garner evidence. However, I recognise the Government’s caution, and in securing a clear commitment to learn from the experience so far and promote equality further, I hope that they will come to the same conclusion as I have, together with the Equal Civil Partnerships campaign and the now more than 80,000 people who have signed a petition in support, many of whom have been enthusiastically lobbying their MPs in recent weeks.

There is a growing tide of support for the measure, fuelled by a court case that is currently destined to go before the Supreme Court in May. I pay tribute to Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, who have pioneered equal civil partnerships and whose application for a civil partnership to the authorities in Kensington and Chelsea triggered this campaign.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned Charles and Rebecca, who are constituents of mine. As he says, the
Does the hon. Gentleman share my dissatisfaction about the fact that the Government may be considering restricting civil partnerships? They appear to have accepted the concept of equality, but if they remove civil partnerships from same-sex couples rather than granting them to opposite-sex couples, they will be restricting choice.

**Tim Loughton:** I completely agree, and I will say something about that in a minute. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s support for the couple whom I mentioned, and his support for the overall campaign.

The issue arose when Charles and Rebecca approached their local register office to register their opposite-sex partnership. As they put it, “We wanted to formalise our relationship and celebrate it with friends and family but we’re not able to do it for what seems like no apparent reason. We prefer the idea of a civil partnership because it reflects us as a couple—we want equality through our relationship and with 2 babies now we want the protections offered by formalising marriage.”

The couple have campaigned tirelessly through the courts. Interestingly, at the Appeal Court last year a split decision ruled against them, but—as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—the court put the Government on notice that the current situation was unsustainable, and referred specifically to my private Member’s Bill as a vehicle for remedying it. I do not want to prejudge the Supreme Court’s findings—the case has not yet been put before it—but it is hard to see how the Government will not be criticised for not taking heed of the need for action when the golden opportunity afforded by my private Member’s Bill has dropped into their lap.

I appreciate that—as the hon. Member for Hammersmith also mentioned—the Government are also reserving the option of achieving equality by scrapping civil partnerships altogether and sticking with same-sex and opposite-sex marriage. I think that that would be a mistake. It is no surprise that there has been a big reduction in the number of civil partnerships since the option of full same-sex marriage was introduced in 2014. In 2016 there were 890 civil partnerships, whereas the average was about 6,000 in previous years, before marriage was an option. That figure was, in fact, an increase on the number in 2015, but, more tellingly, although the full figures have yet to be published, the number of civil partnerships that were converted to full marriage is still in the teens. Indeed, in 2014, when the option first became available, only 4% of existing same-sex civil partnerships were converted to marriage, which suggests that civil partnerships have a specific and different role. That applies as much to same-sex couples as it no doubt would to opposite-sex couples who have been denied the opportunity to gauge the demand so far. Abolishing civil partnerships altogether would deprive not just opposite-sex couples but same-sex couples of choice, and would leave tens of thousands of civil partners in limbo, forced either to become an abolished species or to convert to the full marriage that they had thus far resisted.

In the last consultation on extending civil partnerships, the Church of England was strongly in favour of retaining them. William Fittall, the secretary general of the Archbishops’ Council and the House of Bishops, said: “Our arguments for the retention of civil partnerships are based on the need to maintain an option for those same-sex couples who wish for proper recognition of their relationship but do not believe that their relationship is identical to ‘marriage’.”

I hope that, by the same token, the Church of England will soon come round to the idea of giving formal church blessings to civil partners.

I also hope that the Government will quickly move from a further consultation phase to an implementation phase, and nothing in the Bill would curtail the speed at which they could do so. There is no statutory requirement to put a consultation in legislation. I hope that the further review that I think the Minister wants to offer can start immediately and in parallel with the Bill’s passage, so that if the Government determined what we already know, they could enable thousands of potential civil partners to tie the knot with the same urgency with which the previous Government approached the Bill that became the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013.

Many Members believe that the time has come to back equal civil partnerships, to the potential benefit of many cohabiting couples and their children and the stability of our society as a whole. This part of my Bill has widespread cross-party support both inside and outside the House. It is a concise and simple but important measure, which could bring about equality for those who choose civil partnership, and I urge the House to support it.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):** My hon. Friend has been tenacious in his negotiations this week with the four Departments involved in the Bill. Will he confirm that he is content for the first two clauses to serve as “marker” clauses, and that he and I will jointly table amendments to them so that we can discuss in Committee the consultations that he and I have discussed this week?

**Tim Loughton:** My hon. Friend is impatient. I will confirm that later in my speech: there is plenty more to come. My hon. Friend got in first, but it was not really necessary.

I am aware that I have majored on the first of the four parts of the Bill. It has three other important components, which I think are less complicated and hopefully less contentious.

The fact that my late mother could not add her name as a parent on my marriage certificate is an anachronism, well past its sell-by date and, frankly, an outrage. In fact, the signatures of both my mother and my mother-in-law were included on our marriage certificate, but at our discretion, and as the signatures of witnesses rather than parents. My father signed, as did my wife’s father, because in the days when the anomaly originated, a daughter was a father’s chattel for him to give away, and literally sign away. That has been the case in England since 1837, the beginning of Queen Victoria’s reign, and has not changed since then. The problem apparently lies with the current system of marriage registration, which relies on hard-copy register books held in churches and other religious establishments as well as register offices. That involves some 84,000 open register books in 30,000 churches and religious buildings, so it is quite a big undertaking.
Surely, in this digital age, it is not beyond the wit of man or woman to introduce a single electronic register instead of relying on hard-copy books. That would avoid the potentially costly need to replace all the register books. Instead of signing a book at the ceremony, the newly married couple would sign a document that would then be returned to the register office to be entered in the existing electronic register so that an official marriage certificate could be issued, including the names of all the parents. The measure could also take account of new family structures, including those to which I have referred. There would be two spaces for the signatures of each of the partners in the marriage, or, indeed, civil partnership. That innovation was actually made when civil partnerships were introduced in 2004, but, bizarrely, it does not apply to marriages. Both parents would be included, be they biological mother and father, same-sex parents of whom one might be a biological parent, or adoptive parents.

That, surely, would be a progressive move to acknowledge and celebrate all types of relationships that give rise to children who go on to get hitched. It would also avoid some of the more insulting scenarios that I have encountered, in which a single mum who has given everything to bring up a son or daughter cannot be acknowledged on a wedding certificate, whereas an absentee or abusive father who did a runner at the birth and played no part in the child’s upbringing has an automatic pass to be registered on the certificate. Tragically, many mums discover that literally when the pen is taken away from them straight after the nuptials, when the register is signed to confirm the marriage.

It is nonsensical that this simple measure has not already come to pass. It is apparently the policy of the present Government and that of the previous one. It has been supported by Ministers and Prime Ministers, and it has been the subject of numerous early-day motions, petitions, debates and Private Members’ Bills introduced by, among others, the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees)—who is present—and my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar). My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Margaret Beckett) and my proposals, which would be considered in more detail in Committee, mirror their intention—although I am aware that there are some concerns about potential Henry VIII clauses, which I will seek to restrict. Ensuring that my Bill passes into law swiftly would be the fastest way to achieve this much-supported change in the law.

I can confirm—the Minister helpfully pre-empted me on this point—that the two clauses relating to civil partnerships and marriage certificates are marker clauses. They will be replaced and elaborated on in Committee, as agreed with Ministers, albeit at the 11th hour. Is the Minister happy?

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy.

Tim Loughton: My day is complete.

Finally, let me deal with the subject of stillbirths. This is perhaps the most emotionally traumatic part of the Bill. On many occasions, the House has been moved by the personal testimonies of Members in all parts of the House who have spoken out bravely and vividly about their own family experiences. It is because of those emotional personal testimonies that this whole subject probably punches well above its weight in this place—quite rightly—and by doing so has given a voice and hope to the too many parents who are directly affected by the tragedy of stillbirth. I pay tribute to the work of the all-party group on baby loss, and particularly the work done by my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince), whom I am delighted is here today, and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and the hon. Member for Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—and I am sure anybody I have missed will take the opportunity to intervene or make a speech later in the debate. This has been a great cross-party effort, which is something we do well in this House when we get it right.

I first became involved with this subject while shadow Children’s Minister and then later when a constituent came to me with a tragic tale of how she had suffered a series of miscarriages and then a stillbirth after 19 weeks. A stillbirth is classified as such only if the gestation period is 24 weeks or more; one day less, and that stillbirth becomes a non-viable delivery, more commonly referred to as a mid-trimester miscarriage. There are no central records of exactly how many babies are born in that way, so they do not form part of the perinatal mortality figures, which, while falling—fortunately—are still far too high in this country. Without wishing in any way to downplay the importance and pain of a miscarriage, particularly for new parents struggling to have their first child, the experiences are different. That was brought home to me most starkly by the story of my constituent Hayley.

Back in 2013, Hayley was pregnant. For nearly 20 weeks she carried the child of her partner Frazer. She felt the baby kicking; she went through all the other ups and downs of pregnancy. Previously she had suffered a miscarriage after just a few weeks. Sadly, after around 19 weeks something went wrong, and Hayley and Frazer’s baby died unborn. It was not a miscarriage, and the following week Hayley had to go through the pain of giving birth to a baby that she knew was no longer alive. She had to take powerful drugs to induce the pregnancy; she experienced contractions; and she went into Worthing Hospital and had pain relief. The following day, in June, she gave birth to her baby, Samuel. She held him in her arms. She and her partner took photographs, had his hand and footprints taken and said their goodbyes.

Fortunately, Hayley was given good support by the clinical staff at Worthing Hospital—an outstanding hospital, particularly its maternity department—and had bereavement guidance later. She has an understanding employer in West Sussex County Council, and she was also fortunate to find a sympathetic funeral director, and the funeral took place two weeks later.

To all intents and purposes, Hayley went through all the experiences of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth endured by any other mother, but they were coupled in this case with the unimaginable grief of a parent who has lost a child before they could ever get to know him. She did not just go through a stillbirth: she had a still baby; she became a mum.
The crucial difference is that Hayley and Frazer’s baby is not recognised in the eyes of the state because he was born before 24 weeks’ gestation. If he had survived until 24 weeks and a day, he would have been recognised and the death properly registered in a register of stillbirths. More than just adding to the statistics, that would have been the acknowledgement of an actual, individual baby. To add further insult to injury, Hayley had to hand back her maternity exemption certificate straight afterwards. I am glad to report that the story has a happy ending, because Hayley and Frazer went on to have a child, healthy and doing well, and last year also got married.

The stark difference I have described surely cannot be right; it adds insult to the unimaginable pain that the parents have already had to suffer. Until the passing of the Still-Birth (Definition) Act 1992, which amended the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, the threshold was 28 weeks, so prior to that even more babies went unrecognised in official records. That change followed a clear consensus in the medical profession on the age at which a baby is considered viable. Since then, there have been cases of babies born before 24 weeks who have, incredibly, survived.

It is true that there is an informal procedure for hospitals to issue so-called commemorative certificates for foetuses that are not classified as stillbirths. They provide parents with a certificate that records their pregnancy loss before 24 weeks. The charity Sands has produced a template of a certificate of birth and encourages all hospitals to adopt it. However, it is unofficial and counts for little or nothing in the eyes of the state.

As a result of this case, I brought a ten-minute rule Bill before this House on 14 January 2014. It was supported by a number of Members here today and was widely supported across the House, but, as usually happens, it ran out of parliamentary time. However, I did take the issue further with the help of the then Health Minister my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who hosted a roundtable at the Department of Health and we were in the middle of coming up with a solution, with the aid of the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which has been very supportive, and the charity Sands among others. Alas, however, as has been the bane of my private Member’s Bill experience, the Minister was moved on and the initiative was lost.

This Bill would resurrect that initiative by committing the Government to holding a proper review of how we could come up with a scheme whereby the state would recognise that a child such as Samuel actually existed. For the many parents who have written to me since I first launched my Bill, it would help to bring some closure after a truly traumatic ordeal. Some of the experiences that have been revealed to me are unimaginable to those of us lucky enough not to have gone through it with their own children.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, which is very difficult to listen to. Will he go into detail about the effects of registration of a baby’s body—or the burial of the body, for example, or what happens to the remains—and also on the legal position of maternity and paternity leave for the bereaved parents?

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is an expert on this and has campaigned on it for a long time, and has her own personal experiences. There are many implications in law, in employment and in other regards in recognising that somebody has gone through the experiences of being pregnant, for which they are entitled to various things, but all of a sudden, just because that pregnancy came to a traumatic end before 24 weeks, all that support and recognition completely falls away. There are far-thinking employers who take that into account, although they are not obliged to. So this is about more than just giving closure to parents who have had a traumatic experience; there are all sorts of other things that can help them get through that experience as well. I will conclude shortly, and I know other Members will then recount their own experiences of the very real practical implications.

One particularly stark example was a woman who had given birth to stillborn twins delayed either side of the 24-week threshold. One was registered as stillborn, recognised in the eyes of the state, while the other, born just before 24 weeks, did not exist. That cannot be right and we can and must do better. The Secretary of State for Health shares that ambition and is to be commended for the comprehensive measures to bring down substantially the number of stillbirths and to deal much more sympathetically with the impact when they do still happen. Other countries, such as Holland and Norway, have reduced their mortality rates much more dramatically, yet in the UK we continue to see wide variations geographically and demographically. For example, the stillbirth rate in the south-west of England is 4.7 per 1,000 live births, while in the north-east it is 5.8; that is a 23% difference. There are big differences between age groups and mums from different ethnic backgrounds.

The simple fact is that 3,122 babies were stillborn in England and Wales alone in 2016; those are officially stillborn over 24 weeks, not including those before the 24 week threshold. One in 225 pregnancies end in stillbirth after 24 weeks; it is 15 times more common than cot death, and that equates to around nine babies every single day. That is nine mothers and fathers who have lost a child after completing more than half the term of a pregnancy. They then have to go through the pain of childbirth to see a baby who will not grow up.

The Bill will simply require the Government to hold a review of how we can do better and come up with a simple scheme that could have a huge impact on many grieving parents. It has nothing to do with changing the law on abortion, and that debate is for another day and another piece of legislation. I have deliberately not been prescriptive about what form the review should take, but I trust the Government to do the right thing here and I think we are pushing at an open door.

I know we are pushing at an open door with my last measure, as the Health Secretary signalled his support for it at the Dispatch Box during a statement on stillbirths in November. There appears to be an anomaly in the law where coroners in England have the power to investigate any unexplained death of any humans unless they are stillbirths. That is because a baby who dies during delivery is not legally considered to have lived. If a baby has not lived, it has not died. As coroners can only investigate deaths where there is a

“body of the deceased person”
they have no legal jurisdiction to investigate these deaths. However, one in three stillbirths occur in healthy babies who die at term.

In some cases, those deaths occur due to mismanaged deliveries, and there has been a number of high-profile cases involving clusters of such deaths, well above the national average. According to the charity Sands, an estimated 500 babies die or are left severely disabled because of an event during their birth that was either not anticipated or not well managed. There is currently no independent investigation of these intra-partum deaths, and hospitals are left to investigate their own mistakes. It has been shown that these hospital reviews can be inadequate and fail to inform grieving parents of their findings.

If parents suspect that a mismanaged labour or delivery has caused the death of their child, the coroner has no jurisdiction to investigate, although there are some examples of good practice where the hospital agrees to allow that to happen. At worst, some baby deaths may be classified as stillbirths when there were in fact signs of life post-delivery, to close down on further independent investigation. I am sure that such cases are rare, but it will be to the benefit of all parents who have suffered the loss of a baby, or who want to be assured that their hospital is doing everything possible to keep babies safe, to have much more transparency and evidence that lessons are being learned from these tragic cases.

I am particularly grateful to my local West Sussex coroner, Penny Schofield, who has championed this issue and who approached me to include the subject in my Bill. Penny introduced me to Michelle Hemmington and Nicky Lyon of the Campaign for Safer Births, who have bravely bared their own traumatic experiences and worked for a change in the law, so that the pain of stillbirth can be reduced for others. I pay tribute to them, and others involved in the campaign, for their bravery.

My Bill proposes an enabling clause to give the Secretary of State powers to amend the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 to give coroners the power to investigate stillbirths. The preference would be for the change to apply to late-term stillbirths and for discretion to remain with coroners to determine which deaths they wished to investigate rather than be swamped by having to investigate large numbers of otherwise straightforward stillbirths. However, I appreciate the complexities of making such a change, given that the responsibility lies between the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Social Care. I do not seek to be prescriptive about the enabling power at this stage, but I am sure that both Secretaries of State would wish to come to terms with such a traumatic loss. As such, it should certainly be seen not as a stand-alone measure but as complementary to the panoply of other improvements that the Government are currently introducing, on which they are to be congratulated.

I apologise for the length of my comments, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the complex nature of the multiple measures in my Bill and the complicated and stressful route to getting here today have meant that greater explanation has been necessary. Much work remains to be done, with amendments in Committee and potentially at later stages, but I hope that all hon. Members here today and elsewhere will appreciate that these measures are welcome and important amendments to anomalies in the law and that they all have the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of a great many of our constituents and those yet to be born. I commend my Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. At least 16 Members want to speak in the debate, plus the Front Benchers, and we want to hear from everybody. I suggest that brevity will assist us greatly.

10.23 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will attempt to keep my contribution concise. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on bringing forward his comprehensive Bill. I know that he has wanted to act on these matters for a really long time, so this is a real tribute to persistence and determination. I support the Bill in total, but I am going to confine my comments to the issues addressed in clause 4, which deals with extending the powers of coroners to enable them to investigate stillbirths. This will make a difference to many families who need to know why their baby died. Even more importantly, it will ensure that lessons are learned and improvements are made so that other parents are spared the horror of losing a baby. I acknowledge the important work done by the Secretary of State for Health in getting to tackle avoidable harm and death through his maternity safety strategy. I welcomed his support for this Bill when he made a statement to the House on 28 November last year, in which he said:

“I will work with the Ministry of Justice to look closely into enabling, for the first time, full-term stillbirths to be covered by coronial law”.—[Official Report, 28 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 179.]

That was an important and welcome development.

Mainly, though, I am here on a Friday to speak for Harriet Hawkins, because she will never be able to speak for herself. Indeed, she never got to draw breath, and, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham has explained, that is significant. I am also here to support my incredible and courageous, but heartbroken, constituents, Jack and Sarah, Harriet’s parents. Their fight for the truth has been so dreadful and so unnecessarily painful that we in this House must act to ensure that others do not have to go through the same thing.

Let me explain what happened to Harriet, and Jack and Sarah, and how it could all have been so different. Harriet was Jack and Sarah’s first baby. There were no problems in pregnancy, and Sarah was considered low risk. She began to experience contractions one day after her due date on 11 April 2016. She was in labour for five days before Harriet was eventually delivered. In that
time, Jack and Sarah made 10 phone calls and two visits to the hospital, the Queen’s Medical Centre. Each time, Sarah was assessed, reassured and sent home. When she was finally admitted—to Nottingham City Hospital, because QMC was full—an ultrasound revealed that Harriet had died. We might think that things could get no worse, but sadly, we would be wrong. Sarah was left struggling with an over-long labour, and Harriet was delivered more than nine hours later. In the following days, the only contact Sarah and Jack had with Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust was with the bereavement midwife. Each time, they explained that Harriet’s death was due to numerous errors. They expected to be contacted as part of an investigation, but that did not happen.

I should say that both Jack and Sarah work for Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust. Jack is a hospital consultant—a clinical director in NHS Improvement—and Sarah is a senior physiotherapist. They had an understanding of what they should expect. They knew that something had gone horribly wrong, and when they were told that a post-mortem revealed that Harriet’s death was caused by an “infection”, and told to “try to move on”, they refused to have their concerns dismissed. Following repeated requests, they met representatives of the NUH trust in July 2016. The trust said that it had carried out an investigation—without Jack and Sarah’s involvement—and concluded that there were no errors and that Harriet’s death was down to an infection. As an expert in infections, Jack was able to challenge this conclusion, and he and Sarah demanded an external review. The hospital conceded, and Jack and Sarah met the external review team in August 2016. Following that meeting, Harriet’s death was upgraded to a serious untoward incident, 159 days after she died. That should have happened within 72 hours.

In December, Jack and Sarah were sent a draft report to check for accuracy. It stated that

“Harriet’s death was directly contributed to by five things”.

That conclusion meant a great deal to Jack and Sarah, but when the final serious untoward incident report was circulated, the conclusions had been watered down, stating that

“Harriet’s death might have been avoided if”
certain other things had happened. To Jack and Sarah, this significant change smacked of a cover-up, and a refusal to learn from the handling of Harriet’s birth. The trust would not explain why the investigation team had changed its conclusions.

Dissatisfied with the handling of the investigation, Jack and Sarah contacted the clinical commissioning group, which organised a new external review team to conduct a second serious untoward incident investigation. That report was published in December 2017, and it said that there were multiple missed opportunities for intervention and appropriate monitoring earlier in the labour. Had one of those opportunities been taken, it is likely that the labour would have been substantially shortened, with any foetal compromise recognised on CTG. It is therefore likely that intrauterine foetal death would not have occurred:

“The overall conclusion of this investigation was that the death of baby H was almost certainly preventable.”

I do not know how many babies have died or been harmed since Harriet’s death in April 2016, or whether those deaths or injuries could have been avoided if the lessons from Sarah and Jack’s case had been identified earlier. I also do not know how many babies died before Harriet due to similar failings of care, which would have prevented her death had they been identified. Opportunities were very clearly lost, and without Sarah and Jack’s incredible fight there would have been no learning from Harriet’s death.

Sarah and Jack wrote to me earlier this week:

“We have always said had we not been clinicians we would not be here today, fighting. We would have believed the flawed internal report and the flawed initial external report. It has taken us almost two years to get an independent review. This should not be the responsibility of grieving parents to push for.

An external review cannot be deemed to be independent, like in our example. It will not provide the honesty and openness of the coroner’s court. It will not provide the follow through in learning to prevent other baby deaths.”

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s testimony. Does not this case clearly highlight the unique nature of the coroners’ courts, which provide the facilities and the vehicle to investigate such matters sympathetically, supportively and with an ability to get to the truth?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The role of coroners is incredibly important, and there are a number of reasons why coroners are the right people to investigate such deaths. First, why should a baby’s death be treated differently from any other death? The coroner is an independent judicial office holder, and therefore the inquest will be truly independent and transparent. The coroner can address local issues at a particular hospital or unit, and they can refer to other statutory bodies, including the Care Quality Commission.

If a coroner makes a “prevent future deaths” report, it can be monitored closely. The family will be able to participate fully in the process, and not merely be consulted, and they will be able to have legal representation. The family will be able to attend the inquest to ask questions of the clinicians and managers concerned in the care, and they will receive full disclosure of all documents and policies in advance. A coroner’s inquest is heard in public, which ensures transparency of process and decision making. A coroner can of course recognise trends and, if necessary, impose improvement orders on provider organisations.

Jack and Sarah are concerned that the Bill commits to review, not to a definite change in the law, so I hope the Minister will listen carefully, acknowledge what the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has already said and not let down my constituents.

Speaking in the media, Jack and Sarah said that they want to make their daughter proud. They surely make us all proud. We owe it to them to make this change in the law. Please support this Bill.

10.33 am

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on introducing this Bill. He has a long and proud record of supporting families and progressive policies in this House, and it is a genuine honour to follow his lead. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on her emotional and heartfelt speech—I am sure it is one of many that we are about to hear today.
The Bill covers four important areas, and I am aware that many colleagues wish to speak, so I will talk about just two of those areas, although I make it clear that I have great sympathy for and support all four elements of the Bill. First, I firmly support the call of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for the names of mothers to be registered on marriage certificates, and I am glad that the measure is supported by the Government and many in this House, as it has been for a long time.

There are currently some 2 million single parents in the country, and about 90% of them are women. As it stands, those women are not able to be registered on their children’s marriage certificate—what a bizarre situation in this day and age. It is also worth noting that both parents’ names are, in fact, recorded on civil partnership certificates.

I also agree with the argument that we should use this opportunity to introduce further reform of the overall process of how marriages are registered, rather than simply changing the content of the marriage entry itself. Simply amending the existing registers might be the quickest course of action, but it does little to improve the overall efficiency of the system. If any further amendments are required in future, it would mean that all 84,000 registers would need to be replaced again, no doubt at considerable cost. Britain is obviously proud of its technological innovation, and we are leaders in this digital age, so surely it should not be too difficult for us to think of a way for marriage entries to be held on a single electronic register, which I understand may well be the intention.

I have received quite a lot of correspondence from constituents on extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples, admittedly on both sides of the argument, but I have a clear view on the subject. Although civil partnerships were introduced to extend the rights available to same-sex couples, rather than as an alternative to marriage, it has had the unintended consequence of creating an inherent inequality on the basis of sexual orientation. By trying to eliminate one form of discrimination, we have unintentionally created another.

I am sure colleagues will be aware of the statistics on the increasing number of children in the UK whose parents are living as unmarried couples and so do not have the same legal protections enjoyed by families of married and same-sex couples. Of course, some of those unmarried couples may simply not wish to enter any form of legal union, but that is not the case for many couples in my constituency. They want their relationship to be recognised in law but, for a variety of reasons, do not wish to marry. My hon. Friend gave the example of divorced Catholics, and I know of several such examples.

Although I am happily married, and I would like to believe my wife would say the same, I accept that marriage is not for everybody. I am sympathetic to those who dislike either the symbolism of marriage or the implications of ownership inherent in legally defining couples as “man and wife”—interestingly not “man and woman” but “man and wife.” That definition distinctly includes the element of possession that many people find uncomfortable.

Of course, expanding civil partnerships could have a significant effect on a number of other policy areas, including pensions. It is right that we take time to assess what those implications may be, but I implore the Government not to take too much time assessing those implications. I hope the Government listen carefully to the arguments made today and act accordingly, because Britain has changed, attitudes have changed and it is time that the law caught up.
On the investigation of stillbirths, I point out that in the UK we still have a woefully high number of stillbirths for a western country. I know that as I used to work in a gynaecology out-patient clinic and I remember this happening. A stillbirth can be truly traumatic for mothers, and we need to do more to support women that go through this and more to prevent stillbirth. We agree that stillbirths that occur before 24 weeks should be formally acknowledged and registered, but by no means would we want to see such a measure used to undermine abortion rights and a woman’s right to choose.

In conclusion, Labour Members fully support this Bill and only wish that the rest of the Government were as forward thinking as the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham.

10.41 am

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is an honour to take part in this debate, but I must confess that I was slightly confused by the remarks made by the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), because as I see it, this is not a matter to politicise; these are complicated moral issues that we are finding our way through together, consensually. Some of the best things I have done since I have been in this House have been done on a cross-party basis and on these very difficult issues.

I thoroughly support, in its entirety, this Bill put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), but, unusually for an MP, I am going to confine my remarks to the three areas of it of which I have personal experience. I will therefore leave the issue of civil partnerships to others whom I know want to talk about that.

The inequality of marriage certificates was one of the first issues I came across as a constituency MP when I entered the House back in 2015. We had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall, at which many hon. Members here today were present, where I spoke about a terrible story of my constituent, whose father subjected her and her siblings to sexual abuse over a number of years. She has not seen him since she was 10. Were she to get married now—I believe that the current law is one of the most awful abuse, would get no mention. That is simply wrong.

This Bill will ensure that the Secretary of State undertakes a full review of the system. I accept the need to look for efficiencies and to find ways to create a more secure system for the maintenance of marriage records. We must also consider what terminology we use to recognise all forms of parental relationship. Inevitably, that will take time. As a former church warden, I am familiar with the current register system, and I see no reason why we cannot give celebrants and registrars the ability to cross out “father” and amend at their own discretion, or simply to add to it, at least until that review has concluded. Next week, we mark the centenary of women’s suffrage, and I am afraid that it all feels rather archaic standing here discussing such a glaring yet rectifiable inequality.

Although I accept that, on all sides, we have been slow to deal with marriage certificates, in the three years I have been here the Government have been ambitious in their approach to stillbirths. I am really pleased with the progress we have made, although it does not go nearly far enough, towards halving the number of stillbirths by 2025. The all-party group on baby loss is a force of nature, and I pay great tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and indeed the former Member for Ipswich. We were all there in the middle of the night starting this group, determined to make things better. We were soon joined by the passion of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and then that fabulous speech by the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) did so much to help our cause. I am proud that we must take some credit for the fact that the way we talk about miscarriages, stillbirths and neonatal loss is changing. As a group, we know there are strong views on the way in which stillbirths are registered and investigated. For me at least, it seems that much should depend on the wishes of the parents. Fear of touching on painful subjects—although, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham made clear, there is no need to upset the abortion laws over this—and talking about them must not render us incapable of reflecting a situation where babies born younger and younger are, happily, now living. Real people are suffering by our failure to address these difficult issues. A mother who has been through labour and is going through lactation, often for a significant number of weeks, for a baby who is stillborn before 24 weeks will of course feel that his or her life should be properly recognised and recorded. I am hopeful that our group will have a great deal of input into the report the Secretary of State will undertake should this Bill progress today.

I was in the House in November for the Secretary of State’s statement on the Government’s new strategy to improve safety in NHS maternity services. Worrying about maternal safety, particularly of those who use the Horton General Hospital in my constituency, keeps me awake at night. Unfortunately, we all know that things can and do go wrong. Bereaved families deserve answers, and are often motivated by a burning desire to ensure that what happened to them will never happen to another family. At the moment, as we know, coroners in England do not have the power to investigate a stillbirth, yet in Northern Ireland, in 2013, the Court of Appeal held that coroners do have such a jurisdiction. I know, through talking to members of MBRRACE-UK—Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK—that in the vast majority of cases it will not be appropriate for a coroner to investigate a stillbirth. However, in the cases where relations with a hospital have broken down, where there is no faith in internal investigations or where there are wider learning points from a death, this may in a very small number of cases be appropriate.

In my previous career, I used to represent the Government in military inquests, and it strikes me that there is considerable potential for us to provide specialist training to a cadre of coroners brought in to deal with this extremely sensitive area, in much the way that we did having learnt from the introduction of inquests in military situations. I hope we can rely on our Ministers for joined-up, cross-departmental thinking as the work progresses. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham has kindly met me and Bliss in advance
of today’s debate to scope out views. If this Bill progresses, I look forward to engaging with the review that will follow.

This is a sensible and humane Bill, which we, as a cross-party group of Members, should all unite behind. It merely aims to right long-standing anomalies in the law, and it is a real pleasure to support it.

10.48 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), whom I am proud to call my friend. The work we have done together on the all-party group on baby loss is an exemplar of cross-party working at its best.

I welcome this Bill, presented by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and support all four parts of it wholeheartedly. However, this morning I will speak about just two, one which I will discuss briefly and another which is of great personal significance to me. First, I welcome the measures in this Bill that would legislate to equalise civil partnerships and open them up to heterosexual couples. As we all have, I have had many constituents contact me about that in recent weeks, and I am happy to support the measures the hon. Gentleman proposes.

Now I come to the main topic I wish to talk about this morning. I remember, when the hon. Gentleman sent an email around notifying us all of his intentions with this Bill, being really hopeful when I saw the provision to register stillbirths who are born under 24 weeks’ gestation. I hope the hon. Gentleman does not mind my quoting his email, in which he said:

“Currently a child born to a mother who goes through the whole process of labour but is stillborn after 23 weeks for example, is treated no differently to a miscarriage... Both are traumatic and we need to do more to support families affected in this way but the failure by the state to acknowledge that a child born this way ever existed effectively surely just adds insult to injury.”

When I received that email and read that paragraph, initially it floored me, because it was me he was describing. That was exactly my experience with Lucy, my third child, and I am sure I used similar words to describe how it all felt in my intervention in the baby loss debate in 2016.

Lucy was born at 23 and a half weeks, and sadly she was stillborn. I mentioned Lucy for the first time in Parliament during the powerful baby loss debate during Baby Loss Awareness Week in 2016. That was 11 years after I had been elected. I said at the time how much I admired—and I still do—my fellow officers of the all-party group on baby loss, who led the debate that day. The year before, the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) are raising this issue today. My hon. Friend is very brave to be able to talk through her personal experience. As ever with the many issues that we cover in debates these days, it is important for people outside the House to understand that MPs share these experiences, as we share mental health issues and other forms of loss in our families. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. The all-party group is doing a fantastic job of campaigning. I hope we can hear a little more from my hon. Friend. Because the issues she is covering are really valuable.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is very clear that Lucy does exist. Lucy does exist in my hon. Friend’s memories. It is very important for so many constituents that the all-party group on baby loss and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) are raising this issue today. My hon. Friend is very brave to be able to talk through her personal experience. As ever with the many issues that we cover in debates these days, it is important for people outside the House to understand that MPs share these experiences, as we share mental health issues and other forms of loss in our families. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. The all-party group is doing a fantastic job of campaigning. I hope we can hear a little more from my hon. Friend. Because the issues she is covering are really valuable.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you so much. I appreciate all the support that everyone is giving me to help me to get through this moment.

As I was saying, Lucy was three to four days short of the 24-week legal age required to be considered eligible for a death certificate. I was horrified and further traumatised when I then saw it entered in my records as a miscarriage. Because she was pre-24 weeks, she did not even get the dignity of being classed as a stillbirth, although that is what I always say she was, if and when I do talk about this tragedy—which is not very often, as Members can tell.
We went on to have a lovely blessing, given by the amazing hospital chaplain in the private room to which I was moved after she was born. We named her Lucy during the blessing and spent a number of hours with her before she was taken to the chapel of rest. Twenty years ago, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Gateshead did not have any cold cots—I sincerely hope it does now; I will try to find out—so we could not spend the night with her, even though I was kept in overnight, heavily sedated.

We had a very small family funeral service. My children were two and three and a half at the time, so they were not even there, just our parents. The service was organised by the chaplain and the Co-Op, which funded and organised everything. That was such a touching thing to do, although I know that is not always the case—my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) campaigns on that very topic, and I support her in that. Lucy was buried in a tiny white coffin in the same grave as my nana and granddad.

I tell the House all that to highlight that to the chaplain, to the Co-Op funeral service and to us, her family, she existed. She was a baby who sadly was born dead. Her heart was beating throughout my labour, up until just minutes before she was born. She just could not make the final push into this world. Because of that, and because of a matter of a few days, she does not officially exist in any records, other than in our memories and our family records. Even the entry on the deeds for the grave is my name, as if I, or in this case a bit of me, was buried there. Her name is not on the deed for the burial plot because although buried there, she did not exist. I hope that Members can appreciate and understand how hard this was to deal with and to understand at the time, when I was dealing with what was, and still is, the worst thing I have ever had to experience in all my life.

There must be a way to square the circle in cases such as this, with the whole 24-weeks viability argument. Babies born too soon and before 24 weeks now survive in much greater numbers than ever before. To my great delight, I have met some of them at events in Parliament and it is amazing—each one is a miracle. Surely there is a way to recognise the 22-week or 23-week babies who did not quite make it to their first breath. That is why I welcome wholeheartedly what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is trying to do with this Bill. I hope that the Government will look favourably on it.

10.58 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for bringing these incredibly important issues to the House with his private Member’s Bill. He has managed to squeeze into one Bill the work of, I think, four Government Departments—it may be more. One can see from the Box just how many officials have been working on the Bill, and believe me there are many more. I commend my hon. Friend for making the Government work so hard to ensure that we see justice done on these four important issues.

I thank Members from all parties for contributing to this debate. I must say that it is difficult to follow the very moving speech by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). To bring Lucy into this Chamber and to speak about her in the way the hon. Lady did was incredibly moving, and I hope that today will be a step forward not just for the hon. Lady but for other mothers and fathers throughout the country who have suffered terrible, terrible loss.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for her moving speech, and to my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), both of whom have spoken on some of these issues at great length and, sadly, with personal experience.

It has been a pleasure to work with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. His reputation preceeds him, as a tenacious Back Bencher and as a tenacious Minister when he was Minister for Children and Families. I am delighted that we have reached a place where we can agree on the progression of the Bill. The Government cannot support the version of the long title that is currently before the House, but we have amendments to be added in Committee that we hope will bring about the changes that so many in this House wish to see. Assuming that the House agrees to give the Bill its Second Reading, we will table the amendments—jointly with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham—before the rise of the House today and they will be debated in Committee.

I recognise that my hon. Friend wants the Bill to go further than our amendments, particularly our amendment to civil partnership, will allow. I am therefore very grateful to him for working so constructively with us to reach an agreement. We will ensure that, if clauses 1 and 2 are both amended accordingly, Clause 2 deals with civil partnerships. Our amendment to it will require the Government to undertake a further review of the operation of civil partnerships, and to bring forward proposals for how the law ought to be changed so that the difference in treatment in the current system is resolved. The amendment will go further than the current marker clause in the Bill before the House, in that it will require the Government to report to Parliament and to include a full public consultation.

I assure Members that this is a commitment on behalf of the Government. We are committed to resolving this issue, but we have to get some better evidence than we have at the moment in order to deal sensitively with the civil partnership issue. I wish it were a simple matter of changing a sentence in the Civil Partnership Act 2004, but we have to get some better evidence than we have at the moment in order to deal sensitively with the civil partnership issue. I wish it were a simple matter of changing a sentence in the Civil Partnership Act 2004, but we have to recognise that this is not just about eligibility; it is also about the rights that flow from any order that preceeds a marriage.

Andy Slaughter: Although clause 2 is disappointing in some ways, it is a step forward. But the Minister will be aware that this matter will go before the Supreme Court in May. Will she give the House an indication of the timescale both for the consultation and for when the Government will reach a decision?

Victoria Atkins: I am very conscious that I must not comment on an individual case. The Government intend to get on with this piece of work, frankly regardless of whether the House permits this Bill to have its Second Reading, although I sense that it will not come to that. This piece of work will be commenced immediately because we are determined to resolve the matter.
The work to which we are committing involves four elements. First, we are committing to continue our existing work on assessing the relative take-up of civil partnership and marriage among same-sex couples. Since 2013, when marriage was introduced for same-sex couples, an increasing number of couples have chosen marriage instead of civil partnerships. We do not know, however, whether the current levels of demand will be sustained or whether they will change over time.

We currently have only two full years of data for civil partnership formation following the introduction of marriage for same-sex couples. Given the scale and significance of the decision, it is proportionate to gather more data so that we can be sure that demand has stabilised. Our assessment is that we will have a proportionate amount of evidence by September 2019 to be confident in assessing the ongoing level of demand for civil partnerships among same-sex couples.

The second piece of work that we are committing to undertake relates to those already in civil partnerships. We continue to consider whether phasing out civil partnerships for same-sex couples is the best way forward. We want to approach the issue sensitively and delicately without understanding how it would affect same-sex partnerships for civil partnerships among same-sex couples.

The third piece of work we are committing to is to undertake surveys to understand the demand for civil partnership among opposite-sex unmarried couples. Our previous consultations did not suggest that a significant number of opposite-sex couples wished to enter a civil partnership. Indeed, the most recent survey, which was conducted in 2014—admittedly, with a relatively small number of respondents—suggested that people would not wish to convert their civil partnership into a marriage. We are therefore committing to undertake research with same-sex couples to understand their marriage. We are therefore committing to undertake relate to those already in civil partnerships.

The fourth piece of work will be a review of what has happened in other countries when they have been faced with similar choices. This is an important part of the evidence base. Although drawn from a different social context, the experience of other countries gives us information on the choices couples actually make when offered the choice between marriage and another form of legal recognition, such as civil partnerships.

Dr Drew: Would the Minister consider a fifth piece of work? She heard my intervention on the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I suggest a piece of work to publicise the lack of rights that co-habiting couples have if that partnership breaks down. There is just no awareness at all of that lack of rights, so anything that the Government can do to get people at least to check what their rights are would be very helpful.

Victoria Atkins: The idea of educating people about their rights is one that I am instinctively drawn to agree with. I will take that suggestion away and speak to my officials about how we incorporate it in this survey to ensure the provision of that education. I now turn to the happy subject—

Tim Loughton: Before the Minister moves on, let me say that I am grateful to her and am delighted with everything she has said, particularly her commitment to get on with the work now. But there have been two consultations, it has now been 13 or so years since civil partnerships were introduced and we know about the experiences over many years of all those other countries, so we will she acknowledge that an awful lot of the evidence is ready to hand and that this further work need not take much time at all? Can I have her commitment that there will be a sense of urgency to resolve this issue, one way or the other?

Victoria Atkins: There is a sense of urgency—very much so. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not be drawn into precise time limits because I would not wish to undermine in any way the academic research that will be undertaken, but there is a very great deal of urgency. We hope that we will have a proportionate amount of data from the pieces of work that I have set out by September next year.

I turn to the subject of marriage. In the Home Office, sadly we very often have to deal with the very worst of humanity, so it is a positive pleasure to talk about civil partnerships and marriage, and to celebrate happy and long-lasting relationships. As someone who is very happily married to a long-suffering husband, I know the irritation that can happen at the ceremony when people realise that the marriage certificate does not provide for the inclusion of mothers. The Government fully support the correction of this issue, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for drawing it forward.

At this point, I should welcome the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) to her place on the Opposition Front Bench. Although I have only been a Minister for eight weeks or something like that, may I give her just a little piece of advice? Hearing and judging the tone of the House is a very important role for those on the Front Bench. She will have noticed that there is a great deal of consensus in the Chamber today, so perhaps we did not need to drag the discussion into, “He said”, “She said”, and so on.

The long title of the Bill refers to only mothers being added to certificates. We need to ensure that when the marriage entry is updated it allows for all the different family circumstances in society today—for example, same-sex parents. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury set out the pressures that can be present in family circumstances and the need for marriage certificates to reflect that. We need to make sure that we have a system in place that enables the marriage register to be capable of adapting. My hon. Friend suggested that perhaps people could simply strike through the marriage certificate to include the mother’s name. I implore people not to do that. This is a technical, legal document, and doing so may mean that it is not valid, so the happy couple will have to go through another ceremony. We will work very hard on this.
I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for agreeing to amend clause 1 of his Bill in Committee to insert the provisions of the Registration of Marriage (No. 2) Bill in its place. That important Bill is the long-standing work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who has been battling for years to have this anomaly in our marriage ceremony and celebrations corrected. I place on record my thanks for her commitment to ensuring that the marriage certificate reflects the important role of both parents.

When the Registration of Marriage (No. 2) Bill is added to this Bill, the provisions will form the way in which marriages are registered in England and Wales, moving from a paper-based system to registration on an electronic register. I know that some will worry immediately about what that means for the all-important photographs that we show off of the end of a happy marriage ceremony. I assure the House that we will still be able to have the photograph of signing a document at the ceremony. Wedding photographers need not worry: brides and grooms will get that all-important photograph with the document and their signatures.

Moving to a schedule system is the most efficient and cost-efficient way of updating the marriage entry. It would be the biggest reform of how marriages are registered since 1837, moving away from the outdated legislation currently in place. To the joy of my colleagues in the Treasury, it will also introduce savings of about £33.8 million over 10 years. Some concern has been raised about the use of Henry VIII powers in the Registration of Marriage (No. 2) Bill. We would be content for the Bill to be amended to include a sunset clause limiting the use of the powers to a period of three years, allowing for the legislation to be amended to introduce a schedule-based system. Once implemented, that would allow for any amendments required to deal with any unintended consequences.

Having dealt with civil partnerships and marriage, I now move on to the subject of registering stillbirths. I must acknowledge the very hard work and commitment of my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and the hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Washington and Sunderland West, who have campaigned so effectively to ensure that these losses are felt within this Chamber and that our legislation reflects them as well.

The Government’s ambition is for the health service to provide the safest, highest-quality care available anywhere in the world. I am sure that we would all acknowledge the excellent NHS staff working tirelessly on a daily basis to help us achieve this ambition. Nevertheless, when it does occur—I would like to ensure that Opposition Front Benchers pay due respect to this section of the Bill—the loss of a pregnancy is a heart-rending tragedy for families that stays with them for the rest of their lives. Many of the care considerations for parents experiencing a stillbirth—that is, when a baby is born after 24 weeks’ gestation—will be similar for those experiencing a late miscarriage. Local policies, however, may affect the type and place of care offered or available depending on the gestation when baby loss occurs.

Currently, parents whose babies are stillborn after 24 weeks’ gestation can register the baby’s name and receive a certificate of registration of stillbirth. When a pregnancy ends before 24 weeks’ gestation, however, there is currently no formal process for parents to be able to register their loss legally. Some expectant parents find this to be not just distressing but devastating. The Department of Health and Social Care recognises the need to do more to support families affected by a miscarriage. Some families may want their loss to be acknowledged and registered. Others, however, may feel distressed at any mandatory requirement to do so in the circumstances of their grief. This issue must therefore be approached with great care and sensitivity.

Accordingly, I am pleased that clause 3 will provide for the Government to review this issue and to look at whether current law on registration of stillbirths should be changed to allow for the registration of pregnancy loss before 24 weeks’ gestation. As part of this review, we will seek views and evidence from all interested parties. I hope that colleagues across the House will contribute to that review.

I now move on to coroners’ investigations.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): May I clarify something before the Minister moves on? My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made it clear that he did not intend that this Bill would make any change to the provisions on the number of weeks in relation to abortion. Can she confirm that that is the Government’s intention as well?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, who shows his usual attention to detail. The proposals in this Bill do not in any way affect the laws relating to the availability of termination. They simply concern miscarriages in the circumstances we have described today. I thank him for allowing me to clarify that on the record.

I move on to coroners’ investigations. I should declare that in my previous life I worked with the chief coroner, His Honour Judge Mark Lucraft QC. On clause 4, let me first assure the House that the Government agree wholeheartedly with the need to look at the role that coroners could play in this regard. On 28 November last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, as he now is, made a statement in this House about the Government’s maternity safety strategy. This Bill potentially has an important role to play in promoting better outcomes for mothers and babies.

Currently, under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, coroners do not have jurisdiction to investigate when a baby does not show signs of life independently of its mother. Coroners can commence an investigation if there is doubt as to whether a baby was stillborn or lived independently of its mother, but the investigation stops if the coroner’s inquiries reveal that the baby was stillborn. Clause 4 places a duty on the Secretary of State to prepare and publish a report on whether, and if so how, the law ought to be changed to enable or to require coroners to investigate stillbirths. It also gives the Lord Chancellor a power to make regulations amending part 1 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 so as to provide for when, and in what circumstances, coroners will investigate stillbirths.

I realise that the House may have concerns about a power to make regulations in this way, but the safeguards written into the clause will ensure that it is used
appropriately. For example, the regulations will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, so there will be scrutiny by both Houses, and the regulations cannot be used to create any criminal offences unless the offence has an equivalent in part 1 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

The Government think that it is important to carry out a review and produce a report in this area before making any changes. There are important and sensitive issues to explore, such as the question of how far into a pregnancy coronial involvement should be triggered, and the potential role of other factors, such as violence to the mother or medical negligence. We need to hear a wide range of views, including those of coroners, including the chief coroner, medical professionals, researchers in the field and, of course, bereaved parents and the organisations that support them.

I referred earlier to the statement that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made in the House last November on the Government’s maternity safety strategy. He set out improvements under way in the NHS, including the newly established Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch, which will investigate 1,000 cases per year of full-term stillbirths, neonatal and maternal deaths, and severe brain injuries during labour, in order to discover what may have gone wrong and to learn lessons. At the same time, he announced that the Government intend to look closely at enabling coroners to investigate stillbirths. My hon. Friend’s Bill today helpfully moves us forward in that regard.

This short Bill has grand ambitions. It deals with the happiest of times—the celebration of love and committed relationships—as well as the saddest of times: the loss of a much-cherished baby. My hon. Friend and others have dealt with the inevitable emotions that arise on such occasions sensitively and powerfully, and I thank them all. The Government want to work with him constructively and thank him for the assurances he has given on clauses 1 and 2. Accordingly, the Government are pleased to be able to support it.

11.21 am

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for bringing forward this Bill and commend the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for their bravery and determination today.

I support all the elements of the Bill, but I wish to speak to clause 2. The civil partnerships aspect is long overdue. I fully understand why the authors of the original Civil Partnership Act 2004 were focused on their primary purpose of allowing gay men and women to live as couples recognised by the law. The need was great, and hon. Members are well aware that it is often better to put forward a Bill that only fulfils the main purpose, rather than load it down with other, possibly more contentious matters that may delay its transition.

It was a shame, however, that, in passing the Act, the House potentially compromised one of the most important principles that gay people had been fighting for—the principle that every citizen of this country should be treated as equal before the law. This point was made at the time, and I can remember that some of those making it were seeking to scupper the Act, so I appreciate why it was passed in the form it was. It was incredibly important to me, as a gay man in a civil partnership with my partner, that our relationship be recognised by the law of the land and in consequence treated as equal by all the relevant civil institutions.

I can remember arguing with a customer service employee of the borough council that neither my partner nor I was living alone and that therefore we should not be in receipt of the single person’s discount on our council tax. We were seeking to pay the borough the correct level of council tax and were denied the right to do so. The officer actually stated, “We do not recognise the existence of same-sex couples”.

My partner can now be my next of kin, will automatically inherit if I die and is accorded all the respect and accommodations due to someone as one half of a legally recognised couple. However, although I fully support the introduction of same-sex marriages, we had no overwhelming desire to get married. We believe that our civil partnership accords us the respect and protections we need and are happy to leave it at that. And that is the position that a substantial number of opposite-sex couples would also like to be in.

Two of my constituents, one of whom is well known to me as a former borough council officer, have lived as a couple for 40 years. They have two children—one is 29 and the other 33—but they have never wished to get married because they do not want to feel that they are binding themselves with some sort of moral straitjacket. They feel that going through the act of marriage would be like an admission that they might split up if it were not for the marriage act, but they do want the fact that they are a couple to be recognised by the law. They have the knowledge and ability to have instituted a complicated legal trust to prevent their children from losing their inheritance when they die, but they are very aware that most couples do not have that ability. They do not understand why, if I and my partner can live in a civil partnership, they should not also have that facility.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s support for the Bill, and I applaud his public spiritedness in wanting to pay more tax. Does he agree, though, that abolishing civil partnerships and just having the level playing field of marriage would be deeply destructive, because he would be in limbo, belonging to an exclusive and dwindling group to which nobody could be added, which would be an extraordinary position and certainly not progressive?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, and I fully agree with him. I am very pleased with my civil partnership. I would not wish it to be changed in any way. As he rightly says, if the civil partnerships already entered into remained but no further civil partnerships were allowed, it would introduce a separate and different relationship under the law for people of the same sex that does not apply to people of the opposite sex. The basic principle that people should be treated the same in law is well worth upholding.

The other point, of course, which the hon. Gentleman did not make explicitly but which needs to be borne in mind, is that many opposite-sex couples have the same
view as the opposite-sex couple I just mentioned, and do not want to enter into marriage but do want their relationship to be recognised. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), who is no longer in his place, made this point very clearly. There are many opposite-sex couples who have been living together for some time, and anything that the law can do to regularise their position and make sure they stay together and are treated properly by the law has to be a good move.

In conclusion, equality before the law is a very important principle. I believe that the civil partnerships aspect of the Bill helps to address that principle, and I urge hon. Members to support it.

11.28 am

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), and it would be wrong of me not to mention the emotional speech that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) made earlier on in the Chamber. She is an exceptional advocate for her constituents, and today I was thankful I was here to listen to her testimony.

It is also a pleasure to be here to see the commendable work that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has done. When I go to lobby functions, I often look around to see who else is in the room, and when I come across him—

**Tim Loughton:** You leave quickly.

**Scott Mann:** Ha, ha! When I see him, I know my political compass is pretty much on message.

There are some great elements to the Bill, and the first I would like to touch on is that of civil partnerships. It is always worth remembering in this place to follow the evidence and look at the background of the case, and I want to touch on some of the evidence base. Civil partnerships were introduced in 2004 to allow same-sex couples to obtain legal recognition of their relationships and access to the same legal rights as opposite-sex couples. In the first 10 years, 64,000 people took up civil partnerships, according to the Office for National Statistics figures. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 meant that same-sex couples can marry under English and Welsh law, and from the end of 2014, civil partners were granted the right to convert their civil partnerships into marriages.

Following a consultation in 2012, no changes were made to civil partnerships under the 2013 Act. The Government argued at the time that civil partnerships were created to allow same-sex couples equal access to the rights, responsibilities and protections for those who are married. In 2014, another consultation was launched to gather views and evidence on the future of civil partnerships. Almost 11,500 people responded, with a huge range of views.

Since that, there has been a legal case, which sits behind this Bill. In 2016 a heterosexual couple presented a case to the High Court arguing that they faced discrimination under present law. The case had much wider implications, and the judge granted the couple permission to take it to the Court of Appeal. The hearing took place in November 2016 and the judgment was delivered in February 2017. All three judges said that the claimants’ human rights were affected, but concluded by a majority that it was proportionate for the Government to take time to decide the future of civil partnerships.

I have received correspondence on this issue, and I have no problem with this element of the Bill. However, as the Minister said, we need to consider a much wider evidence base before forming a consensus.

**Michelle Donelan:** Does my hon. Friend think that the review should look at whether the public understand the difference between civil partnerships and marriage? They are equal in legalities, and there is no financial benefit of one over the other.

**Scott Mann:** My hon. Friend from the south-west makes an interesting point, and I know the Minister is listening.

It is a travesty that the mother’s name is not on the marriage certificate. I was not aware of that until I did some research into the debate, and it came as a real surprise to me. It is madness that this has been allowed to go on for such a long time. Since 1837, the marriage register entry in England and Wales has included details of the spouses’ fathers but not their mothers. There are presently two Bills going through Parliament that seek to change that inequality, one introduced by the Bishop of St Albans, which has had its Second Reading in the Lords, and the other by the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), which will have its Second Reading on 23 February. This change has long been called for and has cross-party support.

In 2014 the then Prime Minister gave a commitment that the content of the marriage entry would be updated to include the details of both parents, as current procedures did not reflect modern Britain. Statistics show that there are currently some 2 million single parents in the country, around 90% of whom are women. As it stands, if any of their children were to get married, they could include only their father’s details in the marriage entry. Their mother’s details would not be included. In the modern world, that is unacceptable.

I will not touch on the third and fourth elements of the Bill. Many Members have spoken about those elements, including my hon. Friend the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. I do not feel I can add anything particular, and I look forward to the speeches yet to come on those issues.

In conclusion, there are many commendable elements of the Bill, and I hope Her Majesty’s Government and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham can find a way to review the issues raised today.

11.34 am

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on bringing the Bill to the House. It is clear that the legislation on the registration of births, deaths and marriages needs updating. It is time that the details of mothers, not just fathers, are included in a marriage registration, and it is time for us to reform the laws on the investigation and registration of stillbirths.
I recently received a letter from a coroner. Together with other coroners, he is seeking a change in the law that would enable coroners to investigate all stillbirths that occur after 36 weeks. That is generally regarded as full term, and the reason for death after 36 weeks needs to be explored. Hospitals should involve parents and answer their questions about why their baby has died through their review processes, but when those questions are not answered, the coroner plays a vital role in looking for answers and ensuring that lessons are learned and mistakes are not repeated. As the law stands, the coroner cannot investigate stillbirths. That needs to change, and parents need to have that option.

The problem is that there has been virtually no decrease in the rate of stillbirths in England and Wales in recent years. The latest data give the figure for stillbirths in the UK in 2014 as 3,252. That is higher than those reported in the best-performing countries in Europe. I think it reasonable to argue that the rate remains so high because individual stillbirth cases are not properly investigated. The fact is that the majority of stillbirths are avoidable, and the outcome for both mother and baby would have been different if the care was improved. How can care be improved if there is no analysis and learning from mistakes?

The inquest process would require the circumstances of the death to be looked at and considered and recommendations made to improve outcomes in the future, which of course will save lives. However, it is important to say that the inquest process will not be appropriate in all cases of stillbirth. It is vital that a coroner’s investigation into stillbirths happens in close consultation with parents. Some parents may not want an inquest.

Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, welcomes the provisions in the Bill that will enable a coroner’s involvement but does not wish to see that made mandatory. Stillbirth is a traumatic experience for parents and families, and I agree with Sands that it is vital to consult publicly as part of any review, to ensure that families’ views are fed into the process, which can be extremely prolonged and painful for them, so as not to cause additional emotional harm to bereaved parents.

11.37 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). I commend the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for her powerful and emotional speech. She said she was not brave or strong. I completely disagree; she is very brave and very strong, and I thank her for her words. People in the House were moved, and I am sure that those watching her speech on TV were also moved. She made very important and powerful points, and I thank her.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on bringing his private Member’s Bill to this stage. The way that he has brought four pieces of legislation together is ingenious. I hope he will stick to the common theme, and I think that it is how individuals and their loved ones are recognised. I hope that he agrees. It is a pick-and-mix Bill, and I am going to pick a couple of bits to talk about today. I will speak to the first two clauses, on the registration of marriages and civil partnerships and the reform of civil partnership.

As other Members have said, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) have been very vocal on and great advocates for the registration of marriages. It is so important to have our mothers’ names on our marriage certificates. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) said that he was not aware until he began to look at this that our mothers’ names are not on our marriage certificates. I am sure a lot of people are under the illusion that their names are included, and only when they look at the certificate after the event do they realise that the name of a very important person is missing. Our mothers form our early lives and our lives as we grow up and enter adulthood, and they play such an important role. I am sure they have also had an important role in putting together the wedding ceremony, only for them to be denied having their details on the marriage certificate, which I think is so wrong.

We are celebrating 100 years of women having the vote, which makes it even more bizarre that this has not been sorted out. It is a matter of equality, as well as a matter of family history and social history. So much information will be able to be gathered in the future if we include our mothers’ names on marriage certificates. My family is a case in point. My marriage certificate had my father’s profession as a timber merchant, but not what my mother did—she was a classroom assistant in a school for disabled children—after bringing up her children and as we got older. On the paternal side, my grandfather was included in my parents’ marriage certificate as a mill worker, but my grandmother, who was in service, is missing. On the maternal side, my grandfather was included as a railway worker, but, sadly, I do not know what my grandmother did, and I can no longer ask my mother, so that bit of social history is missing. What we are discussing will not only add to social history, which is so important, but demonstrate social mobility and address the equality side of things.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is making a very emotive point. Does she agree that this is very important not only on the social side—we seem to disappear if we are not on marriage certificates—but in these days of equality? We are going to celebrate 100 years of women having the vote and all of us in Parliament talk about equality, yet this situation is completely unequal.

Maggie Throup: If we look at this across the board, we see not only this inequity, but others. We need to look at such things in more detail to make sure that men and women—I include men in this—are equal because there are inequalities for both genders and we need to sort this out.

I agree that we need to look at the cost and make sure that any change is not made at huge cost to the taxpayer, so I welcome the way in which it has been proposed. That is so important, as is not losing a vulnerable certificate that means so much to so many people.

I will move on to the second part of my speech, which is on the reform of civil partnerships. I welcome the Minister’s words about more work being carried out. We are aware that civil partnerships were originally
intended not as an alternative to marriage, but to provide a legal recognition of such relationships and access to the same legal rights. We need to make sure that, if we make any change in legislation to include heterosexual relationships in civil partnerships, we get it right.

If we look at the data on what is happening with civil partnerships, we find that almost half the people entering civil partnerships are now aged 50 or above, compared with 19% in 2013, so the way people perceive civil partnerships has changed. The average age of women entering civil partnerships is now higher than that of men, so we need to look at what we are trying to do and what gap we are trying to fill. The uptake of civil partnerships has now decreased dramatically. According to the data I have, approximately 6,000 women and 9,000 men entered civil partnerships in 2006, but the numbers of both types of civil partnerships are now down to three figures. We must make sure that we are actually providing the right mechanism for people to cement their relationships and the security they are looking for in the future. With a population of 84,000, there is a good cohort of people on the Isle of Man, where civil partnerships for mixed-sex couples are available, to look at to see what lessons can be learned, as well as what works and what does not work.

I thank the Minister for looking at this in more detail. We need to make sure we get right any changes we make. I know people will say that we are not rushing into this, but we do need to make sure that we are providing the right mechanism for the right people at the right time.

11.46 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I want to make a few brief remarks about clause 2, on the reform of civil partnerships, but I begin by adding my congratulations to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). It is a shame that he has had to wait 20 years for a Bill, but he is certainly making up for it now. It is always a pleasure to work with him, because he does so in a spirit of just getting things done. We were together on the tasting panel to choose the new House of Commons gin—and that went very well indeed. I should add that it is a very fine west London gin. Despite his positivity, I am sure he shares my disappointment that the Bill does not go further, and I hope that it will do so in Committee and on Report.

I am slightly alarmed that the Bill, albeit in what is perhaps a holding clause, raises the prospect of losing civil partnerships altogether, because I think that would be a backward step. The Government are clearly serious about looking at that as an alternative, but I urge them to think again. I think that the consensus across the House—hon. Members have been very supportive of the Bill generally—is very much to support civil partnerships as an institution, and one that adds something to the institution of marriage. Yes, it is good—this is a step forward—that the Government recognise that there has to be equality, that there is unfinished business and that this is a “how the law will change” clause rather than, like some others, a “whether the law will change” clause. Such a lack of equity is very important because we should not treat different couples differently, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) said, so even though such a change would extend rights for opposite-sex couples, it would not be good for same-sex couples. The point that was made that suddenly creating a historical and fossilised group of people if we now move civil partnerships from same-sex couples just seems perverse.

A stronger reason, which I thought would appeal to the Government, is that the provision extends choice. That is the primary motivation of my constituents Charles Keidan and Rebecca Steinfeld, who I am pleased to say are here for the debates. They have been absolutely stakhanovite in pursuing this matter through the High Court for judicial review, through the Appeal Court and now on to the Supreme Court on 15 and 16 May. That shows a huge commitment, as Members will understand, of energy, time and resilience. They feel strongly about it because they feel that the institution of marriage is not for them, but they want to make the commitment and have the security and rights that a binding contract would give them. Why should they be deprived of that? They have had substantial support from their legal teams, the Peter Tatchell Foundation and the many other couples who seek this remedy, some of whom have already sought it by going to the Isle of Man and other places.

Charles and Rebecca now have two young children—they did not have them at the start of the process—and it will be good if the Government can move speedily. They are being prompted not only by Members of Parliament but by the Supreme Court and the Appeal Court to get on with it. The issue of choice in itself is sufficient, but I would mention one other point, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr. Drew) in relation to cohabitation. There are now 3.3 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples. That figure has more than doubled in the past 20 years. Surveys have shown that two thirds of those couples are unaware that there is no special institution called “common law marriage”. They have extraordinarily few rights. A couple separating after perhaps 20 years or on the death of one partner can find that they have very few rights and many liabilities that they would not otherwise have had.

Lady Hale, the President of the Supreme Court, has called for a “remedy for unmarried couples in English law, along the same basis as in Scotland”, where there is some protection. I do not say that the extension of civil partnerships will be some magic bullet for dealing with the real problems with cohabitation law or lack of it, but it is nevertheless a step forward. The very fact that we are all talking about it and that there is a lot of publicity about the Bill and the issue will make more people aware of their lack of rights. I think that a substantial number of people will take advantage of the change in the law; people who do not want to go through even a civil, let alone a religious, marriage ceremony will see a civil partnership differently and will get that protection under the law.

The Bill provides an opportunity for the Government to look more generally at the gaps in the system. The Bill deals with one of those gaps. We will return no doubt at some stage to humanist marriage, but the Government also have a duty to look at cohabitation. Perhaps not by coincidence, the case of Siobhan McLaughlin is also going to the Supreme Court in April. She was cohabiting for 20 years, and her partner sadly died. She had four teenage children. She found
out that she was not entitled to bereavement payments or to a widowed parent allowance of perhaps more than £100 a week. The Supreme Court will no doubt do its usual excellent job on this, but I am not sure that these are matters that should be left entirely to the courts. They are for us and for the Government.

I hope that in amending and supporting the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, the Government will support the extension of civil partnerships. I hope that they will also look more generally at defects in the rules for both cohabiting couples and couples who wish to enter the security of those arrangements.

11.53 am

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for kindly calling me. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on introducing this important Bill. It is a bit of a smorgasbord of issues that are all important in their own right. It may not come as a surprise to the House that I want to touch on clause 3 on the registration of pregnancy loss occurring before 24 weeks and clause 4 on investigations by coroners into stillbirth.

I have huge amounts of time for the aim of clause 3, and I recognise the huge inequality in the particular case that my hon. Friend raised of the poor mother who lost twins, one born before and one born after the 24 week cut-off date. Only one of them was recognised by the law. That is why the review set out in the Bill is so important.

I am immensely proud to co-chair the all-party group on baby loss, which the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—I am pleased to see them both in the Chamber—helped to set up. With my hon. Friend, I remember collaring the former Member for Ipswich, who was then the Care Quality Minister, at about 1.30 am during a Finance Bill. We sat him down and discussed how we were to take our work on baby loss forward, and how we would address some of the big issues.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on his Bill, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for his work on baby loss. I lost my son, Ethan, to stillbirth in 2004, and— it might sound strange to say this—I was fortunate to get a stillbirth certificate, because the incident occurred post 24 weeks. I commend my hon. Friend and others for everything they are doing to further this important cause.

Will Quince: I am very sorry to hear of my hon. Friend’s loss, and I thank him for his campaigning on this issue. He makes an important point about the discrepancy in our law, and the time has come to address it.

The all-party group on baby loss has two fundamental aims. The first is to reduce stillbirth and neonatal death, and the Government have been hugely supportive on that aim. We now have a target of halving stillbirth and neonatal death by 2025. When I first arrived in Parliament and we raised the issue in late 2015, the aim was to achieve that reduction by 2030, but the date has been brought forward. That is fantastic news, because we lose between nine and 15 babies every day. We have one of the worst records in the western world, and it has to change. The Government have put in place a number of steps to make that happen, and I am hugely positive and optimistic about the future.

Even if we meet the aim of reducing stillbirth and neonatal death by 50%, however, 2,500 to 3,000 babies will be stillborn every year. That does not even touch on the huge number of parents who suffer what we define in law as a miscarriage, and the Bill will give us the opportunity to look at registration and recognition in that area. Even if we achieve all our aims, there will still be parents who go through this emotional and personal tragedy. That is why bereavement care and support are so important. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West was right to mention cold cots, because we need such facilities—and, indeed, bereavement suites—in every hospital in the country.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I have listened to most of this debate, and I have been very impressed by the contributions. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me about the importance of organisations such as Scunthorpe Rotary, which is working locally to get a bereavement suite at Scunthorpe General Hospital? The work of such organisations across the country makes a real difference to people at a very difficult time in their lives.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. Charities and the Government have to work hand in hand with each other and with parents, many of whom want to do something to support the hospital that helped them after they suffered their tragic loss. Parents are helped not just by hospitals, but by charities, too. After our loss in 2014, my wife said to me, “I don’t want flowers. I don’t want the house to be full of flowers that then die.” So we set up a JustGiving page to enable people to donate money—in the end, it was a huge amount—to the specialist bereavement suite.

The work being done by groups such as Rotary, as well as by charities and individuals up and down the country, is to be applauded and welcomed, but the Government should not use it as an excuse not to act in places that do not have such facilities. The Secretary of State has been very positive in that regard, and he wants there to be a bereavement suite attached to every maternity unit in the country.

Bereavement care is hugely important, and I am pleased to say that the bereavement care pathway has been launched and is operating in 11 trusts. The plan is to roll it out nationwide later this year, to provide consistent bereavement care for those who suffer the loss of a child. Not only are the consequences of getting it wrong too great for the parents and the family, but there is a huge social cost, as we can see from the number of parents who, sadly, separate after the loss of a baby.

I want to touch on the point about recognition. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West made this case very powerfully in her speech, and I applaud her for her bravery in setting out the case for this change more powerfully than I ever could. We come
to the very term “stillborn.” In effect, when we talk about stillbirth we are talking about a “still born” baby. It is important to recognise the double meaning: they are indeed still born, whether it is pre-24 weeks or post-24 weeks. For the parents who hold that baby in their arms—perfectly formed, beautiful babies—the only difference is that they are not breathing. I am not going to be the person who says to that parent, “That baby didn’t live,” or, “They weren’t here. They weren’t with us. They weren’t a real entity. They shouldn’t be recognised in the law.” The time has absolutely come for this change. We pretty much have cross-party consensus on that, and I am really pleased that the Government support it. The review will make a difference and the all-party group on baby loss will, of course, feed into that.

Clause 4 is a policy that I very much support. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham and I are undoubtedly very much on the same page on investigations into stillbirth, and his campaign is a very big part of why the Government have made so much progress on this issue. We can learn a huge amount more from people’s experiences and share them across the NHS, and that has to be a good thing. Because the more we talk to parents, the more we hear that those who lose a child want their child’s life, however short, to have meaning. I raised that in an intervention on the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, but I am not sure it helped all that much. What I mean by that is that parents want to know what happened, how it happened, where there will be learning, and that those learnings will be shared across our NHS to ensure that as few parents as possible have to go through that huge emotional tragedy and ordeal.

I was kindly invited by the Secretary of State for Health—now the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—to his speech to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. He came immediately afterwards to make a statement, saying that from April this year, the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch will investigate every case of stillbirth, neonatal death, suspected brain injury or maternal death notified to the RCOG Each Baby Counts programme. To put that into numbers, there are around 1,000 incidents every year. He also announced—this point is significant in relation to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, but I am not sure it helped all that much. What I mean by that is that parents want to know what happened, how it happened, where there will be learning, and that those learnings will be shared across our NHS to ensure that as few parents as possible have to go through that huge emotional tragedy and ordeal.

“to look closely into enabling, for the first time, full-term stillbirths to be covered by coronal law”—[Official Report, 28 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 179.]

This seems an appropriate time for me to pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Health for all the support that he has given me and the all-party group in our campaign to reduce the stillbirth and neonatal death rate. I also pay tribute—this is my first opportunity to do so in the Chamber since the reshuffle—to my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) for all his work as Member of State in the Department of Health, following on from his predecessor, the Care Quality Minister, the former Member for Ipswich. As Back-Bench MPs, we have numerous meetings with Ministers, and we know that those take place more out of courtesy than anything else, but that was never the case with my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow. He genuinely took an interest in the issue and our work, and he recognised that we had a real opportunity to make a huge difference in reducing our stillbirth and neonatal death rates in this country. We should all be very proud of that legacy.

My wider point is that the Government are listening. The Bill reinforces the mood music and soundings that we have had from them in this regard. They are trying to learn from best practice elsewhere and from unfortunate incidents where stillbirth occurs. Most importantly, as I mentioned, the Secretary of State has already told the House that he is looking into coroners investigating stillbirths, and that is very welcome. When that work has been undertaken, we will certainly work with him and anybody else who wants to be involved with the all-party group.

Improving support for bereaved parents and learning from experiences so that we can lower our stillbirth and neonatal death rate are small things, but they will make a huge difference to thousands of people up and down the country. I will support the Bill.

12.4 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who has been such an effective campaigner on this issue, and other colleagues who have made such brave speeches about their own experience of neonatal birth and stillbirth, and losing their loved ones. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on this brilliant Bill, which my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) rather ingeniously named “the Loved Ones Bill”, a nickname that brings all its elements together.

Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of meeting Denise and Dale from Boughton Monchelsea, in my constituency. They came to the House to talk to me about civil partnerships. They desperately want to make a formal commitment to each other. They want to ensure that they would both be financially protected should something happen to one of them, but they do not want to get married. They want a civil partnership, but, unlike their friends in same-sex relationships, they do not have that option.

The introduction of same-sex civil partnerships was an important step towards greater equality, putting same-sex couples on a similar legal footing as married couples and officially recognising their love and commitment in law. In 2013 we rightly introduced gay marriage, recognising that marriage has a particular status in our society, and that same-sex couples who wanted to marry should be able to do so. Paradoxically, however, opposite-sex couples are now being effectively discriminated against, as they are not given that choice. If we believe in relationship equality and giving couples the same rights and freedoms whatever their sexuality, it makes no sense to deny civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples.

I am married myself; my parents are married, as were my grandparents; but I recognise that not everyone has such good experiences of marriage. Some people see it as a patriarchal institution that oppresses women. They clearly have not met my husband and me! [Laughter.] Not all people feel that marriage is right for them, and their choice should be respected.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She mentioned discrimination. In 2016 a heterosexual couple presented a case to the High Court, claiming that the present law discriminated against them.
The case was dismissed because the judge ruled that they were not subject to humiliation or derogatory treatment as a result of their status. Surely the point is that the system discriminates de facto, irrespective of whether people are actually abused.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend has made a very good point in citing that case.

If, for whatever reason, a couple do not feel that marriage is right for them, but want to make a strong and formal commitment to each other—and given that we have developed a model for it with civil partnerships, even if that was not the original intention—I believe that we should allow them to do so.

Furthermore, we know that children benefit from growing up in a stable family, with a couple who have a stable relationship. Not every relationship works out, and not every child will be brought up by a couple in a stable relationship, but we owe it to children to help people to form, build and sustain stable relationships, and I believe that if a civil partnership is the way in which a couple want to formalise their commitment to each other, it is wrong to stand in their way.

Let me now turn to the registration of marriages. It is clearly wrong for mothers not to sign the registers, and it is also clearly outdated. The current system does not reflect modern Britain. When the child of a single mother gets married, only the father’s name is included on the certificate, even if the child was raised by its mother alone and barely knew its father. I made a point earlier about some people’s perception of marriage. The continuation of a system that does not allow mothers to sign the marriage register may add to the view of some people that marriage is rather old-fashioned and patriarchal. That is something that we could put right.

Finally, on the registration of stillborn babies, I cannot imagine the pain of losing a baby; I remember the misery of an early miscarriage, but I find it hard to imagine how I would have felt if one of my children had been stillborn, and I have so much respect for colleagues who have spoken so courageously about their experiences, particularly the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has spoken today, and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Colchester and for Crawley (Henry Smith), who mentioned his own experience earlier. I have enormous respect for what they are doing in their campaign on this, and I know it is appreciated by constituents of mine who have been through stillbirth. A constituent of mine who lost a baby—I will change the name—told me:

“Emma was my daughter, she wasn’t a statistic.”

My overriding view on this matter is that we have to do better in our health system at reducing the number of stillbirths. I spent time working in maternity units and found it shocking when looking at the data and asking questions that I got the impression that it was just accepted that every year there would be nine, 10 or 11 stillbirths; that was just how it was—that was just a fact. In the most recent unit when I heard that there did not seem to be a sense of inquiry about why, and whether each one of them could have been prevented. That simply should not be accepted.

I welcome the Government’s work and the ambition to halve the stillbirth rate; that is absolutely right, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester has said, there is a huge amount going on. A crucial part of achieving that ambition is understanding what has happened when there is a stillbirth—what went wrong—through proper investigations, perhaps by an independent body. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury said, coroners investigations might not always be the right way to do that, but sometimes they might, so I welcome the inclusion of that in the Bill.

We should learn from stillbirths—or late miscarriages, as they are officially known—whenever they happen, whether after 24 weeks or before. We have heard powerful points on the registration of babies before 24 weeks, and I am conscious of time so I am not going to contribute on that. Instead, I conclude by saying that I welcome the fact that the Government are clearly listening very hard and supporting the Bill.
married, only the father’s details would be included on the marriage entry. That is a damning indictment of the many women who have done so much great work to bring up children alone. In those terms, I think that this is a really important area that we should be pushing, if we are to better reflect the modern state of Britain.

Such a change would also provide an opportunity to reform the whole system of marriage registration. Using digital technology, we could make the whole system much more efficient and create a more secure system for the maintenance of marriage records. Ironically, there is a system for civil partnerships in England and Wales, but Scotland and Northern Ireland have a scheduled system that has been in place since 1855 which deals with all this. We are not normally behind the Scots, but in this instance we clearly are.

I want to turn to the part of the Bill that deals with a more sombre affair: the proposals to allow coroners to investigate and register certain stillborn deaths. I can only imagine the pain that stillbirth can bring, but sadly, it is an experience that many women have faced. Having some lasting recognition that the child was part of life will provide some small compensation. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham went into moving detail about some twins who fell foul of the system. I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the way in which she related her story today. I absolutely take my hands off her, and I thank her very much indeed for doing that.

Changing the definition relating to stillbirth to beyond 24 weeks has already been done; the Government have reduced the threshold from 28 weeks. However, having had three healthy children myself—for which I count myself incredibly fortunate—I know that they were certainly making their presence felt at six months, or 24 weeks, but I am sure that all women who have had a baby will know that that person makes their presence felt from day one. That life is worth celebrating, whatever happens. It is absolutely right that the Government are looking into bringing down the threshold, and I welcome the review of this aspect of the Bill. I also support the clause that deals with investigating certain types of stillbirth. From April this year, the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch will investigate every case of stillbirth, neonatal death, suspected brain injury or maternal death notified to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. There are currently 1,000 of these incidents a year. Having a stillbirth would not be wished on anyone, but should it happen, gathering evidence about the why and wherefore is so important if we are to avoid future stillbirths.

Best practice is more important than anything else, and I highlight Musgrove Park Hospital in my constituency. I am not sure whether the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss knows about the project at Musgrove Park, but it has won a national award because of the excellent care bundle that has halved the number of stillbirths at the hospital in three years. The project has done excellent work, and it would be good if that model could be rolled out elsewhere.

The reduction in stillbirths has come through better delay, changes such as not feeling any movement. All the pregnant mums at Musgrove Park are being given wellbeing wallets and documents to fill out, which is something the all-party group is recommending to other hospitals. I could not recommend the scheme at Musgrove Park more—it is literally a lifesaver.

Finally, civil partnerships were never intended to be an alternative to marriage, but a clear case has been made today for looking much more closely at the issue. I support the Minister in calling for a further review and consultation, because the more evidence that can be gathered to make the case, the better. What is really important is the safety and strength of our family units. If we can do anything to improve that, all the better.

There is much in the Bill that is good, and it genuinely goes to the heart of people’s lives. I support the measures that are going forward, and I support the reviews that the Government are instituting to edge forward the other proposals, too.

12.21 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I echo the support that has been expressed for the Bill, which will ensure the registration of stillbirths before 24 weeks and give coroners the power to investigate stillbirths.

I will concentrate on the clauses that address civil partnerships. I stress that I understand the case that hon. Members have made today, and I applaud the passion of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for this topic. Although I welcome a report and a review to find more evidence, I think that rolling out civil partnerships to everyone is not the right approach, as I am confident such a review would highlight.

It is time to refresh our minds as to why civil partnerships were invented. They were invented because same-sex marriage was not legal. Civil partnerships were not intended to be a permanent alternative to marriage. They were created to allow same-sex couples access to rights, responsibilities and protections equivalent to those afforded to married couples. That is no longer the case.

I appreciate and empathise with the argument that the current situation is unequal because opposite-sex civil partnerships are not available, but the answer is not necessarily to expand civil partnerships. In fact, I would rather see civil partnerships cease altogether. Today everyone in the UK can get married. We finally have equality, which is what people have campaigned for and fought for. Expanding civil partnerships to all would serve to add an extra tier, which would confuse and complicate commitment, rather than encouraging it.

Let us also be clear that there is no legal difference between marriage and civil partnership. The differences are in the names, in the ceremonies and the fact that women are, of course, named on their children’s civil partnership certificates, but we can address that separately—I passionately believe in naming women on their children’s marriage certificates.

Andy Slaughter: The hon. Lady has spoiled my tweet: I have just tweeted that there is unanimous support in the House today for extending civil partnerships. Does she take the point that this is about extending choice? It
will not affect her or other people adversely; it will simply give other people the chance to do something that they want to do.

Michelle Donelan: I apologise for spoiling the hon. Gentleman’s tweet, but I do not agree with him. Other Members have yet to speak, so I will make the case in the rest of my speech. I am sure I will answer him in full. Marriage is ended by divorce, whereas civil partnerships are ended by a dissolution, which is just as lengthy a process. We need to be clear about that, because some assume that it is easy to dissolve a civil partnership—it is not. There is no difference, other than that adultery cannot be cited as a reason for civil partnerships to dissolve—that is not a case for expanding them further. They both offer legal recognition of a relationship, they are symbolic, they are acts of union, and one does not have financial benefit over the other. Civil partnerships do not act as a form of additional co-habitation rights; they are legally the same as marriage.

Some say that civil partnerships are a modern alternative to marriage, and I recognise that argument, yet they are basically the same. It is important that we educate people about that and do not mis-sell the point. I have spoken to a number of people who have a civil partnership and they find it offensive to suggest these things are not the same. Nor are civil partnerships a stepping stone for couples who are not ready to marry; they are marriage but with a different name. Perhaps there is a misunderstanding that we need to address in the review.

Another point to make is that civil partnerships are not cheaper. That argument has not been made in today’s debate but I have heard it before. Weddings and civil partnerships can cost as much as people make them cost. Another argument used for the Bill is the claim that people can be put off by the word “marriage” and the connotations, social pressures and expectations of what it represents. Do we really believe that a significant number of people choose not to marry because of the word “marriage”, but are absolutely fine to make all the same legal and financial commitments when the name is different? The connotations, social pressures and expectations around marriage often exist because it is seen as something permanent and something that can end badly, but that is equally true of a civil partnership. As time progresses and more and more people have them, that will become known. So in a few years’ time will we offer a third option and then a fourth? It is also important to note that amending the eligibility criteria for entering a civil partnership would cost at least £3.3 million to £4.4 million, so the option on the table is not exactly cheap.

Another key aspect we must consider is the level of demand. That is particularly pertinent and the review will highlight it, which is why I strongly support having a review and a consultation. As lots of Members have said, two consultations have already taken place, but on the whole there was very little input from people. That suggests that there is potentially a lack of demand in this area, but we need a further review to examine that. In addition, no clear consensus was established.

Since the introduction of marriage for same-sex couples, the number of civil partnerships has fallen dramatically, and there were just over 1,000 formed in the UK in 2016.

Between 29 March 2014 and 30 June 2015, 7,732 couples converted their civil partnership into marriage. A key aspect for us to consider in enabling opposite-sex civil partnerships is—

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is perfectly entitled to her view, but I fundamentally disagree with it. I certainly would not wish to deny those potentially many thousands of couples on the basis of this costing about £3 million. She says there is no difference between civil partnership and marriage, and that it should not be treated any differently. In terms of status, that is right, but why is it that more than 80% of same-sex couples who have committed to a civil partnership do not think that they need to or want to convert that into a marriage? They think a civil partnership is different and more appropriate for them—why does she think they are wrong?

Michelle Donelan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We do completely disagree on this topic. His accusation that 80% of that cohort do not want to convert into marriage because they see it as something unique is a wild one. I have many friends who have a civil partnership and they choose not to convert it because they already have something that is equal—my hon. Friend is therefore backing up my point that a civil partnership is just as good as, if not the same as, marriage; it is a duplication. That is why they do not seek to convert it.

A key thrust of the case for enabling opposite-sex civil partnerships is that it would encourage commitment, helping ensure that families stay together, which all the research shows is advantageous to children—I agree with that sentiment. However, the argument is tenuous. Some 2.9 million different-sex couples living together in the UK are not married. The Equal Civil Partnerships website, which backs this campaign, states that some of those people do not want to make a legal commitment, but civil partnerships are the same thing. It cites the “trappings of the institution” as another reason but, as has been discussed, civil partnerships will effectively morph into an institution. They are the same as a marriage.

Committed relationships tend to last for just that reason—they are committed. If we add another tier, that does not necessarily mean that different people will enter into that commitment. It might actually mean that all we do is split the same pool. I am passionate about enabling and facilitating commitment and helping families to stay together, but the answer is to further promote commitment, study why relationships and families break down, and invest in those areas.

Helen Whately: May I pick up on my hon. Friend’s point about splitting the same pool of people who might otherwise marry into those who get married and those who have a civil partnership? I have spoken to people who would like to form a civil partnership and do not feel that marriage is the right thing for them for all sorts of reasons that should be taken seriously. They will not get married instead, and the alternative is that they do not have any legal recognition of their relationship.

Will my hon. Friend address the concerns of those people who do not feel that they can get married and would like their relationship to be formally recognised as a civil partnership?
Michelle Donelan: I do not think it would be entirely the same group of people. There would be some others, but I do not think it would be a significant number. We need to examine why those people do not feel confident about getting married and deal with those issues, rather than create another form of marriage by a different name. People can get married in a civil ceremony that is very similar to a civil partnership. There are potentially other issues as to why people are not getting married, other than just the name of the institution.

Expanding civil partnerships would undermine the sanctity of marriage by encouraging some people away from marriage and confusing matters. I ask Members to consider the words of David Levesley, a gay rights campaigner who wrote recently in *The i* newspaper:

“It is one thing to think that marriage is patriarchal and sexist. It is another to try and suggest that something the gay community fought to improve upon is something we should start praising as a great, liberal alternative.”

This entire campaign is based on a sense of inequality—a sense of inequality that I recognise, appreciate and emphasise with, which is why I applauded the Government for conducting a review of the matter. However, duplicating the system with another tier of legal commitment is not the right approach. We need to have serious conversations about why some people are put off marriage and what deters them from getting married.

12.32 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on introducing the Bill to the House. The reassurance from the Minister about what the Bill does and does not cover probably took two hours off my speech.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Shame!

Kevin Foster: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s disappointment, but I will make sure I speak briefly because I am also quite a fan of the next Bill on the Order Paper, so I have no intention of performing one of my longer Friday orations. I shall focus on the nature of the Bill.

When we consider private Members’ Bills on Fridays, I regularly speak about whether they are needed, whether they are not just something that sounds good but might actually make a real difference, and whether the proposals are proportionate to the issue. In the case of this Bill, all those tests are satisfied. We only need to hear some of the evidence from our constituents about those who get married, including me. When people get married, at the end they are presented with the formal register. I listed the fact that my father was a painter-labourer in Devonport dockyard, and my wife Hazel listed the fact that her now-deceased father was a farmer, and of course that was it. Given that my mum could not be at my wedding—she died four years ago this week—it was actually very sad that she could not even have the recognition of being part of the day via the inclusion of her name and profession on the certificate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham rightly said, this law dates back to an era when married women were viewed as chattels of their husband. The idea was that they were physically the property of their husband. In fact, they had no persona of their own legally; by law, they were their husband.

That continued right the way up to the 1880s. People may be wondering whether there was some sort of enlightenment during the 1880s that meant that law was abolished. In fact, it was abolished after a court ruled that everything written by a female author was actually legally by her husband, so the author went and ran up a whole load of debts. When the creditors sued, the court ruled in exactly the same way, saying that all those signatures were legally her husband’s and he had to pay every single bill. Funnily enough, the provisions were abolished very soon after that and married women were given their own legal identity. It is certainly a reminder of a time that no longer exists.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) pointed out the social history and information that we get from items such as wedding and birth certificates. I had a little bit of a surprise when I looked at my grandfather’s birth certificate. In fact, this is a story that the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) will probably quite like. It turned out that my great-grandfather was a Canadian soldier. We all said, “He never went anywhere near Canada, so how was he a Canadian soldier?” It turned out that he was an Irish Roman Catholic who was prepared to join the fight against imperial Germany, but did not wish to join the British Army. At that time, the compromise for these men was to say, “Well, you’re going off to the same place anyway. If you want to go with the Canadians or one of the other dominion armies, off you go.” So he was signed up for the Canadians, even though he had never set foot in Canada. Obviously, my great-grandfather’s views on the Union were very different from mine. That is an example of what people can find out, and the social history that is not captured by these wholly outdated provisions.

I am interested to hear that the Bill will give us the opportunity to bring in a more modern system of marriage registration. There are those who view marriage not as a loving commitment and not as I see it—as something that Hazel and I celebrated before God—but as an opportunity to abuse the immigration system. A more modern registration system will help to deal with that, which is welcome, while removing the archaic provisions of only listing a father on the certificate.

On opposite-sex civil partnerships, I am open to the evidence. I am not as opposed to them as my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). It was the right choice for Hazel and I to have our wedding in church, as that is what we strongly believe in, but I recognise that it is not everyone’s choice and neither should the law force people to marry in church. Since 1833, people have not been forced to get married in church. I also recognise that there are people local to me who want to have a civil partnership. I do not see a particular problem with people making this choice, so I will look at the evidence from the consultation and we will see whether it affects the provision.

The only thing that I would slightly caution is the argument about the views of the Roman Catholic Church, although it is not really for me, as an Anglican, to get into this argument too much. The idea is that if someone was divorced they could have a civil partnership rather than a marriage. I did not find that particularly convincing because my understanding is that the Church would still see it as a partnership in the same way as a civil marriage. In reality, what makes the difference is whether
the Church would allow marriage in a church. Of course, the position of divorcees in the Church of England has changed in recent years: it was once very unlikely that divorcees would be able to remarry in the Church of England, but parish priests are now much more likely to exercise their discretion based on many quite reasonable grounds. For example, I do not think that any of us would seriously believe that Christ would call someone to stay in an abusive relationship. None of us believes that is the case, so it is right that we make this change.

I very much welcome the provision to change registration of births. I hope that it will provide comfort; hearing the powerful stories today confirmed that for me. I particularly welcome the provision to allow coroners the power to investigate stillbirths. A coroner’s inquiry gives a unique opportunity to examine what went wrong—not necessarily to apportion blame, but actually to find out what went wrong, to learn lessons, to give comfort to all involved and to come to a decision. Therefore, it is welcome that their powers are extended in this way. Again, there is obviously a lot of detail to go into. I am sure that a discussion will be needed with the devolved Administrations, particularly in Wales, about how exactly this will work. However, I think that this welcome provision will bring closure to many people.

It is appropriate that this Bill gets its Second Reading. The only concerns are matters that can be dealt with in Committee and perhaps on Report if Members have specific areas that they wish to tweak. It would not be proportionate to try to block the Bill, because it tackles issues that reflect, first, changing society and, secondly, changing medical knowledge. The original provisions on coroners were passed in an era when it would have been very hard to work out what was going on inside the human body. That is now possible with modern scanning and testing techniques, so coroners can look at real evidence. Given the impact on people, giving them the ability to register what was to them not just a statistic or a number in a hospital but a child is totally the right step for us to take. I fully welcome the Bill, and I am sure that it will get its Second Reading in the very near future.

12.40 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). It is fair to say that we are, in a regular capacity, the tail-enders. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on introducing this Bill.

When I first heard about the proposal on civil partnerships, I must admit that I had one concern, about which I intervened on my hon. Friend earlier: the idea—I am not trying to present this as a straw man—that this could be seen as “commitment-lite”. In other words, it might affect the idea that marriage is something very solemn and permanent that people go into committing for life by being less of a commitment and therefore appealing to people who go into it almost in a half-hearted fashion.

That was my instinctive response. However, having considered it and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), spoken to people who would consider this option and would like to have it, I feel that, on the contrary, it would offer to people who would never get married a way that they can commit. That is a very positive thing. Based on all kinds of evidence, we could argue that we live in a more consumerist society where we like to upgrade our mobile phones every year and so on and to have a lot of choice. Arguably, we are not sticklers in the same way that previous generations were. Therefore, institutions that encourage commitment are to be welcomed. I do not have any problem with this in principle.

With regard to Government consultations, we hear a lot about demand. Is there demand for this option? I am not sure that that is the best way to talk about this. We are talking about rights and equality. One person can bring a case to court because that person has rights. The fact that we know individuals who would like to consider this option is enough in itself, and we then have to decide whether it is right in principle. As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent, there was a court case that found that the lack of heterosexual civil partnerships was not discriminatory because the couple in question had not been subject to abuse and so on. I disagree with that—while obviously respecting the independence of the judiciary. To me, it is self-evidently discriminatory. This provision would be a welcome addition to our institutions. I am more than happy to support it for that reason.

Since becoming an MP, I have been incredibly moved by speeches I have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and from Opposition Members, who, in a wonderful cross-party way, have supported such wonderful reforms in the area of baby loss. As a father of twins, the idea that there was a case where a parent had lost their twins and one received a certificate and the other did not is extraordinary. Whatever else we do, we should ensure that that cannot happen. That is why I support my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham.

12.43 pm

Tim Loughton: With the leave of the House, I would like to express my thanks to all Members in all parts of the House for such strong support for all parts of this Bill. It was almost unanimous but certainly very strong support.

Labour Members often reduce Conservative Members to tears, but in the case of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), it was absolutely for all the right reasons. Her speech alone made such a strong case that nobody else need have spoken on why the law on stillbirth needs to be changed. It was brave, powerful and the most stark evidence that her daughter, Lucy, was born and did exist and that the state needs to acknowledge it. Nothing more need be said.

If this debate had been a BBC or Channel 4 hard-hitting documentary, at the end of it the announcer would have said, “If you have been affected by issues in this programme, here is a hotline or website to consult.” That should apply to this debate, because it has touched on some very hard-hitting and emotional issues. I am afraid that I do not have a hotline number or a website for hon. Members to consult, but it certainly has had a dramatic effect on all those here today. I do not want to be more political than that, given the mood of the House. This debate has shown the House at its best.
This is something that needs to be done. All parties have made common cause. It is also the modern thing to do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) said, attitudes have changed, and the law now needs to be changed to catch up. I do not care what we call the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) called it a smorgasbord, and I referred to it as the hatch, match and dispatch Bill, but my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) won the award: the loved ones Bill. That sums up the common thread. The Bill presses a lot of buttons. The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) even pressed the button of paying more tax as a result of his civil partnership. It is also important for social history.

For all those reasons, I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Minister from the Dispatch Box. The Bill is not as forceful in its terminology as it could be, but I am sure we can work on that in Committee. I appreciate her commitment that the review can happen now—that there will be no delay—and I appreciate the sense of urgency and the commitment to addressing the issue, as well as the presumption that we will need to look at how the law can change. She has heard that, for most people here, abolishing civil partnerships is not an option, for very good reasons.

The Minister will also have heard the very emotional contributions on the stillbirth measures, with which it was clear she had a deal of sympathy, and the iniquity of the marriage certificates issue. I have in my hand a piece of paper: a copy of my marriage certificate. To add insult to injury, my father signed it twice, because he also married us—so he got to sign as the clerk in holy orders as well—whereas my mother only signed as a witness. It includes a description of my father’s and father-in-law’s occupations, but there are no details about my mother or mother-in-law. It is an important piece of social history that we are missing out on as well, and that should not be underestimated.

This is just the right thing to do. I apologise for how long and technical my speech and the contributions have been, but these are worthy measures, as the quality of the contributions has underlined. It has shown the House at its best, and I hope that the Government will now make these well-supported measures a reality. I will work constructively with them to bring that about.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Victoria Atkins: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In an excess of excitement, enthusiasm and efficiency, the Government issued a “Dear colleague” letter from me in advance of the House indicating its willingness that the Bill be given a Second Reading, for which I apologise. We have got to the right place, however, and colleagues should now have a letter addressing that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of what has happened. It is absolutely right that she should apologise for the premature release of the letter, but the mood of the House showed a great deal of consensus, and perhaps her officials were unduly influenced by the tweet from the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). As I say, given the consensus and mood of the House, I am sure that it will be forgiving of this mistake. None the less, I thank her for apologising.
Parking (Code of Practice) Bill
Second Reading

12.49 pm

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Parking is an indispensable part of motoring. If you arrive by a car, you need to park it. Our high streets, in-town businesses, many other facilities and even some housing units are all only reachable, useable or viable through the use of local parking facilities.

According to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, there are 38 million vehicles on our roads. Of those, probably some 19 million—about half—will drive and then undertake at least one parking transaction each and every day. The number of tickets issued every year from private car parks is near to 5 million, so it is clear that the majority of vehicle owners do not have an issue involving parking fines.

However, it is important that those parking on private land who receive a private parking notice are treated fairly and consistently. Motorists should have the certainty that when they enter a car park on private land, they are entering into a contract that is reasonable, transparent and involves a consistent process. Poor signage, unreasonable terms, exorbitant fines, aggressive demands for payment and an opaque appeals process, together with some navigation settings, can turn a parking notice into an issue involving unreasonable circumstances.

In some cases it appears that confusion is designed to add to his list of unreasonable circumstances the repeated issuing of fines to individuals parking in their own parking space outside their property, which has affected me and many of the residents in the block where I live in Cardiff.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) rose—

Sir Greg Knight: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, whom I regard as an hon. Friend.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. We usually co-operate musically, rather than politically, but in this case I am happy to co-sponsor his Bill. Does he agree that the statutory code of practice he proposes ought to take into account the poor response by parking companies to inquiries from our constituents and from us as MPs? I wrote to New Generation Parking Management in September last year about my constituent Ann Martin-Jones and had no reply. I wrote again in January this year and had no reply whatsoever from that company. Does that not show that some of the companies in this industry are cowboy companies?

Sir Greg Knight: It is only common courtesy in business to respond to correspondence. I expect the code of practice to have a requirement that where someone challenges a parking notice, whether it be the car owner, the car owner’s solicitor or the car owner’s MP, the parking company is obliged to respond, and within a reasonable time—I would say 14 days.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. Does he agree that these parking companies often indulge in what I term confusion marketing in the car parks they manage? There are signs that say different times and days, and when Members of Parliament point out these quite fundamental problems in their systems, the companies often write off the fine but do not rectify the original problem.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In some cases it appears that confusion is designed to ensure that a parking ticket is issued against the unsuspecting motorist.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I completely support the right hon. Gentleman’s Bill. I will make my own speech, but I wonder if he will add to his list of unreasonable circumstances the repeated issuing of fines to individuals parking in their own parking space outside their property, which has affected me and many of the residents in the block where I live in Cardiff.

Sir Greg Knight: I certainly would condemn that, and I will share an example with the House shortly of a similar case that I regard as outrageous.

Today, we have the opportunity to tackle this issue. I know that the worst abuses feature in the emails and postbags of all Members of Parliament. Not only my constituents in East Yorkshire but motorists right across the country are angry and calling for action.

One such motorist is Mr O’Keefe. He was driving in a private industrial estate, searching for a particular outlet that he was having difficulty finding, when he stopped in an empty lay-by for 15 seconds to check his satellite navigation settings. It transpired that he was caught by a passing security van equipped with a camera, and a week later he received a ticket for £100 for stopping in breach of a sign situated further back on the road that he had passed at 30 mph. The parking company agrees with his version of events—it accepts that he was stationary for only about 15 seconds—but when he made a complaint and then appealed to the Independent Appeals Service, he was fobbed off in both cases and he continues to receive threatening letters.

Even homeowners have been hit, as the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) said in his intervention. A case was brought to my attention concerning residents in a Salford block of flats to whom over 200 tickets were issued for parking in their own car park in just one month. They were given a day’s notice to display a newly designed permit by the management firm, which posted warning letters and the new permits through residents’ letter boxes only one working day before it enforced the new regime. Some of the residents were away on holiday and others did not receive the new parking permit, but they found that their vehicles, parked in their own dedicated spots, had a penalty of £100 stuck to the windscreen. At least one resident who had been away on holiday came back to find tickets to the value of £2,000 on his car. The dispute is ongoing.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that all this injustice is being facilitated by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, which enables these rogue parking enforcers to find out the identity of the owners of such vehicles?

Sir Greg Knight: That is a fair point. My Bill seeks to deal with that, and I will come on to it in a moment. If we have a statutory code of conduct, certainly consequences will flow for a company not adhering to it.
James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the acronym PCN is very confusing for people in relation to parking? It is used as a penalty charge notice when issued by civil authorities, but as a parking charge notice when issued by private companies. The terms are very similar, but very different sets of rule and regulations govern those two separate types of penalty.

Sir Greg Knight: I agree. When we are dealing with private land, such notices should be called private parking notices. The code of practice, if the Bill goes ahead, should contain requirements about what is in the parking notice so that it cannot mimic a police ticket or a court document, and cannot use unnecessary threatening language. My hon. Friend makes a good point.

The case has been drawn to my attention of 69-year-old Angela. Her car was ticketed for £70 for exceeding the time permitted in a supermarket car park. Angela is 5 feet tall, and the small signs were mounted so high up that initially she did not even see them. When she returned to discover the ticket, she looked for signage and eventually saw a sign. It was secured, if that is the word, with pieces of baler twine. Even after staring at it to try to read it, she could not read the wording as the text was so small and too far away.

In another part of the country, a pensioner mis-keyed her number plate into an automatic machine when paying for her parking, getting one digit wrong. On returning to her car, she discovered that the innocent mistake had resulted in a ticket. On appeal, she was able to point out that it was an honest mistake and, indeed, that no other car on the DVLA database had that registration number, but the parking company still demanded payment.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My right hon. Friend is setting out some very bad examples of behaviour by some of these companies, but does he accept that there are some good examples? I can point to one that happened to me last week. I arrived back at my car at York station, where I had left it all week, to find a ticket on my windscreen, and realised that I had forgotten to pay, but a note on the ticket simply said, “Did you forget?” The company did not charge me because I am a regular customer of the car park.

Sir Greg Knight: I think “Lucky” is my hon. Friend’s middle name. The cases I have itemised and that my hon. Friends have drawn to the attention of the House have one thing in common. They show a lack of fairness and a sense of injustice in how the motorists were happening across the UK under the present advisory and a sense of injustice in how the motorists were

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on introducing the Bill. In 2011, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill entitled the Consumer Protection (Private Car Parks) Bill. Alas, I was not successful on that occasion. There have been years of abuse by rogue parking companies, and I wish his Bill every success. Has he had any indication that the Government will be supporting it?

Sir Greg Knight: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for his support. We can all agree that action is overdue on this.

The changes in the Bill will reassure drivers that private car park operators will in future treat them in a fair and proportionate manner. If they do not—here I answer a point raised earlier—drivers will have access to a robust, transparent and independent appeals service. The erring car park operators will risk being put out of business by being denied access to the DVLA keeper records.

Several stakeholders have shown their support for the Bill. I have been working with a number of motoring groups including the RAC, and I am pleased to say that I have indeed had an indication of support from the Government today, as well as from the official Opposition and the Scottish National party, for which I am very grateful.

As I have said, almost 19 million journeys every day end at a parking space, so this issue affects all voters, regardless of geographic region, class or age. If you have a car, you will benefit from the Bill, and Members who support me today will be supporting the British motorist. Parliament now has a real chance to make parking fairer for both consumers and businesses.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): On the point about fairness, one of my constituents recently raised with me the question of the telephone numbers that some of these companies provide, and the lack of transparency for people who then try to find out why they have been charged. Does the Bill cover that?

Sir Greg Knight: The Bill provides the framework for the introduction of a fair code. In my discussions with the Minister, for which I am obliged to him, he has
indicated that he expects signage to play a part in the code. The code should set out that signage must be adequate and must provide details of how to contact a company to make a complaint or dispute a ticket, as well as details of how to activate an independent appeals process.

Today gives us an opportunity to introduce fair play all round to an industry whose reputation has been besmirched by a few car park cowboys. I hope that the House will agree that it is an opportunity that should be grasped.

1.5 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to support this Bill wholeheartedly, because it deals with an issue that hugely affects my constituency. I have come across examples of all the problems that the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) has mentioned. It is a particular challenge in my area of Cardiff—I know that it is also a problem in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan)—because of the density of accommodation in the Cardiff bay area. In Butetown and Grangetown, we have a lot of high-rise apartment blocks; I think there are about 15,000 such units in the bay area. With that come pressures on parking and lots of private parking facilities.

Everybody agrees that we want to prevent people from misusing other people’s parking spaces. People who come to enjoy the Wales Millennium Centre or other entertainments in Cardiff bay need to be able to use the public parking lots in the area, so that they do not block up residential areas. On the other hand, when rogue parking companies are doing all the things that the right hon. Gentleman has set out, it is clear that there is a fundamental problem that we need to address.

I will remark briefly on a couple of issues; I am keen for us to get on to the third private Member’s Bill, which concerns the taxi trade. I want to point out several companies with which I have had particular problems, and against which I have had to advocate on behalf of constituents: Link Parking, New Generation Parking, UK Parking Control and ParkingEye. I also want to highlight the firms of solicitors that work with those companies. We might refer to such firms as “robocalls” firms, and they often have a close and cosy relationship with the parking companies.

Kevin Brennan: Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that public authorities have a responsibility not to engage private parking companies that act irresponsibly? In my constituency, I have had dozens of complaints about ParkingEye, which is engaged by a local hospital—very unusually for Wales—to undertake their paid car parking.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree; I have had problems with ParkingEye too. This is not just about public authorities, but freeholders of large blocks of apartments, lettings companies, and those doing short lets—all the people who are involved in letting out, for long or short periods, properties with parking spaces attached. They must make sure that they do not do so, for example, one day before a change of parking arrangements and they must also make sure that a person who changes their car can easily get a new permit and not run the risk of getting a massive fine while they are waiting for their new car to be registered. The process for motorists should be simple and straightforward.

I want to deal with one more area, because it relates to the next Bill that will be debated today. I have seen harassment of taxi drivers in my constituency, for example, when they operate around some major retail areas and are waiting to pick up elderly or vulnerable customers, who want to get back home with their shopping from places such as Asda in Cardiff bay. The drivers suddenly find themselves caught with massive fines for driving in and out of a car park—this has happened on a number of occasions—to pick up people doing their shopping. Sometimes they have been harassed by staff who are employed by these companies. A number of drivers have come to me with video evidence of harassment from staff involved with these rogue parking companies.

Fundamentally, this comes down to common sense, justice and reasonableness. When things end up in court, it is an absurd situation. Robocalls companies, which are making a massive mint off this industry, can issue a summons for just £30, and yet a defendant can sometimes have to pay as much as eight times that to defend the case, as well as having to deal with the time, emotion and everything that comes with that process.
I wholeheartedly support the Bill proposed by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire and very much hope it gets Royal Assent. We need to crack down on these rogue companies. They are an absolute disgrace to this country. Ordinary motorists and ordinary residents should not have to put up with it, and I wholeheartedly support the Bill.

1.12 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I am delighted to support the Bill and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) for his work over a long period to make progress on this matter. I also associate myself with the remarks made by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I recognise a lot of the incidents that he discussed.

As a number of Members wish to speak, I will cut short a lot of my remarks, which essentially endorse the Bill, and come on to a couple of extra points that I really want to make. I completely support the Bill’s objectives. I spoke to my local citizens advice bureau yesterday and asked about the levels we are seeing in south Gloucestershire. It said that in the last couple of months, 29 people have received advice from the CAB about private parking enforcement notices. Clearly, incidents and the amount of ticketing are rising, so I completely support the Bill. I will make a couple of points and perhaps suggestions about how we could alter the Bill in its next stage.

The Automobile Association has probably been in touch with a lot of hon. Members about parking hotspots. Essentially, hotspots are covered up or hidden because of access to location data. When councils enforce parking restrictions, they are obliged to detail, by location, how many PCNs have been issued and how much money has been raised, but private parking operators are not. That means that problem locations, where parking charges are issued essentially too liberally, remain hidden.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend is right as far as the present situation is concerned, but if the Bill proceeds, I anticipate that the new mandatory code of practice would require transparency of data. I hope that the Minister will commit to ensuring that information about the number of tickets issued per car park will be in the public domain.

Luke Hall: I completely endorse what my right hon. Friend said and hope that the Minister will give that assurance. As has been discussed, parking hotspots can be due to poor signage, unclear signage, poor markings on the floor and even, in some cases, signs that are deliberately designed to mislead the person who is parking and catch out motorists. I am not saying that that is happening in all cases, but it clearly is in some.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the provision of confusing signs, along with the confusion over PCNs and the machinery that people have to use to get their tickets, is often deliberate, with the intention of levying fines rather than ordinary parking charges?

Luke Hall: It is important for us to address that during the Bill’s passage. Parking hotspots in private locations continue to trap innocent drivers month in month out, year in year out, and because the information is not released, there is little pressure or incentive for layouts to be improved in order to prevent drivers from making the same mistakes. I support the AA’s recommendation that when a private parking company requests a person’s data from the DVLA, it should be required to give either the postcode or the location where the driver was caught, so that the number of parking charges issued per location could be recorded and published by the DVLA. I understand that it would be quite a simple change, and that the information could be added to the V888/3 form that private parking operators have to fill in. I hope that that can be incorporated in either the guidance or the Bill.

I also want to make a point about cost. According to a report published by the Transport Committee report in 2014, which I understand is still accurate, the DVLA charges £2.50 to process each request for information, but the processing costs the DVLA £2.84 per application, which means a deficit of 34p. We are effectively subsidising the private companies that are making the applications, and that surely cannot be right. I hope that we would make the charge the same as the cost, but, if not, we would surely charge slightly more rather than slightly less. The DVLA is having to cover a shortfall of £700,000 a year, which is 0.1% of its total operating costs.

I know that a number of other Members wish to speak. Let me end by saying that this is a positive Bill. I hope we shall be able to address a couple of the points that I have made as it progresses, and that the Minister will give some assurances about the guidance, but I think that it will promote confidence in private operators by creating what will be a set of recognised standards. It is endorsed by the chief executive of the British Parking Association and the director of the RAC Foundation. I commend my hon. Friend for introducing it, and I will support it.

1.17 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I wholeheartedly congratulate the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), my partner in crimes against music. I see that the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) is present as well. I was wondering what song we might be able to cover to celebrate the Second Reading of the right hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and I thought that perhaps it would be the Beatles classic “Drive My Car”—“Baby, you can park my car”.

Kevin Brennan: Surely it should be Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi”, which contains the words “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot”.

Sir Greg Knight: May I take up this theme? The Bill is really saying to cowboy operators, “‘Get Back’. You will no longer have a ‘Ticket to Ride’. And if you do not follow the statutory code of practice, it will be a case, for your business, of ‘Hello, Goodbye’.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest that we all want to be “Homeward Bound”?

Pete Wishart: I think all this just goes to show how much in harmony the members of MP4 are on these issues.

This is a particularly useful Bill, which I strongly support. I believe that it is absolutely necessary. Private parking companies have become a curse in so many of our communities, and they are out of control in so
many areas. They are a blight on communities, harassing motorists and driving tourists away from many towns and city centres. The city of Perth is plagued by these cowboys. I have received more complaints about one car park in Kinnoull Street than about any other issue in my constituency. That car park is operated by the John Wayne of all the cowboys, the appalling and loathed Smart Parking, a company that blights communities throughout Scotland, including Inverness, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). It distributes fines like confetti, and its so-called smart technology seems almost designed to frustrate motorists and harvest fines from them.

Another company in my constituency, UKPCS in St Catherine’s Retail Park in Perth, has even managed to outdo Smart Parking. One part of this free car park is ringed with signs saying that anybody who parks there who has the temerity to leave that zone and access facilities in other parts of the retail park will be fined up to £100, and people’s privacy is being invaded by car park attendants taking photographs of unsuspecting customers to prove this crime. This is the level of harassment our constituents are now having to put up with on a daily basis at the hands of these cowboys, and it has to come to an end.

The sheer scale of their preying on our constituents is almost industrial in its operation and organisation. A private parking ticket is now being issued every 4.5 seconds, the equivalent of 13 per minute. The RAC estimates that the total value of illegitimate parking tickets issued by private companies in a single year could be as much as £100 million. These parking cowboys know they are on to a good thing, and they know what to do now is build parking ticket charges into their business models in order to increase their profits at the expense of our constituents. This Bill will hopefully signal the beginning of the end of the parking cowboys.

Self-regulation has obviously failed dramatically. The British Parking Association is as much use as a multi-storey car park in the middle of Gobi desert. The parking cowboys hide behind BPA membership to give a veneer of legitimacy. Every time I take up issues with Smart Parking, it just comes back to me and says, “We’re members of the BPA so it should be all right.”

What do our constituents think? Some 93% of participants in an RAC survey think a Bill aimed at tackling the issue is a good idea, so the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire is on to something here; 84% want fines to be proportionate to the contravention; 74% want fines capped; and 81% of motorists want a national standard on signs. The good news for the right hon. Gentleman is that 78% want a parking regulator that enforces good practice.

We have heard some of the things that should be included; I will make a couple of pitches, and I hope to serve on the Bill Committee to pursue them. When people receive PCNs, their rights should be included on them. Too often the parking cowboys dress them up as fines; they are not fines. They are not even effectively collectable; what they are is a statement to say that the recipient has somehow breached the terms and conditions of using that private land, and if the parking company were to pursue them, there would have to go to the civil court and prove that they broke those terms and conditions.

I make a plea, too, on the use of debt collection agencies, which has to end. They are grossly invasive, threatening and meant to intimidate people into paying. I have seen some appalling examples of the use of debt collection agencies and how they increase the intensity of their threats and intimidation. I have had constituents who have had 10 threatening letters, which increase to the point where I almost think they are going to be taken out and shot at dawn, such is the level of their threats.

The National Motorists Action Group has also found an unsavoury profitable collusion between private parking companies and debt collection agencies. It is right that PPCs should expect settlement and that they write letters, but local authorities do not use private collection agencies, so if it is good enough for the statutory sector it should be good enough for the private sector, too.

I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) about DVLA access. I believe parking operators should have to prove they are entitled to get DVLA access. I know that is not being considered, but I would like it to be. Parking operators should meet a test to show they are a responsible parking operator in order to get DVLA access, but if there are any examples of bad practice, DVLA access must be removed. I like the AA’s suggestions and ideas about monitoring hotspots through postcodes, and if something peculiar and particular is going on, as in Perth, the private operator has an obligation to resolve it and, if it is not resolved to our satisfaction, they lose access to the DVLA. That is a straightforward suggestion.

I am also grateful that this will cover the whole of the United Kingdom, so that areas like mine are covered. My constituency has been particularly blighted by the parking cowboys and I hope this will mark the beginning of their twilight months.

In my experience, people are happy to pay for their parking, and an arrangement that ensures that parking on private land is properly charged and any transgressions are proportionately tackled is the way forward. Surely it is not beyond our wit to design such an arrangement.

1.24 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). As a touring actor for 45 years, I picked up tickets all over the country, including in his area. It is my pleasure to support the Bill proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). His proposal for a code of practice sets exactly the right tone. No one is seeking over-intrusive regulation of the private parking market, because there is nothing fundamentally wrong with it if it is run properly and with oversight and consideration. Private parking is a legitimate industry that it is important we get right in some areas, and overregulation would put a burden on local authorities, and therefore on the taxpayer, if they had to administer and maintain all the car parks themselves.

However, a code of practice is necessary to inform correct behaviour, as for all public amenities. Without such codes, poor practice grows. I have seen this in my own constituency. My experience in Clacton is with a
firm called Smart Parking. It advertised free parking in a very pronounced way on a very big sign. Far less prominent was the request to enter a plate number and to take a ticket. That was required even though the parking in that car park in Ravensdale was supposedly free. The widespread view was that a large “free parking” sign meant just that, so people just parked their cars and went about their business, only to have a hefty fine levied on them because they had missed the deliberately small print.

In my view, that is an outrageous scam, and it is still going on. It enables Smart Parking to issue tickets and therefore collect fines. It would appear that the company is not interested in levying ordinary parking charges. Instead, it raises money through levying these very expensive fines—a legal if dodgy practice. It was totally legal, for instance, that a 70-year-old lady visiting a friend at the Abbey nursing home round the corner from the Ravensdale car park for 45 minutes was later sent a fine in the post, despite the fact that a notice advertising one hour’s free parking was displayed in the car park. I am informed that since Smart Parking took over the site in Clacton, about 400 unfair parking tickets have been issued, and given the local demographics, there have probably been issued predominantly to elderly, and therefore potentially vulnerable, people. Of those, 250 are being pursued by a company called Debt Recovery Plus, one of the debt recovery schemes that we heard about earlier.

Clause 6 of the Bill covers the delegation of functions, and would give the Secretary of State the power to “enter into an agreement with another public authority authorising and would give the Secretary of State the power to

In my mind, that means local councils are in the best place to lead the charge. After all, councils already administer their own municipal car parks, and are experienced in having to balance the needs of the local community, including those of small businesses, parents on the school run and so on. They have the bedrock of skill, experience and local knowledge that can really help to tackle some of the outrageous abuses that we are seeing.

The extant regulation is insufficient. Smart Parking claims that it is fully compliant with British Parking Association guidance, and it is. However, that still allows it to issue hundreds of fines that are legal but totally disingenuous and unjust. That is why I support my right hon. Friend’s Bill. It is unjust that we allow signage that is legally compliant but blatantly results in hundreds of parkers ending up under a misapprehension that causes them to receive fines, as is happening in the Ravensdale car park, off North Road in Great Clacton. When hundreds of people are fined due to the same mass confusion, the system is failing. We in this House need to fix this, just as we once did with unscrupulous clammers.

Having two different accredited trade associations with differing codes of practice creates inconsistency and confusion in the market. We need universal standards that can be understood across the country. For example, there could be a universal standard providing parkers with a five-minute grace period in which to decide whether to buy a ticket or not, having read the signs. They should be able to leave the site with impunity if they decide not to proceed. Sadly, I know of cases of people who have merely driven into a car park then turned round and left, not knowing that an automatic number plate reader had recorded their visit and started the process of issuing a fine.

Let us be clear that the issue is getting worse. As it currently stands, private parking operators seek car keeper details from the DVLA to follow up unpaid charges. Research from the RAC Foundation suggests there was a 28% rise in requests for keeper details in 2016-17 alone, which means private car parking companies are ticketing drivers once every seven seconds—that figure conflicts with an earlier statement. There are an awful lot of parking tickets, anyway.

I urge Ministers to consider how we can bring to bear the core pillars of localism and use this Bill further to empower councils—in line with a code from the Secretary of State, as suggested in the Bill—to root out some of these unscrupulous practices that damage good local parking and, therefore, the economic and tourism prospects of towns across the country.

1.30 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on introducing this much-needed Bill, which I am pleased to support on behalf of the Opposition.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) said, everybody knows a victim or has been a victim themselves of these parking companies. Two weeks ago I met Resolver, which helps people to resolve their consumer complaints. Resolver also campaigns to raise awareness of consumer rights in relation to private parking, and it told me that the number of complaints it receives about private parking nearly doubled between 2016 and 2017—from 1,865 in 2016 to 3,522 in 2017.

We all accept that parking operators are entitled to protect vehicle access to private land and to protect people with a rightful reason to be on that land. The problem is how some of those companies go about it, with their often indiscriminate and excessive enforcement. I have received the example of someone who parked in a car park and unfortunately died while they were out shopping. They received a parking charge because, obviously, they had not thought to remove their car, and their relations were chased by a parking company for the parking fine. The case caused considerable distress. Only two things used to be certain: death and taxes. Now it is death and parking fines, apparently.

Resolver has a lot of in-depth statistics showing that the main complaints arise where firms unfairly apply charges in contravention of their own rules, with 625 complaints; where the recipient has left the car park within the allotted time limit and is still fined, with 286 complaints; and where the signage is unclear, obscure or behind a tree, with 198 complaints.

Resolver also says there are too many barriers to getting in touch with these parking companies, as we heard from my hon. Friend. The companies only accept complaints in writing. They do not accept emails or telephone calls, and they do not answer the complaints in writing. They say that they have never received the complaints. It is far too difficult.

As we have also heard, the most common misunderstanding is that people think the charges are actually fines. The invoices look like penalty charge notices. The invoices have black and yellow on them,
and they try to mirror penalty charge notices in every possible way. They try to blur the rules between public and private car parks. Many people are intimidated into paying the tickets even when they do not think the tickets are fair, not least, as we have heard from my hon. Friend and from the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), because the companies use debt recovery agents and solicitors. They try to get the parking fines paid by any means possible.

I have heard of inaccurate threats to use bailiffs, outside the court system, to repossess cars. It is vital that the code of practice outlaws such dodgy practices. I agree with the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) about the honeypot car parks that catch drivers repeatedly, sometimes because the signs are not illuminated in the dark, and sometimes because the signs are not visible at all. As the AA says, the postcodes of all the parking fines that are issued should be submitted. If there are these honeypot car parks, they should be looked at.

The statistic that got to me was the fact that 5 million vehicle keeper records have been requested by private parking operators from the DVLA—5 million people have been issued with these fines. That is an incredible number, and this is the time to bring forward some justice for the motorist. The parking companies should not all be lumped together, as there are some that follow the law. However, the bad practices of many parking companies colour people's view of all parking companies, and it is time for us to take this Bill forward. I look forward to it going through Committee and receiving Royal Assent.

1.35 pm

Al Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on introducing this Bill and on his very lucid Conservative Home article, which was published yesterday, and which I read with interest. I rise to support the Bill and welcome the cross-support it has already garnered, and I hope the Minister will be supportive, too.

People contacting me to ask for support in appealing car parking tickets and for help with queries with private car parking firms form an increasingly large part of my parliamentary postbag, so I very much welcome this timely Bill. I am delighted that it has received industry support, including from the RAC and the British Parking Association. I am particularly delighted that my right hon. Friend has committed to a wide-ranging consultation in clause 2(1), which I understand covers the operators, managers, providers and users of car parks—and, indeed, anybody else considered to be a stakeholder by the Secretary of State.

I very much welcome the creation of a new code of conduct, which I hope will incorporate the best parts of the two existing codes of conduct, but I also encourage members of the public to respond to the consultation, because this appears at a timely moment in the development of vehicle technology. As the fourth industrial revolution accelerates and new technologies mean self-driving vehicles—autonomous vehicles—becoming an increasingly large part of our personal and commercial lives, the truth is that parking and its regulation should be reviewed and updated, so that this country is ahead of the times, not behind the curve. We need to make sure that the technology that is transforming our economy is incorporated into our law. Therefore, I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's Bill.

As a Conservative, I believe in a smaller, smarter state, rather than big government, but there is a role for the state to play in the regulation of parking. My right hon. Friend's Bill strikes the right balance between transparency, consistency and protecting consumers. Many Members will be aware of his campaign jingle during the election, where he promised "accountability with Conservative delivery". I commend him for his Bill, which delivers both. I am happy to speak in favour of it, and I hope the House will give it a Second Reading.

1.37 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to support this Bill and, in turn, support the long list of constituents who have come to my surgeries to discuss private car parks. It is time we addressed these issues, and I am confident that this Bill will do so, by introducing a statutory code of practice. I echo the sentiment of Andrew Pester, the chief executive of the British Parking Association, who says that a single code “is important to ensure that unscrupulous providers don't undermine the parking sector with bad practice.”

This problem is not just isolated to Wiltshire; nearly 10,000 people approached Citizen's Advice for advice on this issue last year alone. The problem is getting worse, which makes this Bill particularly pertinent. Parking firms are issuing almost 13 times more tickets than they were a decade ago. A major issue is rogue private parking operators—I am sure we all have those in our constituencies. This Bill will tackle them by creating clarity and consistency across the sector and—pardon the pun—driving up standards. The current system is rather fragmented. It is important to note that both accredited trade associations have their own code of conduct, which means there is a complete lack of consistency. This Bill will rectify that.

One area I would like to see further action on, which other hon. Members have mentioned, is the issue of parking fine hotspots—I, too, support the AA's campaign on that. About 70% of the constituency parking charge cases I deal with come from the elderly, and the problem is usually with a lack of signage, unclear instructions or a very small font—the lighting or technology is not user-friendly and so they cannot work out where to park.

Although the code will address those issues to an extent, it is only right that private operators are bound by the same level of transparency adhered to by local authorities. Councils are currently obliged to detail by location how many PCNs have been issued and how much money has been raised; private parking operators are not. That needs to change, so that hotspots can be reasonably identified and the reasons assessed. I hope that the Minister will consider that. The new code will raise industry standards and provide consistency and the assurance that consumers and our constituents need.

1.40 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I was going to regale the House with a whole litany of complaints, but everyone will be happy that I am not going to do that because
Members from all parties have shown their unanimity on this issue. There is unanimous support for the Bill, and I completely concur with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight).

Much of my postbag and email inbox is taken up by correspondence on this issue, about which more than 10,000 people a year now seek advice and guidance from Citizens Advice. Enough is enough. Firm regulation is long overdue. The technology is often a problem for the more elderly people in my constituency, along with issues such as eyesight, signage and access to telephone numbers.

There is a clear case for a unified code of practice being really useful. Currently, any given parking operator could be regulated by either the British Parking Association or the International Parking Community, each of which imposes separate and different codes of conduct on its members, so a degree of digging is involved just for a resident to find out to what rules the company they have a dispute with is bound, let alone for them to find out how to hold the company to account.

A unified set of standards will make it much easier for ordinary citizens to learn their rights and take action against unscrupulous parking operators, by making the information easy to find and universally acceptable. That will make it faster and simpler for the likes of Citizens Advice and the staff in our offices to help people who approach us about parking issues, and I hope that it will also allow more people to find out on their own what they need to know.

Although failure to meet the new code of conduct will not be a criminal offence, the Bill will ensure that such a failure may lead to a parking operator being refused access to DVLA data. I hope that will effectively put such an operator out of business in that respect. I strongly support the Bill and am very pleased that it will be considered today.

1.42 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the time, I shall keep my remarks brief to allow for discussion of the next Bill on the Order Paper. I very much welcome this Bill, which follows on from a debate I secured last year about the parking sector. The Bill is needed because some firms are not playing by the rules and are not being fair to car park users, and in receipt of such charges feel pressured into paying them straightaway, partly due to the escalating cost.

The Bill is therefore welcome and long overdue. My constituents and I fully support it. I hope it gets its Second Reading quickly so that we can get on with the task.

It is fundamentally wrong that details given to the state—details that we are required to give to the DVLA in order to register our cars by law—are then used to allow the industry to practise in this way. Most examples come from remote enforcement. It is the DVLA that needs to be the focus, and not how much is charged in a car park or the choices that people make. We should focus on the relationship whereby we have given information to the state only for it to be passed on to a company to behave in this manner. That is why the law needs to change and why this Bill is so welcome.

1.45 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Although the vast majority of privately owned car parks treat their customers with respect, there are still far too many rogue operators. As Members are aware, a common scenario is that people park their car, pay for a ticket and leave without giving it a second thought, but receive a parking ticket in the post some days later demanding an up-front payment within a specified timescale. If they do not pay right away, the fine may double—it is pay now or pay more. The difficulty in such a situation is that the onus is on the owner of the car to prove not only that they have paid to park, but that the ticket was displayed appropriately, when the evidence is all with the person trying to impose the charge. These charges are often accompanied by threatening and aggressive letters that, in their own right, cause a great deal of distress to those receiving them. It is understandable why so many people in receipt of such charges feel pressured into paying them straightaway, partly due to the escalating cost.

The Bill is needed because some firms are not playing by the rules and are not being fair to car park users, and there is sometimes not a clear and fair appeals process. Such companies should simply not have privileged access to public and official databases such as those maintained by the DVLA. The only surprise to most of us is that this is not already the case because it seems so blindingly obvious.

The damage caused by these unfair notices is not just to the people receiving the charges; the wider community also suffers. Unfair parking charges and penalties cause a culture of avoidance. People stay away from those car parks and become more fearful of paying and display car parking. This is having an impact on our town centres,
as drivers are concerned that a trip to the town centre could result in an arbitrary penalty. We need this Bill to pass not only for the sake of our constituents, who are directly affected, but for the sake of our local economies.

1.47 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I am aware that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) is poised to introduce his Bill, which addresses an important issue. Also the Minister, to whom I shall shortly be acting as Parliamentary Private Secretary, will be cross with me if I give her cause to have to reduce her no doubt excellent speech by too much. There may even be some colleagues who are in a rush to get home because their own parking ticket expires soon.

As we have heard from colleagues across the House, this is a very good Bill, which I am pleased to support. However, a number of concerns have been raised by other Members that I also want to underline. The fact that private parking companies use the PCN abbreviation as “parking charge notice”—compared with the “penalty charge notice” issued by the police and civil authorities—is willfully misleading and should be stopped. We should also look at the way in which private parking companies are allowed to design the waterproof wrappers for tickets, the tickets themselves and the language on them. There is a clear attempt to make these tickets look like they have come from the civil authorities or from the police.

In my experience and the experience of many of my constituents, signage in private car parks is inconsistent. At best, that could be down to poor maintenance or a mistake. At worst, it could be argued that the poor signage is again a deliberate act to confuse or deceive.

Another development that I have found unhelpful is car parks where people can park only with an app. Some of these apps are absolutely excellent. It is not the case that people can park in car parks on the Great Western Railway network only by using the APCOA app, although that app is very good; many Members will have had experience of using it. That is not so in other car parks, one of which belongs to a very fine hotel in Bristol that insisted that people used an app to pay for their parking.

Some years earlier, when the company was in a very different guise, I had used an online parking facility with that company and given over my car details. I could no longer remember any of the log-in details, and it turned out that there was no facility for me to reset my membership or to be able to access the app. However, because I had entered the car park, I would be charged, and if I was unable to pay through the app, then I would have to accept the ticket and appeal it. The fact that the company could do that was quite extraordinary, especially as I had entered the car park and incurred the charge before any of this became clear to me. That could have been a unique and extraordinary happening experienced by almost nobody else, but it does perhaps indicate how unregulated and unreasonable the private parking industry can sometimes be.

What underlines all the things we have heard today better than anything else is that in all our experience when dealing with casework, we have heard time and again that when these private parking companies are challenged, they capitulate almost immediately. Very rarely do they stand their ground, and that indicates exactly how thin the ice they are skating on is. I agree with colleagues across the House who have said that access to DVLA data is, very clearly, a privilege for companies that behave correctly and should not be allowed for those who repeatedly behave very badly indeed. I have great pleasure in supporting the Bill.

1.51 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I have two or three questions for the Minister.

I have already mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) my concern about the DVLA’s inadequate behaviour in this respect. I do not see why the DVLA itself does not stop giving access to its database to rogue parking companies. This Bill proposes to deal with that indirectly through members of parking associations rather than directly with the parking companies concerned.

Sir Greg Knight: May I correct my hon. Friend? My understanding is that the DVLA does refuse to give access to rogue parking companies, so the threshold beyond which a company is regarded as “rogue” is perhaps what needs changing. That is the point.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for correcting me. In that case, may I challenge the Minister to explain why so many of these rogue parking companies are continuing to operate in the disgusting way that we have heard about during this debate?

Will my hon. Friend the Minister ensure, when this Bill goes forward, that we also introduce a provision ensuring that there should be equal treatment of all vehicles in private car parks? In my local authority area of Christchurch there is a lot of resentment about the fact that when, for example, Travellers invade the car park, they are treated with impunity, whereas people who may have just overstayed by 20 minutes find themselves having the book thrown at them. Can we ensure that the Bill is used as a vehicle for getting equal treatment for all motorists who park in private car parks? Will my hon. Friend say when he expects the provisions of this Bill, and the secondary legislation, to be enacted, so that people who are concerned about this issue know the deadline for implementing what we in this House want to do?

If my hon. Friend gives satisfactory answers to those questions, I hope that the Bill can make progress.

1.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Nobody leaves their house because they want to go and do some parking; parking is simply a means to an end, and it should be as easy as possible. The millions of people across the country who use private parking facilities every day deserve a system that is fair, transparent and consistent, but as we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, it is clear that the current private parking system has at times failed each and every one of these tests.
I join hon. Members across the House in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on bringing the Bill to its Second Reading. It rightly seeks to address an issue that comes up time and again in all our postbags and inboxes. As we have heard, there is currently no standardised, central and independent regulation of private parking operators. Today, there are two different trade associations, each with its own code of practice, and, as the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned, the industry is largely self-regulating.

That has led to a range of issues for hard-working constituents doing their best to abide by the rules as they go about their day-to-day business. As we heard, people are being charged unreasonable amounts of money for what are clearly very minor and honest mistakes. My Department has received a case where someone accidentally mistyped their registration number into a parking system, and for the sake of a 50p ticket received a £45 fine in the post—90 times the cost of the original parking ticket.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Members for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Clacton (Giles Watling), also problematic is poor signage. To park in a private car park is essentially to enter into a contract, but signs are often poorly lit and have unreasonably small text, meaning that drivers are completely unaware of the contract they have just entered into. As my hon. Friend the Members for Havant (Alan Mak), for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Wells (James Heappey) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) set out, however, unjustifiable charges and poor signage are not the only problems facing motorists.

Stephen Doughty: I am glad to hear that the Minister supports the Bill. Will he also look closely at the links between one of the so-called trade associations, the International Parking Community, and Gladstones Solicitors, and the listing of all these accredited operators? It is clear from Companies House information that there are clear links between the individual directors of Gladstones and the IPC, which goes under United Trade and Industry Ltd, and that there has been a repeated changing of names and addresses in an attempt to cover up these links.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the alleged conflicts of interest within the industry. That is certainly something that the code should look to improve. On his other point, he is right that the way some operators contact members of the public is deeply worrying, as we have heard, and how they label tickets. We have also heard familiar stories of intimidating letters issued by companies that often falsely give the impression of being from a solicitor. These letters often contain threatening, legalistic language, hide appeals information in the small print and disingenuously push people towards paying unjust fines, unaware of their right to appeal.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady raises the issue of the level of fines, which is also something the code is considering. In theory, there is currently a maximum fine: the job of the new code is to make sure it is properly enforced.

Similarly concerning is the use of county court judgments, as was raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth. We are aware of a case in which a private parking operator pursued a ticket against someone who had sold the offending car before the ticket was issued. Inexplicably, the operator decided to obtain a CCJ against the unsuspecting person, which they only discovered when it caused the family’s application for a mortgage to be rejected at the last minute—their chance to buy their dream home ruined by a £40 fine meant for someone else entirely. Such practices are clearly unacceptable and must come to an end.

That brings me to the appeals process itself. As many hon. Members have mentioned when writing to my Department, accessing the appeals process is no guarantee of a fair hearing. In too many cases, appeals seem to simply ignore common sense. In one case, despite the fact that the parking operator had stated that the alleged parking offender was a male, the appeal process upheld the case against a woman.

We would imagine that if the industry had confidence in the tickets they were issuing, they would be willing to defend their decisions at appeal. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells touched on this, and the House may be interested to know that in the year to September last year, for just one of the trade associations’ appeal services, in almost 40% of cases brought to appeal, the parking company immediately caved and cancelled the ticket. That statistic suggests that parking operators are in many cases issuing questionable tickets that they themselves do not even think are worth defending at appeal.

Clearly we must take action to put an end to the indefensible behaviour we have heard described today by Members across the House, and the Bill is an opportunity to do just that. Specifically, it will enable the Government to introduce a new single code of practice to cover the whole industry, which will give drivers the confidence to know that they will be treated in a fair and consistent way.

To respond to the comments from my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood), an operator that fails to comply with the code will lose its access to DVLA data. That is a severe penalty, making it effectively impossible to enforce a ticket. Further, if a trade association has been found to be breaching the code of practice, its status as an official trade association will be revoked immediately. Any costs arising from the code, including its enforcement, will be covered by a new levy on the industry, which the Bill also provides for.

The Government have started to develop the new code in partnership with stakeholders, and I welcome the fact that the director of the RAC Foundation, Steve Gooding, is chairing an industry advisory panel. I put on record my thanks to him and the other panel members for the work they are doing. I look forward to receiving their latest submission.

I thank all hon. Members who have participated today for highlighting the clear need to improve standards and regulation in this industry. I am sure that my
officials have been taking close note of all the examples raised, which will go into developing the code, the principles of which we hope to publish at the same time as the Bill’s Committee stage.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) raised the issue of disclosure. The Government agree that transparency in disclosure is very important and should form part of the Bill. The exact form is still being worked on, with not just car park operators but those involved in the appeals process, and that data should be available for the public and audit authorities to analyse.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire for the time and effort he has put into bringing the Bill to Second Reading. It will pave the way for real reforms that will make a positive difference to people across the country, and I am delighted to speak for the Government in support of his Bill.

2.3 pm

Sir Greg Knight: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank all Members who have taken part in the debate and expressed their support. I particularly want to thank the Minister for indicating Government support for the Bill, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), and the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). The point raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) about seeing that an appeal process is truly independent will be dealt with in the Bill.

Every Member who contributed to the debate made a valid point. I will not cover them all, but all good points raised can be covered in a robust code of conduct. The Bill may not make finding a parking space any easier, but it will make the whole process fairer, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

2.4 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am sure that many hon. Members have heard from taxi and private hire drivers about the issues the trade faces, as well as from passengers, trade unions, disability and safety campaigners, and councillors because the trade faces enormous challenges, particularly with changing technologies. The Bill focuses solely on passenger safety. We need a solution that respects local contexts and local decisions. With nearly 360,000 licensed taxi and private hire drivers in the UK, we need to better equip enforcement officers to regulate the trade and improve safety standards. Let me first present the problem, and then I will explain how the Bill will work to solve it.

We have seen some high-profile cases in which drivers have used taxis or private hire vehicles to abuse vulnerable people. In areas where this has happened, it has led to local authorities adopting high standards and refusing licences to those who do not meet them. Under the current system, however, there is nothing to stop individuals applying to a local authority with lower standards, being granted a licence and then working in the area where they had been refused a licence. Councils have revoked the licences of drivers only to find that they go elsewhere, get a licence from another authority and are back working the same streets, sometimes within days. That cannot be right. The local authority with lower standards has no way of knowing about previous refusals, if the driver in question does not choose to tell them. Ultimately, this leaves all of us exposed to harm and deprives local authorities of control over their own streets.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very interesting point. Will he give us some examples of where this is happening?

Daniel Zeichner: Given the time constraints, I will not go into the detail of such cases, but some notorious ones in Southend, for example, have hit the national headlines.

We now come to the second part of the problem I seek to address. Local council enforcement officers can enforce only against those who are licensed in their own local authority. This means not only that drivers trying to game the system can work where they please, but that they are too often exempt from many enforcement powers. The system renders responsible councils trying to tackle problems in their areas helpless in the face of drivers coming from outside and operating under lower standards.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Erewash Borough Council gives out licences to one lot of taxi drivers and Broxtowe Borough Council gives out licences to another lot, while the car park for Ilkeston station is in Broxtowe and the taxis drop people off in Erewash. Does the hon.
Gentleman agree that the Bill will help to solve the problem of ensuring that everyone meets high standards in such a situation?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady is exactly right that that is the problem we are trying to address.

The Bill will give councils the tools they need to better protect passengers using taxis and private hire vehicles in their areas. It requires licensing authorities to record licence refusals, revocations and suspensions on a national database. Currently, there is no system that centrally records this information. When processing applications, licensing authorities will be required to check the register and to have regard to any previous decisions recorded before awarding licences. This will stop drivers who are gaming the system, and prevent them, if refused a licence in one authority, from just crossing a border into a more lenient area and obtaining a licence there instead, while maintaining the intention to work in the area that refused them.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly support my hon. Friend’s Bill. I am conscious of the time pressure, but let me say that I have worked very closely with taxi drivers in Cardiff and with the GMB on addressing these issues. This is a crucial part of the cross-border debate, which I am sure he agrees goes much wider. Does he agree that it is excellent that the Welsh Labour Government are looking at these issues in the context of the new devolved powers that they will have in Wales?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is right, and it will be very interesting to see what the Welsh Government come up with.

As I was saying, the second authority must have regard to the decision of the first, and come to a reasoned decision on whether to license a driver.

The second part of the Bill allows local authority enforcement teams to report instances of wrongdoing by taxi and private hire drivers that cause them concern to the authority in which the offender is licensed. The licensing authority must then have regard to such a report and respond. This duty to have regard can be challenged in court, which is important because this will help to drive up standards across the country and end the frustration of local drivers seeing others in their community working to lower standards, when higher standards have—for good reason—been set through local discussion. We owe it to the trade to assure drivers that their peers are indeed fit and proper, and worthy of licensing. This Bill will raise standards and public trust, and improve the industry.

More can be done on taxi and private hire policy. I believe that a substantial overhaul is needed, and I hope it will be done in future by my hon. Friends on the Front Bench as part of a Labour Government. National minimum standards for drivers, vehicles and operators that can be built on to meet local requirements are required, as are national enforcement powers and further work on issues beyond safety. I hope that the Minister sees the importance of this issue and commits to further legislative work on taxis and private hire vehicles. Time is tight, so I will conclude, but I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support this Bill, help to improve it further in Committee and stand up for all the drivers and passengers in our constituencies who will be helped by its success.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I rise to commend the Bill to the House. It would do an excellent thing. In my constituency I have drivers licensed by both East Lindsey District Council and Boston Borough Council, and the idea that drivers never stray from one area to another is ridiculous.

I wish to make a broader point, which is that the history of the licensing regime goes back to an era when private hire vehicles of any sort were unlikely to go outside their own area. That is hugely outdated and anachronistic in the modern age. The idea of a national database is now a relatively simple proposal, and it is just one of the Bill’s merits. When private hire arrangements were first brought about, the idea of a national database was unthinkable. What strikes me about the Bill is that it is probably the first of several cases in which we could think about how to do things in a far more efficient and sensible way and bring about real improvements in public safety or other areas for relatively little cost and with relatively enormous benefits. I know that the Minister will look at that, but the Government should consider more broadly the opportunities to replicate such an arrangement. It is a positive thing that the Government have supported the Bill.

In any national database, the security of the information must be paramount, and I know that the Minister will look at how that should be implemented and at all those considerations. In the age of Google, Facebook, social media, Matt Hancock the app and all that, we have to bear in mind that we should not rush towards something because it is obviously a very good thing and in the meantime lose sight of security considerations.

With that caveat, I commend the Bill to the House. I will certainly support it; it does something that I hope will be simple enough to make happen relatively quickly.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for offering us the opportunity to discuss this important and timely question. I am pleased that the Bill has come out of a wide-ranging consultation process. It is the product of discussions with local authorities, trade unions, the Local Government Association and central Government, and I am gratified that there has been such a diversity of input. I am also especially grateful to my hon. Friend for taking the time to meet representatives from the third sector, including Guide Dogs and the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. As such it is really pleasing to hear that this consultation process has identified a clear commitment across the industry to raising standards and enhancing safeguarding frameworks.

Under current frameworks, unscrupulous drivers have an open pathway to game the system. I should be clear that I am not necessarily criticising the second licensing authority in such instances. Beyond the licensing question, moreover, there is a lack of empowerment for enforcement officers, who currently can enforce only against drivers licensed by their own local authority. In general, then, the current system fails responsible councils and law
enforcement teams seeking to tackle abuses in their local areas. It also fails an industry that seeks to operate to the highest possible standards.

I note the time. I am satisfied with the second part of the Bill, which would allow local enforcement teams to report to the licensing authority. This form of collaborative cross-border work would build on what we know is already very positive in the sector.

In all this, then, the Bill would support councils to do their job and would not remove any powers from them. Rather, it would enhance their ability to employ existing powers. It would not discriminate unfairly against drivers. It would allow them, for example, the potential of a second chance to retry for a licence in the neighbouring authority. This is a high-quality piece of legislation fit for the 21st century so it is my pleasure to support it.

2.14 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I have several concerns about the Bill. As with many Bills that were drafted with good intentions, the proposed remedy is disproportionate to the problem. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) accepts in his explanatory notes to the Bill that to obtain a licence to drive private hire vehicles or taxis, people have to show that they are of good character and that they are fit and proper persons. I have no problem with that, and I would have no problem with requiring all 293 licensing authorities to use the same test to ensure that an applicant was a fit and proper person and had not been ruled out by another licensing authority.

The key to my concern is apparent in the long title, which talks about making “provision about the exercise of taxi and private hire vehicle licensing functions in relation to persons about whom there are safeguarding or road safety concerns”.

What do we mean by “concerns”? Concerns may be irrational. The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) would be much happier if the word was “indicating” or “showing”, I would be much happier. Why do we need to include that in the Bill at all? An indication that an applicant “has committed an offence” —I think there should be proof that they have. It goes on to say that the consequence of that offence involves not actual physical or psychological harm, but a risk of physical or psychological harm. That is so ludicrously widely drawn that is unfit to be the subject of legislation in this place.

Clause 1(1)(e) is equally wide. There has to be an indication that somebody “has done anything that, for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, constitutes unlawful discrimination against” someone. If there has been “unlawful discrimination” in breach of the Equality Act, let it be established, but let us not have a smear that something may have happened or that there is an indication that it happened. Let us require proof of all this before we take away the livelihood of a driver or deprive somebody else of the ability to become one.

Clause 1(1)(f) talks about an indication that a person “has threatened, abused or insulted another person”. I think that would rule out anybody who has been in the Whips Office, either in opposition or government. I speak as somebody who has never been granted such a privilege, but what person who has served in the Whips Office can say hand on heart that they have never threatened, abused or insulted another person?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think we are drifting a bit from where we should be in talking about the Whips Office. I do not want to concentrate too much on the Whips. They are getting rather perplexed down here.

Sir Christopher Chope: I will not press the point about the Whips, because there is actually no requirement of proof. All one needs is an indication.
Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is making some very relevant points, but they might, of course, be raised about an individual licensing authority. What this Bill does is provide an opportunity to tidy that up and provide a national structure that fixes the problems that he is talking about. I wonder whether he is actually making an application to serve on the Bill Committee.

Sir Christopher Chope: As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am assiduous in my membership of Committees—I think I am a member of five Select Committees at the moment—so I am happy to take on additional responsibilities and burdens. With the greatest respect to my hon. Friend, I think that he misunderstands the Bill. We are not talking about a national system, although there might be good arguments for introducing a national system, so that somebody who was licensed to be a taxi driver or a private hire vehicle driver in London could also be such a person in Christchurch, or vice versa.

The Bill, however, says that if the licensing committee in one local authority decides that there is an indication that someone “has caused physical or psychological harm to another person”, that indication, which is then used by that local authority to deprive the person who has caused the harm of the right to keep or obtain such a licence, must be transferred to another authority and could be used as evidence in that other authority against a similar application, although the raw material on the basis of which the conclusion was reached may not also be transferred.

There may well be a strong case for a national licensing system in the context of the Bill, although in my experience small councils—and I speak as a great defender of a small council, Christchurch Borough Council—are very jealous of their right to have licensing regimes, whether for taxis and private hire vehicles or for other purposes linked to their particular circumstances.

Clause 1(1) refers to “relevant information...indicating that the person...poses a risk to road safety when driving”.

As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is a subject close to my heart, because I used to be a Minister for road safety. When I looked at the explanatory notes, it became clear to me that someone who had convictions for speeding or careless driving would not be regarded as posing a risk to road safety. Why not? We must not belittle the offence of driving with excess speed. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Cambridge, like me, has the privilege of being a member of the Institute of Advanced Motorists, but he will know that members of the institute must declare every year whether or not they have been convicted of a driving offence, which includes speeding. Why should the Bill provide a relaxed test in relation to such behaviour by someone who wishes to be a professional driver, while saying that if there is an indication that that person may have caused psychological harm to another person—although not proven—that will count against him or her?

Clause 1(1)(h) refers to another test of “relevant information”: an indication that the person concerned “may be unsuitable to hold a driver’s licence for other reasons relating to...the safeguarding of passengers, or...road safety.”

So the clause is a catch-all. There would be no protection under the rule of law for anyone who made an application. They would be vulnerable to prejudice, petty vendettas and all the rest of it. It seems to me that the core of the Bill, which is contained in clause 1, is fundamentally flawed. It moves a million miles away from the current provision that if someone can establish that he or she is a fit and proper person, he or she can, prima facie, become a licensed driver.

Clause 1(2) states: “A reference in subsection (1) to an offence includes a reference to the following offences”.

I have no problem with attempts to commit offences, conspires to commit offences, aiding and abetting, or incitement, which are listed in that subsection. I do, however, have a strong objection to clause 1(3), which states:

“A reference in subsection (1) to an offence (including a reference having effect by virtue of subsection (2)) includes a reference to conduct that would have constituted the offence if it had been done in England and Wales.”

In other words, we are not talking about offences; we are talking about conduct that could, if there had been a prosecution, have amounted to an offence. How oppressive is that? It strikes me as incredibly oppressive and potentially unfair and unjust.

Clause 1(4) gives definitions of “sexual offence”; you may be pleased to know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have no objection to that part of the clause. However, we then get on to clause 2, which would set up a new licensing information database. I do not know the extent to which that would be compliant with the Data Protection Act 1998, but it would basically mean that false information provided to one licensing authority on the basis of which that licensing authority has refused somebody a licence can then be transferred—

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 26 October.

Business without Debate

FOOD INSECURITY BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 2) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February.

PETITION
Thrapston Library

2.31 pm
Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am presenting this petition today on the future of Thrapston library on behalf of the people of Thrapston and the surrounding area, who rely on this vital facility that provides a range of important services for the community. They want the library to remain open, and a similar petition has received 975 signatures.
The petition states:
The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that Thrapston Library should remain open.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges the Government to compel Northamptonshire County Council to ensure Thrapston Library remains open.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust

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

2.31 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I want to start
by making it clear that I recognise absolutely that there
is intolerable pressure generally across the emergency care system, and there are serious issues that have to be addressed particularly around handover delays, and I include within that the sense that there is quite a variation from one hospital to another and we need to understand why it appears as though some hospitals are more successful than others in addressing this.

I also want to make it clear that it is not my intention
to focus on the adequacy of funding of the NHS in this
debate; that is for another occasion. The question I want to address here is whether the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust is doing all it can with the resources it has.

I also want to place on record my understanding that we have incredibly committed clinical staff in this trust, and I want to express my gratitude to them: they are often working under intense strain, frequently dealing with extraordinarily distressing and sensitive personal situations, and they do so admirably. I should also express my gratitude to the Minister for meeting me this morning to hear more about my concerns, and for the seriousness with which he listened to them.

My reason for calling this debate is that I met a senior employee of the trust, who is a whistleblower in effect, and who came to me with deep concerns about what is going on in his service. I found the testimony to be very credible and I took the concerns extremely seriously. I have seen a list of 40 cases of potential patient harm associated with delays in response times, including 19 cases where patients lost their lives.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Simon and Michelle came to see me about this very issue. Their 999 call was downgraded, and as an unintended consequence, they lost their baby girl, Darcey, in what appears to be one of a catalogue of failures in the interaction between the ambulance trust in the hospital.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful for that intervention, and the hon. Lady is doing exactly the right thing in pursuing that matter on behalf of her constituents. They deserve answers to the concerns that they have expressed over that tragic case.

Beyond the list of 40 cases, I understand that a further 120 incidents of potential patient harm and a potential 81 patient deaths have been associated with delays over this period of time. One case, which is not on the list of 40 that I have seen, concerns a constituent who does not want her family’s name to be mentioned.

She has written to me as follows:

“My Mum had been ill from Boxing Day and finally on New Year’s Day she deteriorated to such a level that I had to call an ambulance. When I first logged the call they advised me that as she was still breathing we would have to wait an hour before a team could get to us. Mum’s health deteriorated further to a point that I had to place another call to the ambulance call centre as she had suffered a stroke and then a heart attack and had stopped
breathing. My sister and I had to perform CPR whilst waiting for the crew. When they finally arrived, although they tried, they said that there was nothing they could do and she was pronounced dead.”

I should say that my constituent commends the crews that attended for the work that they did.

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House today. Does he agree that this is due to a systemic crisis, rather than to individual failings? Since publicising this issue in the Chamber some weeks ago, I have been inundated by cases of people from across the country, not just the east of England, who have experienced similar failings in the ambulance service. We must make it clear that this is not just about blaming managers at the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust; it is also about accepting that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Health bear responsibility for what is happening to ambulance services across the country.

**Norman Lamb:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Ultimately, the Government are responsible for keeping the people of this country safe, with emergency services that work effectively. That is ultimately what we are debating.

This is not something that just happened over the Christmas and new year period. Just last Friday, the 91-year-old mother-in-law of some close friends of ours in south Norfolk fell on to a cold stone floor. They called 999 at 8.45 pm, but the ambulance did not arrive until 4 am. It left at 4.45 to go to the hospital, but she had to wait in the ambulance until 6 am. She then had to wait on a trolley for two more hours. That is intolerable; she is 91 years old. This could happen to a family member of any of us; we all have a stake in this. We have to recognise that it is intolerable. Another constituent has told me about his 92-year-old mother who broke her leg. She had a nine-hour wait, during which she developed hypothermia. Then a car arrived, rather than an ambulance, and she had to wait another 40 minutes for the ambulance. That is simply intolerable.

I am told that, according to the assessment of many people internally, the service over that period was unsafe, and that no assurances have been given that the trust would be able to provide a safe service in the future, if there were to be a period of very cold weather or a flu epidemic, for example. That is a matter of serious concern to the people of the east of England. On several occasions during the period, there were more than 200 999 calls that could not be responded to at the moment they came in, because no crews or ambulances were available.

The Care Quality Commission told me this morning: “This is a service that is in crisis”.

It also said:

“Patients are at risk”.

However, the CQC appears to have confidence in the leadership of the trust. I fear that it is being complacent in its attitude, and that it is not taking seriously enough the number of patient harm incidents that I have referred to. I have deep concerns about whether any family member of mine, any constituent, or anyone else across the east of England who has to rely on the service will get a service that will protect and safeguard them in their hour of need. I am told response times in North Norfolk are dire—not just that the trust is not meeting the target but that the long tail beyond the target is deeply concerning. I do not have the assurance that we need.

The concerns appear to have been recognised because a risk summit was convened. According to the official guidance, a risk summit is normally triggered “if there are significant and serious concerns that there are, or could be, quality failings in a provider or system.”

The guidance further states that a risk summit should be called “only as a last resort”.

Well, we clearly have a last resort here.

My central plea to the Minister is that we need an independent governance review, and I would like a specific response to that because I genuinely believe it is needed, but I would like to raise the following specific concerns. I understand there was a £2.8 million underspend in the trust in month nine of the financial year. How can that be justified? Is the Minister satisfied with that?

I am told that more than 100 staff have been recruited but are currently on a waiting list to start. Some have been on the list for more than a year. I am told there has been no recruitment in Norfolk, which is where response times are at their worst. Staff have left without being replaced.

There was an independent assessment in August 2016, never published, by Operational Research in Health, which said that hundreds more staff are needed across the region to run a safe service. Why has that never been implemented? The only area where there has been recruitment of late, according to adverts online, is in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, the best-performing areas. The impression I am left with is that it is all about hitting the national target, rather than ensuring that all parts of the region are safe.

Interestingly, the online job advert has just been changed to include other counties, but the public board papers say there are no vacancies in those other counties. At the same time, lots of additional management posts have been created. There is a new deputy director of human resources, an associate director of HR, a deputy director of strategy and sustainability and other deputy director posts.

The trust has also doubled its spend on lease cars, which in November 2017 was up from just under £500,000 to nearly £1 million, with directors and deputy directors making no contribution. I am told that directors and deputy directors drive around in Jaguars, Range Rovers, Mercedes and Audi A5s. Is the Minister comfortable with that? The policy allows discretion by the director but, with a service that is under such strain, for me it is a question of judgment and culture in this organisation.

I am told there was a very late sign-off of the plan for the Christmas and new year period following the letter from Professor Keith Willett, so the trust was not better prepared than ever, which is the Government’s mantra. Four meetings take place between the trust’s chief executive and the chief executives of hospitals where the delays were at their worst in the run-up to the Christmas and new year period? We have a right to know.

The trust issued a statement that it had not been made aware of any patient safety issues internally, but that is not true. I have a copy of an email from a constituent to the chair of the trust on 9 January
specifically referring to the fact that someone in the trust had come forward to raise patient safety concerns. Is that acceptable? It is a wholly misleading statement to the public. Does the Minister feel comfortable with that?

Is it acceptable that neither the chief executive nor the chair of the trust has been prepared to be interviewed publicly since the new year? When there have been so many patient safety incidents, surely they should be being held to account for that service on television and radio.

There has been a big issue about director presence over Christmas and new year, with claims and counter-claims having been made, and we need to get to the bottom of it. Will the Minister ensure that we are told who was actually on duty all the way through the Christmas and new year period? By that, I mean on duty and in the region—not at home in some foreign country—leading the service in this region. It was new year’s eve before REAP 4—Resource Escalation Action Plan 4—was declared. That is the highest level. Many people in the organisation felt it should have happened before that, so that mutual assistance could have been secured from surrounding trusts. Why did that not happen?

A report was commissioned last year from SSG Health—a “phase 2 report”—on how the trust can save money. It has never been published. I have tried to get hold of it under freedom of information but my request has been refused. Will the Minister ensure that it is now put into the public domain? Given the scale of the crisis, which the Care Quality Commission has acknowledged, we have a right to know what that report says and what is being done about it. It cost more than £500,000 for this report on how to save money. That shows the scale of the culture problems that we face.

On late finishes, staff regularly work 14-hour to 15-hour shifts, but no data has been available from the trust to the staff side since February last year. In September, the trust removed the staff support desk, which was there to provide support to staff who were working very long shifts. No data has been made available by the trust to the staff side on “tail breaches”—these very long delays in getting to patients. The trust claims an exemption under FOI. That is symptomatic of a trust that fails to be open with staff representatives and with the public it is supposed to be serving. A constituent of mine who has worked for the trust has been declared “vexatious” for making FOI requests about patient safety issues, for goodness’ sake. How about that for the culture of this organisation? The matter is now with the Information Commissioner.

I believe, and I think the Government believe, that trusts should be entirely open; there should be an open culture, encouraging staff to speak out about patient safety issues. Will the Minister send a clear message to end the embargo on FOI requests, so that we can find out what is going on in this trust, rather than have it being kept from the public gaze? This is an issue of the utmost concern to the people of the east of England. People in this region need reassurance that they will be cared for and that the response will be there when they need it. It is frightening for anyone, but particularly for older people, to wait interminably for an ambulance to arrive when a loved one is very ill and potentially dying.

This is intolerable in a civilised society and ultimately it is the Government’s responsibility to ensure that there is a service there to serve the people of this country.

2.48 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): First, I wish to thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing this debate. I recognise the concerns raised about the East of England Ambulance Service, including questions about whether delays to ambulance responses have caused additional harm to patients over the Christmas period, and his concerns about the leadership of the trust and the role of the CQC. I assure him that I am taking these allegations seriously, both as a Minister and, as he knows, as a constituency Member of Parliament in the East of England. I have put in place a number of actions to immediately ensure improvements to services are put in place by the trust.

As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, a risk summit was held this week, on Tuesday 30 January, which examined whether the service is operating effectively now and sought to put in place any required actions to improve it going forward. I have spoken personally to the chief executives of NHS England and NHS Improvement, and to the chair of the risk summit. I will expand on the findings further, but I wish to emphasise that a wide-ranging plan of immediate actions has been put in place to address the issues that were identified. Details of the action plan have been published today and a progress meeting in two weeks will be led by NHS Improvement and NHS England. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the accessibility of the trust leadership in respect of the chief executive and the chair making themselves available for media bids. I have communicated that to the trust.

I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman is concerned about the overall approach of the trust’s senior management and about the level of external assurance from the CQC. In addition to the action plan identified at the risk summit, which was attended by other external parties including NHS England and NHS Improvement, I have gone further by asking NHS Improvement’s executive medical director, Kathy McLean, to provide her own assurance to Ministers in the coming week. That will assess the immediate steps taken to address the concerns expressed in the House and whether actions suggested in the earlier external reports have been implemented. Alongside that, I am happy to have further discussions with the right hon. Gentleman about his specific point about the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives.

I am assured that, where there were serious delays in response times, the trust has identified all potential causes. Following an initial investigation, it is examining 22 such cases through the serious incident procedure. That will ensure that individual cases are properly investigated. The hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) mentioned a specific case and we are determined to ensure that that is addressed. I am happy to discuss that with her further.

In terms of the report mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, which was previously commissioned for the trust, I am happy to update the House and say that the report should be published as soon as possible. Again, that is an issue I will follow up.
Let me turn to the specific actions arising from the risk summit. I am advised that actions to deliver immediate service improvements are being taken forward under the following themes: ensuring that the trust has sufficient capacity for the rest of winter; the effective implementation of handover delay policy with hospitals; the proper execution of REAP level measures; staff access to executive leadership; sound escalation procedures; bringing in independent assurance around the serious incident investigation procedures; working with CCGs and other stakeholders to manage demand for ambulance services; and the full exploitation of emergency service collaboration with police and fire. As a result of those actions, to help to manage winter demand the trust will put eight additional vehicles on the road each day until Easter, with immediate effect.

Improvements will also be made to the trust’s adherence to the national REAP guidelines, and actions will be taken to moderate service pressures, which will allow the trust to de-escalate to REAP level 2. The trust is also working with hospitals to ensure adherence to the national guideline on handover delays, particularly where ambulances waiting to hand patients over receive a new 999 call, which was a specific point that the right hon. Gentleman raised. I also assure him that we will work closely to monitor the outcomes of the work to ensure that safe, high-quality ambulance services continue to be provided to his constituents.

The right hon. Gentleman has also raised concerns that the trust has underspent on its funding while putting in place a hiring freeze. The trust has worked to grow its frontline workforce, fielding 700 more staff since 2014-15, and has achieved a low rate of staff turnover. However, like the right hon. Gentleman, I want further assurance that the trust’s staff plans are sufficient to meet the demands facing the city. I will raise that in my discussions with NHS Improvement.

Substantial local initiatives are under way to improve the trust’s performance. Importantly, more money is being invested in the service: its funding was increased by £90 million this year—an increase of 10%—and it will further increase by £27 million over the next two years. Other significant actions include the deployment of hospital ambulance liaison officers in emergency departments to help reduce the incidence of handover delays, and an independent review of the trust to ensure that it has the appropriate resources and processes to deliver against its performance standards. I will expand on these measures further, but it is worth considering them in the context of wider national initiatives to improve ambulance performance more generally.

As I stated in the House on 22 January, the NHS is busier than ever and the ambulance service is experiencing unprecedented demand, dealing with more than 11 million calls every year. There were almost 7 million face-to-face responses from the ambulance service in 2016-17, which is a 14% increase over the past five years. Under Sir Bruce Keogh’s review of the NHS urgent and emergency care system, ambulance services are being transferred into mobile treatment centres, making much greater use of “hear and treat”, which is treating patients over the phone, and “see and treat”, which is treating and discharging patients on the scene. In December, the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust resolved three out of 10 incidents on the scene without transporting a patient to A&E, freeing up resources to respond quickly to the patients with the most urgent needs.

Additionally, in July last year the Secretary of State approved a revision of operational and performance standards for ambulances following the ambulance response programme. These improvements have now been rolled out to all mainland ambulance trusts in England. The evidence behind this new framework is extensive, covering data collected from more than 14 million emergency 999 calls. The evaluation considered a number of key issues for the east of England, including prioritising responses to the sickest patients while helping to reduce long waits for ambulance responses, and ensuring that patients receive the most appropriate response for their condition. That being said, I do recognise that the trust’s performance against these standards needs to improve.

As I mentioned earlier, NHS England and NHS Improvement are working with the trust to help it to adapt to the new performance framework, and have also undertaken an independent service review of its operations. This review covers the trust’s demand and capacity modelling, staff recruitment and training, and its approach to pricing and contracting in order to enable it to meet the new ambulance response standards. The detail of this work is being finalised and will be presented to the trust board meeting in March.

With respect to the ambulance workforce, we are taking significant steps across the country to support staff. Compared to 2010, there are over 3,000 more paramedics in England. We agreed in December 2016 to increase the pay band of the NHS pay scale, which moves paramedics significantly up the NHS salary structure, and helps to ensure that we are better able to recruit and retain staff in the future.

We are also working to support the trust in addressing issues with patient handovers to hospital trusts, which have been an issue in parts of the east of England. We are clear that handovers must take place within agreed timeframes, and we are supporting hospitals to ensure that improvements are made. As I noted earlier, the trust is working with hospitals to ensure adherence to the national guideline on handover delays. It has also deployed patient safety intervention teams to hospitals to undertake patient cohorting where significant hospital delays arise, as well as placing hospital ambulance liaison officers in emergency departments to help ambulance crews to respond more quickly to incoming calls.

**Norman Lamb:** I am conscious that the Minister is coming to the end of his contribution and that he is not able to respond, here and now, to all the issues I mentioned. Will he undertake to write to me on each and every one of the specific concerns that I raised, including the call for an independent governance review, so that we can get to the bottom of exactly what is happening?

**Stephen Barclay:** I am very happy to give the right hon. Gentleman that commitment. Like me, the right hon. Gentleman wants to get a grip of this issue to ensure that it is addressed. I very much hear the concerns that he and other Members have raised. I hope that he can take some comfort from the series of actions that have already been put in place, including the risk assurance and the commission to Ministers, that signal the seriousness with which this issue is being addressed.
[Stephen Barclay]

I would like to restate that we are taking the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns seriously. I have outlined the measures already taken as a result of the risk summit, and I will closely monitor the situation to ensure that these actions are delivered on. We have also discussed the wider initiatives that we are undertaking to improve ambulance services nationally, as well as specific local actions to ensure that patients receive the highest quality of care.

Again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for introducing this debate. I hope that he, and indeed other Members who have serious concerns about this issue, will continue to work with me on a cross-party basis to ensure that all our constituents get the service that they rightly expect.

Question put and agreed to.

2.59 pm

House adjourned.
Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are seeking to ensure that the regulator will—in our new Bill will come out later in the year—have more rights to fine, follow criminal procedures and look into mandatory clearance. Those of us who have studied corporate governance realise that the rules changed in 1991—the Cadbury report and the OECD corporate governance rules—and were strengthened in 2002. I believe that now, under this Conservative Government, we will be strengthening the corporate governance rules again.1

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): My constituents who have paid into pension funds deserve to have those moneys protected. Will the Secretary of State be a bit more specific? What specific changes to corporate governance does she want to see to ensure that high risk behaviour towards pension funds does not happen again?

Ms McVey: We are getting feedback from various businesses on how they think we can best enable and support them. Any knee-jerk reaction might result in unintended consequences. Shining a spotlight on one area could close down loopholes, only for others to open up. This has to be looked at in the round, but, as I said, stakeholders, shareholders and the executive team should be held to account. We will make sure that that happens.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that the UK’s pension protection system has responded effectively to the Carillion situation?

Ms McVey: I can indeed reassure my hon. Friend that what it is doing, and the avenues it is pursuing, are correct and thorough. I met the regulator last week. It is making sure that it investigates these key matters and provides the necessary pension support. Where we need to strengthen in future, we will do so. Equally, I would like to make Members aware of what the pension regulator has done in the past. With regards to the British Home Stores fiasco, which is totally different from this situation, it employed an anti-avoidance measure and got Philip Green to pay his pensioners £363 million. Further prosecutions are coming forward for Chappell, who bought that company for a pound. That is the kind of work the pension regulator is doing.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As the Government have responsibility for the pensions regulatory framework, how would the Secretary of State describe a regulatory framework that allows the administrator of a pensions scheme to help to bring about the downfall of the company and the employees it represents, and to profit from that downfall?

Ms McVey: When I hear some of the hon. Lady’s comments, particularly those that are out of context, I think about the letter that she has received in the past two days from the UK Statistics Authority, which states that many things she has said are not accurate. The letter said that her remarks—whether about children waking up in poverty at Christmas or linking universal credit with poverty—were not supported, that they were not true statistics and that the sources could not be relied upon. If you will allow me to ask this, Mr Speaker, will the hon. Lady make a statement straightforward about the letter from the UK Statistics Authority?

Mr Speaker: I understand the rhetorical significance of the Secretary of State’s point, but I must exhort the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) to stick to her last. That is to say, this is not the occasion upon which she is invited to expatiate on the matter. She may find other opportunities if she is so inclined, but she should stick to the line of questioning that is relevant to the questioning of a Government Minister.

Debbie Abrahams: I will indeed do just that, Mr Speaker, especially as there was absolutely no answer to my original question. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary working people including my constituent, Philip Wild, have lost half their retirement income because of the Government’s failure to tackle pensions governance—from Carillion to Capita, and BHS to the British Steel Pension Scheme. How many more pensions scandals does the Secretary of State need to see before she introduces the robust regulatory oversight needed to protect people’s pensions for the future?

Ms McVey: Obviously, in the light of the letter from the chair of the UK Statistics Authority to the hon. Lady, it needs to be put on the record that the vast majority of defined-benefit pension schemes are working very well indeed. When we do see instances of abuse or illegal goings-on, they are investigated and the people responsible are brought to account. We have a strong Pension Protection Fund, supported by other businesses that are looking after pensioners across the country.

Consumer Advice and Assistance

2. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to promote the delivery of effective consumer financial advice and assistance. [903732]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We are committed to ensuring that consumers across the United Kingdom have access to high quality, impartial and free pensions and money guidance services. That is why we are setting up the new single financial guidance body, which is presently in Bill Committee in this House. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Conservative Government’s commitment is to a debt respite scheme and a breathing space specifically to address debt.

Gillian Keegan: In a recent poll conducted by Populus and The Guardian, 32% of British workers were found to have less than £500 in savings. What are the Government doing to promote long-term savings and to support employers such as the 1,340 in Chichester that have auto-enrolled their employees, currently benefiting 13,000 people?

Guy Opperman: When the debt respite scheme and the breathing space are put into law, the provisions will make a manifest difference to how people are dealt with in respect of debt, as will the single financial guidance body. I would be failing in my duty not to pay tribute to the 1,340 employers in my hon. Friend’s constituency of Chichester that are doing a brilliant job in ensuring that there are more people in auto-enrolment, adding to the 9.1 million people across the country who are now auto-enrolled in a private pension—something that we should be very proud of.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Some 11 million people a year use price comparison sites to gain information on insurers and other products. The Financial Conduct Authority found in 2014 that such sites were not delivering fair and consistent practices. The Competition and Markets Authority has now said the sites should be using the CARE model; that is, they should be clear, accurate, responsible and easy to use. What can the Government do to ensure that these sites are straightforward and easy to use?

Guy Opperman: The simple answer is that I will take that matter up with my colleagues at the Treasury who are handling that point, particularly in relation to the FCA. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I am in a Bill Committee with the exact same Minister and will probably have an opportunity tomorrow—with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)—to have a discussion about this point.

Mr Speaker: Very reassuring.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): A Port Talbot shift supervisor was badly advised by a pensions predator preying on him who made him take the wrong choice. “I will never forgive myself”, he said, “because all 20 on my shift followed my lead.” In an otherwise welcome Bill, in the words of Baroness Altmann, “the Government seems to have bowed to industry pressure and proposes to weaken consumer protection for pension customers. By removing a clause introduced in the House of Lords….more people are at risk of losing their hard-earned savings in scams, frauds and unwise pension withdrawals.”

She is absolutely right. Will the Government think again?

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to have the opportunity to replay the same debate that we had in the Bill Committee last Thursday. I will give the same answer, which is that, with no disrespect to Baroness Altmann, she is incorrect on this point. The Government are addressing pensions guidance. We have introduced very stringent new laws. We have improved on the point raised by the Work and Pensions Committee, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who sits on that Committee, agreed in the Bill Committee last Thursday.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister for his replay.

Mortgage Interest: Effects on Claimants

3. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect on employment and support allowance claimants’ income of changes to support for mortgage interest.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): All claimants will be offered a support for mortgage interest loan paid at the same rate that is currently available as part of their benefit entitlement. There will therefore be no impact on their income. Claimants will pay back the loan only on the sale or transfer of the property, when the loan will be recovered from any available equity.
Nic Dakin: My constituent, who is registered blind yet has paid into the system all his working life, asks how it can be fair that tenants continue, quite rightly, to get support now, but 100,000 or more people like himself are losing that interest support with their mortgages. It is not good enough to say that they will get it back at the end. This is affecting people now. People are worried about their futures and worried about their incomes now. It is not good enough.

Kit Malthouse: Mortgage support is being offered at exactly the same rate as currently. The only difference is that it is now being deferred as a loan recoverable against any equity available in the house should it be sold in the future. Current participants in the scheme should see absolutely no difference unless and until they sell or transfer the house, at which point the taxpayer will recover the support offered.

21. [903754] Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): This change to support for mortgage interest will hit very hard thousands of low-income households, half of whom are pensioners. Does the Minister acknowledge that this change has not been well publicised and that, at the very least, the Government should pause and communicate what it will actually mean for people financially?

Kit Malthouse: We have to recognise that we are dealing with support for people who are accumulating what is often a very significant capital asset, and it seems only right that when equity becomes available the taxpayer is able to recover some or all of the support. There has been significant communication on the scheme with the people who are participating in it, and that is continuing. There will be between four and six written communications, and people will be invited to call a telephone number where they can obtain information from a third-party adviser before we get to April, when the scheme comes into play. I am confident that the people who are participating in the scheme at the moment will have enough information. Certainly, large numbers are making a decision either way at the moment.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I have been contacted by a number of constituents about this issue, including a Mr Milne, a veteran who is surviving just now on a meagre state pension. He fears that this change will force him to sell his house or to have it repossessed. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of this change, particularly on pensioners?

Kit Malthouse: There is absolutely no reason for anybody to fear forced sale or repossession of a house, not least because the scheme is specifically designed to avoid exactly that. If Members have specific cases where constituents have concerns about the operation of the scheme, I will be more than happy to take them up. If the hon. Lady writes to me about that case, I will provide a response.

Supported Housing

4. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the continuation of funding for supported housing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): We have recently completed consultations on the funding models for short-term supported housing and sheltered housing, and will provide a response in due course. We will come forward with our proposals for long-term supported housing by 2020.

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend is making some useful and valued changes. Will he assure the House that accommodation costs for short-term supported housing such as women’s refuges will continue to be funded at existing levels, with the new grant to local authorities being ring-fenced?

Kit Malthouse: It is typical of my hon. Friend that she has the welfare of her most vulnerable constituents at the forefront of her mind. I can confirm that the current proposal on which we have just consulted is that the section 31 grant paid to local authorities for provision of refuges and other short-term supported housing will be ring-fenced.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Government’s proposals are an improvement on their initial proposals, but one element has brought criticism from virtually all providers, and that is with regard to short-term supported housing. My Select Committee has recommended that for emergency very short-term accommodation of around 12 weeks, there should be a ring-fenced grant to local authorities. The Government have changed the definition of short term from 12 weeks to two years, which all providers have condemned. Will the Government think again and bring accommodation lasting two years into the welfare system?

Kit Malthouse: We are in receipt of a significant number of responses to the consultation, which only closed a couple of weeks ago, and we will consider those over the months to come. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss those concerns with his constituents if they wish to do so.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Government have promised that all short-term provision currently funded by the welfare system will continue to be funded at the same level by local authorities until 2020, but will the Minister confirm that there will be no cut in funding after that?

Kit Malthouse: Given that I am not a Treasury Minister, I am not in a position to confirm that, but it would certainly be our aspiration to provide the current level of support, or indeed enhanced and better performing support, which is the purpose of the changes, in the future.

Universal Credit

6. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of universal credit in helping people into work.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): Universal credit has had a positive impact since its start, as shown through published research and analysis. Independent research shows us that people are
spending more time looking for work, applying for more jobs and even doing jobs they would not have considered doing before.

**Colin Clark:** Constituents in Gordon will face longer waiting times for payments due to the Scottish Government’s policy of fortnightly payment. What support can my right hon. Friend offer the devolved Administration in Edinburgh to help reduce those times?

**Ms McVey:** The advice would be to take the approach of England and Wales. As my hon. Friend says, the Scottish approach delays payment at the end of the assessment period, with 75% rather than 100% of money on time, due to the fortnightly payment.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): The introduction of universal credit is not helping to keep 250 highly skilled HMRC staff working on tax credits in Dudley in work. They were told they would be transferring to the Secretary of State’s Department to work on universal credit. Last week, they were told that her Department has cancelled that, their office will close and they will be made redundant. Will she ensure that the transfer goes ahead as originally planned, so that my constituents can keep their jobs, and will she meet me to discuss it?

**Ms McVey:** I will indeed meet the hon. Gentleman. Let us discuss that. Back in 2016, HMRC announced that move and transfer of jobs. It now seems that as many jobs were not needed for UC. I know that it wants to retain the staff and their skills and knowledge, but I will meet him to discuss the best way forward.

**Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that universal credit is helping all those people who are stuck in a situation where they are only paid to work 16 hours a week and that it is fairer to those employees, the other employees in those businesses and taxpayers, who end up supporting the other employees in those businesses?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The reason we are making this significant change from the legacy system is to ensure that every hour of work counts. We will not have a situation where people are stuck not working or paying punitive rates of income tax of 90% and above if they take work after 16 hours. This is cutting-edge technology. The UK is leading the way on flexible benefits that accompany flexible working, which nowhere else has.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her position? Perhaps she might think to show a little more humility when answering some of these difficult questions on universal credit. Has she considered some of the other benefits that are not included in universal credit, such as free school meals, free uniforms, free bus passes and so on? Many low-paid working families will lose out on those benefits under universal credit, which will make them worse off in work than if they were still on benefits.

**Ms McVey:** These are precisely the things that have been considered in bringing forward universal credit. What support are we giving? The extra childcare support. What is the extra support? Tailor-made career advice and support. We all need humility, but, equally, we all need to hand out and deliver the correct facts to people, not embellish them, resort to sound and fury or drama, or provide obviously incorrect information, as the UK Statistics Authority has levelled against the Labour party.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last month, I visited Grimsby jobcentre, which serves my constituency, and it is very clear that the staff are handling the changeover to universal credit very efficiently. Will the Secretary of State join me in complimenting the staff, including the work they do in motivating claimants and improving their self-confidence so that they can seek employment?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I have actually met the tremendous work coaches in his constituency. I go out to speak to work coaches all the time, and they are saying to me that the change we are delivering through universal credit is the best thing they have ever delivered. The support they can give—not just universal credit—rather than Opposition Members laughing, they would be well advised to come and join me or others in meeting work coaches. I will tell them how we know this is working: if it were not working, we would not have an extra 3.1 million people in work.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Contrary to the “SNP bad” broken record from the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the Scottish Government’s recently introduced flexibilities for universal credit payments, and will she consider implementing Scotland’s model down here, especially as her colleague in the Scottish Parliament, Adam Tomkins, has said he is “very much in favour” of them?

**Ms McVey:** The underlying principle of how we get people into work is working right the way across the United Kingdom. It is working in Scotland, and that is correct. Equally, we agree with giving extra powers to devolved Governments, and Scotland has the right to do things in its own way. As we pointed out earlier, however, some of the changes taken on board in Scotland have actually resulted in slower payment to people who need their benefits.

**Unemployment Rates: Europe**

7. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent comparative assessment she has made of rates of unemployment in the UK and other European countries.

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey):** The UK has the joint fifth lowest unemployment rate in the EU—better than France, the Netherlands and Denmark. The UK’s unemployment rate, at 4.3%, is the lowest in 42 years. It is less than half that of the EU28 average, which is 8.7%, and 3 percentage points below the EU28 average of 7.3%.

**Vicky Ford:** Unemployment in my constituency of Chelmsford is now less than 1.5%, and those who are able to work are finding jobs, but will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents who need our financial support that they will continue to be supported when universal credit is rolled out later this year?

**Ms McVey:** I congratulate my hon. Friend. On the work she is doing as a new MP, and her constituents on the work they are doing to find employment, getting on
in their careers and moving forward. As I have said, this Government believe in hand-up support and opportunity. The support of universal credit—a benefit that supports people in and out of work—will continue not only for her constituents, but for people right across the country.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that of those who have gone into work as a result of this Government’s policies—and that is a good thing—many are living in poverty because of low pay and the inadequacy of our benefits system?

Ms McVey: It is interesting how differently people measure getting into work, poverty and life chances. Children born into workless households are actually five times more likely to be in poverty than those in working households. Under this Government, we have seen 3.1 million more people in work, and the number of workless households has gone down by over 600,000. We are helping people out of poverty: we are helping them get a job.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Earlier the Secretary of State mentioned dodgy statistics from the Opposition. I have heard people say that lots of the new jobs created are on zero-hours contracts and for part-time work. Can she say what the actual figures are for the number of jobs created that are full-time, permanent jobs?

Ms McVey: It was not me talking about dodgy statistics, it was the chair of the UK stats authority who said that, but I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. The overwhelming majority of jobs are full-time and permanent jobs, and the vast majority of those in part-time jobs have chosen to be in part-time jobs.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On job searching, has the Secretary of State had the opportunity to review the very helpful and generous offer made by Liverpool City Council to her predecessor to provide office space for closure-threatened jobcentres? There are two jobcentres in my constituency—nor one, but two—that her Government wish to close, leaving my constituency with zero jobcentres. They are due to close in just a few weeks’ time. Has the Secretary of State had an opportunity to review that offer, to ensure that my constituents continue to receive employment support?

Ms McVey: It is really important that everybody gets the support they need, and a lot of the support going forward will be outreach work, so that people do not need to go to Jobcentre Plus, thanks to further support in the community. Obviously I am pleased that in the Liverpool city area—and in the north-west area—which is my hometown, employment is now far higher than it was in 2010. The unemployment rate under the Labour party was 2.8 million in 2008, even before the banking crisis, but now it is 1.4 million, so we are supporting people and we will continue to support people, because that is what this Conservative Government do.

Universal Credit: Disabled People

8. Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on the number of disabled people living in poverty.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I do not want to see anyone living in poverty, and no Conservative Member of Parliament wants people living in poverty. Disabled people are some of the biggest beneficiaries of universal credit, with around 1 million disabled households having on average around £110 a month more on universal credit than they would have had on the legacy benefits.

Thelma Walker: As disability charity Leonard Cheshire has pointed out, many disabled people do not have internet access, assistive technology or the necessary support to fill in the online form to apply for universal credit. Does the Minister agree that the application process needs to be more accessible, so that disabled people can easily apply for these benefits?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady raises a very important point about accessibility of the benefits system for everyone, which is something we all take very seriously. I am grateful for the support that the Leonard Cheshire foundation and a whole range of stakeholders give us in designing the process, to make sure that it is as accessible as possible.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is important that we are absolutely scrupulous in our presentation of the facts about universal credit? As the Secretary of State referred to earlier, I wrote to the UK Statistics Authority to query the shadow Secretary of State’s claim that “40,000 children will wake up in poverty on Christmas Day because the Tories refuse to pause” the roll-out of universal credit. On Friday, Sir David Norgrove told me:

“It is clearly important that statements by a political party should be fully supported by the statistics and sources on which they rely. We do not believe”—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. He has got the thrust of his question across, and the House doubtless will be grateful to him, but this is not a debate; it is Question Time about the policies—

Mr Clarke rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no, the hon. Gentleman has finished for today on this. This is about the policies of the Government. The Secretary of State has made the point about the Statistics Authority, which I allowed her to make, perfectly properly, but it is not now the occasion for dilation on the attitude of the Opposition. This is questions to Ministers about the policies of the Government. That is the situation. Minister, very briefly—please, do not dilate on that matter, because it is out of order.

Sarah Newton: It is very important that anybody who stands up in this Parliament takes their responsibilities towards the truth extremely seriously.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Some specialist employment services for people with disabilities such as drug, alcohol or mental health problems—for example, Agoriad in my constituency—are subcontracted to these small local agencies, but minus a management fee and
with unsatisfactory remote control. Would not direct contact with these small local agencies provide more resources where they are needed, as well as better value for money and more people in work?

**Sarah Newton:** The hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of specialist providers of employment. This is a very important sector, which the Government have a proud tradition of supporting. I meet stakeholders regularly, and we are always looking to see what more we can do to help them sustainably provide the invaluable employment opportunities that they do.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** Despite the Government's claim that no severely disabled person moved on to universal credit would be worse off, we now know that that is not the case: scrapping the disability premiums will have just that effect. Transitional protection for existing claimants can easily be lost where there is a change in circumstance, such as if someone moves into work and if that job does not last. What assessment has the Minister carried out of the impact of abolishing these disability premiums on disabled people, and does she agree that transitional protection should be retained, so that it is not lost where there is a change in circumstance?

**Sarah Newton:** Unlike the previous system, universal credit is more targeted, and support is focused on those who need it most. Transitional protection is available for people who move into universal credit from other benefits, provided their circumstances stay the same. When giving evidence to the Select Committee last week, my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment said that he was aware of the situation, and he is thinking carefully about this issue.

**Universal Credit: Household Debt**

9. **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the average level of household debt for people on universal credit.

**The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma):** The Government have taken a number of steps to reduce the risk of problem debt, including capping payday lending costs and promoting savings.

Within universal credit, we also have interest-free advances and a system of priority deductions to help claimants who have got into arrears.

**Yvonne Fovargue:** The Government’s own data shows that rising numbers on universal credit are falling into rent arrears, and many claimants in my constituency are going to food banks or approaching payday lenders. Although an advance is available, this is a loan, which is to be repaid at 40% of the standard allowance. Another 40% can be deducted to repay creditors—for example, utilities. That is a total of 80%. Can the Minister reassure me that 80% of the individual allowance cannot be deducted, and that affordability checks, like those that all payday lenders have to do, are carried out before any deductions are actioned?

**Alok Sharma:** Of course the hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that we want to make sure we help those who are in arrears. She will know that research done by the National Federation of ALMOs—arm’s length management organisations—has reported that three quarters of tenants were in rent arrears already before they moved into universal credit. She talks about deductions; the percentage is 40%. However, I am happy to meet her to discuss this matter further.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** It is a genuine pleasure to welcome the Minister to his place and, through him, to thank his Parliamentary Private Secretary for arranging a visit for me to see universal credit working in his constituency this Friday. Further to the question, will my hon. Friend outline the steps being taken to ensure that organisations on the ground help vulnerable people access 100% of universal credit advances rather than get into debt?

**Alok Sharma:** Yes, I can confirm that work coaches and those who perform the interviews at jobcentres make people aware that they can access 100% advances, which are of course interest free, as I said. The other aspect that is available is personal budgeting support, which individuals who need it can also receive.

**Older Workers**

10. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of employment of older workers.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** Since 2010, 1,272 new jobs have been created in South Basildon and East Thurrock—an increase due in no small part to my hon. Friend’s efforts. He will be aware that older worker employment levels are at a record high. In his region, 850,000 50 to 64-year-olds are in employment—an increase of over 120,000 people since 2010—and 120,000 people aged 65 and over are in employment. Again, that is another increase of 45,000 since 2010.

**Stephen Metcalfe:** Does my hon. Friend agree that encouraging businesses to be flexible in how they employ older workers is one way to bridge the skills gap and keep older workers in the employment market for longer, sharing their experience and knowledge?

**Guy Opperman:** My hon. Friend is correct. The fuller working lives strategy, launched by the Department last year, is there specifically to support over-50s into employment and provide them with the skills and retraining that they need, and which businesses specifically value. There are a number of exemplar businesses. He will also be aware that individual people have created over 26,000 new businesses since 2011—that is for the over-50s.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Many older workers are not necessarily there by choice. I think in particular of the WASPI women, who are having to work because of the inadequacies of their pension provision. What are the Government going to do about this?

**Guy Opperman:** The Government have no intention of revising the Pension Acts of 1995, 2007 or 2011 introduced by previous Governments and by the coalition,
but I make the point very strongly that average employment among the over-50s and the over-64s has increased dramatically since 2010.

Universal Credit

11. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent progress her Department has made on the roll-out of universal credit.

**Alok Sharma** (Minister for Employment): Universal credit transforms the welfare state and the roll-out is proceeding to plan, with universal credit now available in one third of all jobcentres in Great Britain.

**David Linden**: Easterhouse Housing and Regeneration Alliance is a coalition of eight independent housing associations that has been based in my constituency and operating for pretty much my entire lifetime. It has profound concerns about the rollout of universal credit in Glasgow. Given that the Government have given a lot of commitment to go and meet various people on their Benches today, will the Minister come to my constituency to meet it and listen to its concerns?

**Alok Sharma**: When we have rolled out universal credit, we have done it in a manner that makes sense and works. Right now, 9% of those who will eventually end up on universal credit are on universal credit, and it will reach 11% by June this year. I am, of course, undertaking a whole range of visits to jobcentres across the country. I will make sure that I make a visit to the country. I will make sure that I make a visit to

12. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent progress her Department has made on the roll-out of universal credit.

**Alok Sharma**: Universal credit transforms the welfare state and the roll-out is proceeding to plan, with universal credit now available in one third of all jobcentres in Great Britain.

**Drew Hendry**: A terminally ill man has won the right to raise a landmark challenge to the Government after the introduction of universal credit left him significantly worse off. Having already acted unlawfully to 1.6 million PIP claimants at a cost to taxpayers of £3.7 billion, does the Minister guarantee that his Government will not be found guilty of unfairly treating the terminally ill?

**Alok Sharma**: I want to be absolutely clear: the changes that we are making in universal credit and in the benefit system are there to focus on protecting the most vulnerable. That is the underlying policy of universal credit and we will continue to do that.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Has the Minister had any discussions with colleagues in the Department for Education about their proposals for the eligibility of universal credit claimants to free school meals? If the current proposal were to go ahead, it would introduce a huge new benefit trap into the system, far worse than anything in the old system. Universal credit was supposed to remove such traps, not create new ones.

**Alok Sharma**: Currently, 1.1 million young people—students—receive free school meals. If the policy that has been put forward as part of the consultation goes ahead—where there is an earnings threshold of £7,400—an additional 50,000 young people will benefit from free school meals.

**Universal Credit: Child Poverty**

13. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If she will make an estimate of the number of children who will no longer be living in poverty as a result of the roll-out of universal credit.

**Alok Sharma** (Minister for Employment): The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:** Both hon. Ladies are right to recognise the role that welfare reform is playing in alleviating child poverty. Work is the best route out of poverty, and universal credit strengthens the incentives for parents to move into and progress in work. However, it cannot be considered in isolation: it is a key component of a broader strategy to move Britain to a higher wage, lower welfare and lower tax society.

**Diana Johnson**: Owing to policies pursued since 2010, we now have 20,700 children in poverty across Hull, and food poverty and holiday hunger are growing, including, despite what the Secretary of State says, in working families. Will restricting free school meals in universal credit create a cliff edge and make the situation even more dire in the most disadvantaged communities?

**Kit Malthouse**: Undoubtedly, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, children are five times more likely to be in poverty if they are in a workless household. The Government’s entire thrust is to get as many people into work as possible, and we would never contemplate anything that would get in the way of those kinds of incentives. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment said, nobody will lose out under the current proposals on free school meals; in fact, there might well be more recipients in the future.

**Karen Lee**: Figures published last month show that 27% of children in my constituency live in low-income households—and these are families who rely on universal credit. Does the Minister believe that it is acceptable that families living in poverty in Lincoln have to rely on food banks, particularly when due to problems with the roll-out of universal credit?

**Kit Malthouse**: I am sure that the hon. Lady, like me, welcomes the 43% fall in the claimant count in her constituency over the past few years—[HON. MEMBERS: “That wasn’t the question.”] On her question, as she and many Members will know, the causes and drivers of people going to food banks are complex. /Interruption./ In my constituency, for example, the food bank was established in 2006—at the height of Labour’s conduct of the economy and welfare system—but the Department needs to think carefully about some of these issues, and we will be doing so in the future.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to his place. Does he agree that, on the important subject of children living in poverty and universal credit, it is important to have a sensible, grown-up discussion and debate, rather than bandying around unqualified figures?
Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend makes a strong point, and he is absolutely right. National statistics, on a number of measures, have shown child poverty falling. In particular, we have seen 200,000 children over the past few years move out of absolute poverty.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): For too long, parents have been able to hide their earnings from their child maintenance payment calculations, creating and adding to child poverty. What action are the Government taking to stop this?

Kit Malthouse: As my hon. Friend knows, the child maintenance system was put in place to enable greater co-operation between parents, on the basis that that often results in a much better outcome for children, but there are parents who fail to do that, and for those circumstances, we have invested significantly in the financial investigations unit of the Child Maintenance Service. We will be consulting further on what more we can do to strengthen our enforcement powers.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place. When the benefit freeze was introduced in April 2016, inflation stood at 0.3%; it is now over 3%, and food prices in December were over 4% higher than a year earlier. A recent study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that one in four of Britain’s poorest households are struggling with problem debt, and new figures from the End Child Poverty coalition show that in some parts of Britain, such as Bethnal Green and Bow in London and Ladywood in Birmingham, over half of children are living in poverty. Their families are no longer just about managing. Will the Government end the social security freeze that is pushing families into poverty?

Kit Malthouse: I would advise the hon. Lady to be slightly careful about the statistics she is using. As we heard earlier, there are some particular problems, but in that report in particular there were enormous caveats saying that the measures were not accurate and the numbers not necessarily reliable, particularly on a constituency basis. The Government are committed to a strategy to tackle poverty that involves work, and since 2010 we have 954,000 fewer households in unemployment and moved into work. That is the best thing we can do for their futures.

Disability Confident Scheme

14. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What progress her Department has made on the implementation of the disability confident scheme.

Sarah Newton: What progress her Department has made on the implementation of the disability confident scheme.

20. Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): What progress her Department has made on the implementation of the disability confident scheme.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): There are 5,550 employers currently signed up to the disability confident scheme. The disability confident business leaders group, comprising prominent national businesses, is promoting the scheme to other employers, and all main Departments have now achieved disability confident leader status. I encourage all hon. Members to come along to a drop-in centre I have organised on Wednesday 21 February, 3 pm to 5 pm, in Portcullis House, Room Q, so that they too can become disability confident employers.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a little bit of additional information, and we are deeply obliged to the Minister.

Andrew Bridgen: Last year, I attended a disability confident workshop in my constituency, where unemployment now stands at an all-time low of 1%. Also present were representatives of the DWP and the local council, as well as local employers, many of whom signed up to the scheme immediately. Will my hon. Friend give further feedback on the national roll-out of a programme that encourages employers to take advantage of keen, loyal staff who are disabled?

Sarah Newton: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his local support for the disability confident scheme. I urge all Members to become involved in these wonderful events, where we see hundreds of people signing up to the scheme. It is important for us to continue to build on the constructive and positive feedback that we receive from employers by giving them practical support, so that they can employ more disabled people.

Mr Speaker: Finally—and, I am sure, with admirable succinctness—Mr Marcus Jones.

Mr Marcus Jones: I recently visited the excellent Oak Wood School in my constituency, whose leaders are working hard to get talented young people with special needs into work and work placements when they finish school. Will my hon. Friend, like me, encourage employers in my area to join the disability confident scheme, so that we can give opportunities to those young people, and not just give them hope for the future, but provide the labour market with a number of people who will be able to bring a vast amount of experience and difference to our workplaces?

Sarah Newton: I was very pleased to hear about the important work being done by Oak Wood School. Last year, more than 500 young people took part in supported internships, and this year the Department for Education has made available just under £10 million of additional funding, which will provide more work placements, particularly for young people with special educational needs. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is vital for us to ensure that more of those young people are given the opportunity to work.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Minister. I am sure that Members will have an opportunity to pore over her comprehensive reply by moving speedily to the Library, where copies will, I am sure, be located within minutes.

Topical Questions

T1. [903721] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): We had a record-breaking 2017 for employment, and I am delighted to see the trend continue as we enter
the new year. The proportion of people in work is at an all-time high at 75.3%—so 32.2 million people are now in work, 415,000 more than were working last year. Figures also show that there are a record 810,000 vacancies in the economy at any one time, which proves that the Government are delivering on our promise to build a strong economy.

Bridget Phillipson: No child in modern Britain should grow up in poverty, but figures from both the End Child Poverty coalition and the Secretary of State’s own Department reveal that we face a growing crisis. Does she seriously believe that ploughing ahead with universal credit will do anything to help the millions of children who are trapped in avoidable poverty in our country or will bring that number down?

Ms McVey: One thing on which both of us will agree—on which, indeed, Members in all parts of the House will agree—is that no child should be growing up in poverty. If we take action to ensure that families are working, those children will not be in poverty. We know for certain that if a child’s family are working, that child is much less likely to be in poverty when it grows up and is more likely to attain higher school qualifications. That is the action that this Conservative Government are taking.

T3. [903723] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Ryedale citizen’s advice bureau has seen a significant drop in the number of universal credit problem cases as a result of the measures introduced by my right hon. Friend and her predecessor, but we are seeing instances of advance payments being used to clear debts. What help and advice is being given to claimants in respect of budgeting and support, so that they can clear problem debts sensibly and sustainably?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Through universal credit, we are providing personal budgeting support, which is available through conversations with work coaches. That is making a great difference to those who need such help.

Mr Speaker: Front Benchers will have to be very brief, because we are running short of time on account of the length of questions and answers. A pithy sentence, or whatever, will suffice.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What is the Secretary of State’s response to the report from the European Committee of Social Rights that said statutory sick pay and support for those seeking work or the self-employed is “manifestly inadequate” and therefore in breach of the legally binding European social charter?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to have a discussion with the hon. Gentleman on this point. All the policies we have put forward are based on being as fair as we can be to all recipients.

T7. [903728] Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): We have heard a lot today about universal credit, and making it work properly will depend to a great extent on DWP staff. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the staff in Sittingbourne and Sheerness jobcentres, who are showing immense dedication and enthusiasm to ensure that benefit claimants in my constituency are not adversely affected by the roll-out of UC?

Alok Sharma: Of course I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the staff at Sittingbourne and Sheerness jobcentres. When I have spoken to work coaches in the visits I have made, they are incredibly enthused: they tell me this is the first time they are able to do what they want to do, which is help people into work.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The behaviour of Philip Green on BHS pensions was outrageous; likewise, Carillion paying dividends and big bonuses, while running up a £900 million pensions deficit. We expect better from our universities; does the Secretary of State agree that it cannot be right that they are proposing to cut the pension benefits of staff just when one vice-chancellor alone at Edinburgh university has accepted a 33% salary hike as part of a package worth £410,000?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): With respect, this is not a matter for Government to respond on. The joint negotiating committee, which is made up of trustees, employers and unions, is responsible for approving an appropriate recovery plan to ensure the scheme is adequately funded. The universities are subject to regular assessment of their overall financial sustainability management and governance, and I am sure the Pensions Regulator will therefore be watching this situation.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Developing a theme from this side of the House, I had the pleasure of visiting my local jobcentre on Friday. Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to the hard-working staff who are delivering record levels of employment in my constituency?

Alok Sharma: Absolutely: I congratulate the staff in my hon. Friend’s jobcentre, and by the end of the process of rolling out UC, we will have 5,000 extra work coaches across the country.

T2. [903722] Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): About 20,000 people in Liverpool have had their personal independence payments cut due to the blatantly discriminatory regulations that the Secretary of State has now accepted were unlawful. When will my constituents get their money back and their entitlement returned?

Ms McVey: The first decision I made was to make sure we did not appeal that question about PIP and what we on this side of the House were going to do to live up to the expectations of PIP, and I think it is a very true, honourable and correct thing that we have done. However, to make sure we deliver it correctly and give the correct amount of money to the people who need it, it will take time for us to thoroughly research what needs to be done.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The attractiveness to many of the two-weekly payments of UC are obvious, but does my right hon. Friend share my concerns that the Scottish Government’s decision to offer this to my constituents and other people across Scotland will leave those who choose it to be worse off than claimants in the rest of the UK?
Alok Sharma: It is absolutely the case that under the Scottish system individuals will be at a cash-flow disadvantage after a number of weeks. I would point out that, of course, alternative payments are available in England, too.

T4. [903724] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Following last December’s High Court ruling, can the Secretary of State tell me by what date all 1.6 million PIP claims will have been reviewed: will it take weeks, months or even years?

Ms McVey: This reviewing will be an administrative process, so we will not need to see the people, but what is most important is that the right people get the right amount of money, and that will take the time it needs.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): We had a very interesting session on assistive technology in the Select Committee on Work and Pensions recently. Will the Government commit to looking at how assistive technology can be used to help more disabled people into work?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I really welcome the work that the Select Committee is doing. I believe that the fourth industrial revolution has the most enormous potential to transform the lives of disabled people, and of course I will read that report thoroughly.

T5. [903725] Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My constituent Mrs Allinson suffers from multiple sclerosis. She has been receiving the personal independence payment for 24 months, but was recently reassessed and denied it on the ground that she can work, although only part-time. Given that she is no longer getting that money, she is working full-time and damaging her health. Do the Government recognise that disabled people need support to stay in work for as long as possible? Will the Minister meet me and ensure that Mrs Allinson’s case is reviewed?

Sarah Newton: Of course I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the case of her constituent. Let us be clear that we want to achieve the maximum amount of support for people who want to and can get into work as well as ensuring that the right support is available for those who cannot do so.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Child Support Agency was set up to pursue absent fathers who were not paying anything at all towards their children’s upkeep. Too often, the Child Maintenance Service seems to file those people under “too difficult” and just pursue people who are already paying. Can the Minister guarantee that the Child Maintenance Service will continue to go after people who are not paying anything at all towards the upkeep of their children, rather than just pursuing those who are already making a contribution?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): I can reassure my hon. Friend that that will indeed be the case, and we will shortly be consulting on what more we can do to enforce against those who are unwilling to support their children.

T6. [903726] Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): One of the challenges in the design of universal credit is that it does not take into account the fluctuating incomes of people who are freelance. They can earn a low amount one month and a high amount the next, but universal credit does not manage that properly. A self-employed person who has earned £15,000 in a year will get less under universal credit than an employed person who has earned the same amount. Will the Government commit to fixing that anomaly?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, universal credit works on a monthly basis. When someone earns a large amount in a month, we apportion that over the following months. It is worth pointing out that it is entirely possible for people with those kinds of earnings to budget over the year, just as many businesses do.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The GKN takeover proposal announced last Thursday seeks to pay a £1.4 billion sweetener to shareholders, despite a £2 billion pension deficit. Does the Minister agree that the Government should act to protect the interests of GKN pension fund members?

Ms McVey: Of course the Government agree that we have to look after the concerns of the GKN workers. Here we have actually seen the trustees of the pension fund coming out, being bold and wanting reassurance from the other company that it can indeed pay for the pension scheme. We can look at the argument from two sides. GKN has to be strong and robust, but also Melrose should voluntarily ask the regulator to look into the implied costs in that benefit scheme to make sure that it can afford to take over the other company.

Guy Opperman: The position has not changed. The Government do not intend to change the Pensions Act 1995, or the 2007 and 2011 Pensions Acts. I would point out that a £1.1 billion transitional arrangement was put forward in the 2011 statute.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Some 70% of the rise in UK employment involves higher-skilled jobs. This is true in Wiltshire, which expects more than 2,500 jobs from Dyson alone. What work is the Minister doing with other Departments to tackle the science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills gap in the UK, so that Wiltshire can benefit from those jobs?

Alok Sharma: I have started to have conversations with ministerial colleagues, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to work as one Government to ensure that high-skilled jobs are created across our country.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the significant rise in household debt and the fear that payday lenders will seek to take advantage of that situation, is not this the right time to seek a significant expansion of credit unions across the UK? What might the Minister do to facilitate such an expansion?
Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman and I have a meeting in our diaries for, I believe, a week Monday, when I hope to expand on that specific point. He will know that credit union membership has doubled in the past 10 years, and I can assure him that we are discussing these matters with the Treasury, which has ultimate control over credit unions.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I am a mathematician and a mother, so I am concerned that the head of the UK Statistics Authority had to write to a shadow Minister to point out that statements that they made were not based on real sources or real statistics. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the shadow Minister should apologise?

Ms McVeY: My hon. Friend puts it so eloquently. It is about time that Opposition Members apologise for their scaremongering.

Mr Speaker: Even mothers and mathematicians have to respect the method, and the method in the House is that Members question Ministers about the Government’s policies. I do not blame the Secretary of State for taking the opportunity to ram home her point with force and alacrity, but Members must understand that this is not Question Time about the policies, tactics or preferences of the Opposition; this is Question Time about the policies of the Government. Even if there is some Whips handout saying, “Ask the Minister about the behaviour of the Labour party,” that does not make it in order. It is not in order—end of subject.

T9. [903730] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Thousands of women born in the 1950s are being left in serious hardship as a result of accelerated changes to the state pension age, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) said, they are crying out for justice. In the week when we celebrate the centenary of the first women gaining the right to vote, how dare this Government ignore their voices?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady will know that the policy continued for 13 years under the Labour Government, and her Government could have done something about it between 1997 and 2010, but she maintained that it was the right policy. This Government continues to maintain that it was the right policy, and if individuals require assistance, the Government give over £50 billion to the disabled on an ongoing basis.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am going back and forth, so the hon. Gentleman can have another go. In fairness to colleagues who have not asked questions, a short sentence—one, that is—will suffice.

Michael Tomlinson: What benefit has auto-enrolment provided for my constituents?

Guy Opperman: Seven thousand employees are now signed up, and 900 employers are doing the right thing and are providing auto-enrolment to my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman and the Minister.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Later, we will debate benefit uprating, which will maintain a freeze on many key working-age benefits even while the consumer price index sits at 3%. We all know that the freeze is pushing people into crisis, so will the Minister take this opportunity to lift the freeze to ease claimants’ suffering—yes or no?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the freeze was enacted in primary legislation, and we would need a vote of the whole House to change it. I am afraid that it forms part of a general suite of welfare reforms that have driven an enormous number of people into work and out of poverty.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: A short sentence from the voice of Delyn.

David Hanson: Will a Minister look at how universal credit is paid into credit unions? My local credit union is raising real concerns about the DWP’s efficiency and organisation in doing so.

Guy Opperman: I am happy to take representations from the right hon. Gentleman, and I will look at that point with my colleagues who handle universal credit.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Bearing in mind the Secretary of State’s call for clear statistics, will she welcome today’s Library paper, which clarifies that 113,000 children will cease to receive free school meals under the proposed changes to universal credit, withdraw the claim that 50,000 more children will benefit at one point in time and bring that to the attention of the House?

Alok Sharma: A consultation is taking place, and the Department for Education will respond to it. Everyone who is currently on universal credit will have that benefit protected as long as the children remain in that education setting.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am advised that we have had 23 topical questions, and we must now move on. I am sorry to disappoint colleagues who have waited. I try to extend the envelope a bit, but the time comes when we must move on.

Debbie Abrahams: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a genuine point of order, as opposed to a point of irascibility.

Debbie Abrahams: Further to the comments made by the Secretary of State during oral questions, Mr Speaker, I seek your guidance on how I can place my response on the record. I agree it is important for everyone to use data responsibly and to provide the sources and contexts of those data, but I will take no lessons from this Secretary of State or her cohort, who accuse us of scaremongering as a way to distract from the reality...
of their Government’s cuts. We know what happened last time they accused Opposition Members of scare-mongering about the impact of cuts and universal credit: the Government introduced £1.5 billion of measures. Our concerns were accurate and well founded, and the Child Poverty Action Group found that cuts to universal credit will force 1 million more children into poverty.

Mr Speaker: The shadow Secretary of State has found her own salvation. She asks me, I think rhetorically, how she can put her thoughts on the record, and she knows perfectly well that she has just done so through the device of a purported—I use the term advisedly—point of order. One day somebody will do an academic analysis. I have not done so myself, but, in my experience in the House, at least 90% of points of order are bogus. The hon. Lady has made her point.

Philip Davies: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you clarify whether or not that was an apology from the shadow Secretary of State? It was not entirely clear.

Mr Speaker: I think not. [ Interruption. ] The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is gesticulating at me in a mildly appealing fashion, but she has made her points with considerable force and requires no further opportunity now.

Ms McVey: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I will lay the letter from the UK Statistics Authority in the Library, so that other people can read it.

Mr Speaker: That is a perfectly reasonable course of action for the Secretary of State to take, but it is not a point of order. It might be called a point of information that some colleagues will find helpful.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Is the right hon. Gentleman seeking to raise a point of order, or is he stretching his legs? [ Interruption. ] The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) says he is keeping himself awake.
Immigration White Paper

3.42 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is going on with the immigration White Paper.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is very cheeky of the right hon. Lady, who is a very senior denizen of the House. I must ask her to read out the urgent question that was granted. I did not grant an urgent question on what is going on with the immigration White Paper; I believe I am right in saying that her urgent question is, “To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the publication of the proposed immigration White Paper.”

Yvette Cooper: That is indeed what I asked. Would you like me to repeat those words?

Mr Speaker: Blurt it out.

Yvette Cooper: I would like to ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is happening with the immigration White Paper.

Mr Speaker: Well, all right. If the right hon. Lady were sitting a written exam today, she would probably have to do a little more revision. I think she has not quite remembered the precise wording. Nevertheless, as Jack Straw would have said, I think we have got the gravamen of the matter.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I will endeavour to answer the question that was set.

It is of course a great pleasure to come to the House today to answer the question from the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I commend her for her brevity. In doing so, I point out that Ministers have made great efforts to keep the House informed of the state of play on the UK’s exit from the European Union, bearing in mind that we are in an ongoing negotiation and cannot give a running commentary.

Since June 2016, there have been numerous ministerial statements. This question, however, relates specifically to immigration, so I remind the House of where we have got to. Our first priority in the negotiation is to reach a deal on citizens’ rights, on the position of the 3 million EU citizens currently in the UK and, just as importantly, on the position of the 1 million UK citizens who reside in other EU member states. An agreement was successfully concluded on that last December, meaning that all those people were guaranteed continuing rights to live and work as they do now. Of course, we updated Parliament fully at the time. Our next priority is to agree the arrangements during the implementation period—the period immediately following the UK’s exit next March. Negotiations are shortly to begin with the EU. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out the UK’s broad objectives in the speech she gave in Florence last year. We will publish a White Paper in the coming months, when the time is right, and of course we will consider how we can update the House as negotiations progress.

As to the longer term, as the House will know, the Government have commissioned the independent Migration Advisory Committee to advise on the economic aspects of the UK’s exit. The MAC has been asked to report by September 2018, although it has been invited to consider whether it could also produce interim reports. Let me be clear: given that we expect to have an implementation period of about two years after we leave, there will be plenty of time to take account of the MAC’s recommendations in designing the longer-term immigration system for the UK.

We are clear that the Government will make a success of Brexit. We will end free movement and build an immigration system that works in the national interest. We will, as we have done thus far, ensure that Parliament is kept informed and up to date.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the Immigration Minister to her new post, but she did not give us any information about immigration or the immigration White Paper. The Home Secretary told the House and the Select Committee in October that there would be an immigration White Paper by the end of last year and a Bill early this year. The then Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), told the Committee in November that the White Paper would be produced “soon”, but now we have this. What on earth is going on? I have to say to the new Minister that this is a shambles. I understand that the MAC is not reporting until the autumn and that it will want to take advice on the labour market, but Ministers knew that timetable before Christmas, when they answered those questions. They knew that timetable because they set it when they asked for advice from the MAC. I also understand that negotiations are continuing, but, again, Ministers knew that before Christmas. In addition, this does not get around the obligation on the House Office to tell the House, the public, EU citizens and employers what its negotiating objectives actually are.

These practical questions need answering very soon, not “in good time” or “when the time is right”. For example, what will the legal status be of the EU nationals who have not registered by the end of the grace period? The Home Secretary told the Committee that that would be in the White Paper. What will the arrangements be for European economic area citizens from Norway or Switzerland? If EU citizens arriving after March next year do not register, will they be able to work? Will employers have to check their registration documents? Will landlords have to make checks before they rent these people a property? What is the position for EU students coming this autumn? What will the arrangements for them be?

We know that the Prime Minister wants people arriving after March 2019 to be treated differently, but we have no idea how. It is just not good enough keeping Parliament in the dark in this way. The Government have said they do not want to be in the single market, but they have not told us what they want instead. They have said that they do not want to be in the customs union, but they have not told us what they want instead. Now they have said that they do not want to have free movement, but, again, they have not told us what they want instead or even what their negotiation objectives are. At best, Ministers are cutting Parliament and the public out of the crucial debate about the future of our country. At
worst, they seem to be stuck in negotiations without having agreed, even among themselves, what they want to achieve out of them. May I suggest to the Immigration Minister that she asks the Home Secretary to come to this House to make a full statement, at least on the transition arrangements? The clock is ticking and when you are running out of time, you cannot keep kicking the can down the road.

Caroline Nokes: First, I reassure the right hon. Lady that we are not kicking the can down the road. We are making sure we get a system that is right for people. That is why I make no apology for making our priority the 3 million EU citizens living here and the 1 million UK citizens living in EU states. We want to have a system in place for them during the implementation period so that we can register those 3 million people as smoothly and seamlessly as possible. It is imperative that, when we come to the House with a White Paper and an immigration Bill, they are the right pieces of legislation.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When are we likely to get immigration down to the tens of thousands?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend will know as well as I do that in successive Conservative party manifestos we have made a commitment to making sure that we bring immigration down to sustainable levels.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The immigration White Paper was originally scheduled to be published last summer. Then, Ministers told the Home Affairs Committee that it would be published before Christmas. Does not this constant postponement speak to the chaos and confusion on immigration in the Department as a whole? Does the Minister accept that, as the director general of the Confederation of British Industry said, business will be “hugely frustrated” by yet another postponement? Does she appreciate that firms need time to plan for change?

Does the Minister accept that this uncertainty is particularly upsetting for the 3 million EU citizens who live here? These people are contributing to the health service, social care, universities, financial services and the hospitality industry, among many other sectors. They are many of our constituents, neighbours and work colleagues. It is wrong that they should be treated like this. Furthermore, the longer the uncertainty goes on, the less willing EU citizens will be to come here to take up employment. Does the Minister accept that the consequences for recruitment in the health service in particular are potentially very serious? Does she also accept that European students who come to study in Britain after March 2019 will want reassurance that, if they are doing a three or four-year course, they will be able to stay for more than two years without having to apply again for a residence permit?

It is all very well for the Minister to say that the White Paper will be published when the time is right. The Opposition argue that the time has been right for some time and that the Government’s postponement and delay are inexcusable.

Caroline Nokes: What is crucial is that, as my predecessor as Immigration Minister did, I continue to consult businesses and universities to make sure that their views are fed into the process. Likewise, the Migration Advisory Committee is consulting businesses because it is so important that their views are fed into the process and that the Government can use the response of economic experts to enable us to determine the best policy going forward.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I commend the Home Office for the careful and considered way it is dealing with this important Bill. It is listening to business and the experts and waiting for some further negotiation, before introducing a Bill that will be fit for purpose for this country for the next 10 or 20 years.

Caroline Nokes: Of course, what we are seeking to do is to have evidence-led policy making.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This unnecessary and unwelcome delay in the publication of a White Paper that was originally promised last summer should perhaps not surprise us, given the Government’s chaotic and aimless approach to Brexit. Even the transition arrangements are in chaos, with the Prime Minister saying that she will push back on residency rights for EU nationals during the transition, thereby making it harder to attract key EU nationals. All that while we are already rejecting doctors and crucial staff from outside the EU because the ridiculous tier 2 cap has been breached for two months in a row.

Scottish Government economic modelling shows that, on average, every EU citizen working in Scotland contributes £34,000 in GDP. The leak of the Whitehall EU exit analysis means we now know that the UK Government are sitting on analysis that comes to precisely the same conclusions as the Scottish Government’s. That highlights yet again the positive contribution that EU citizens make to Scotland’s economy and communities. Free movement has been vital to support healthy population growth in Scotland. I urge the Minister to continue dialogue with the Scottish Government to ensure that immigration rules after exit do not undo that welcome progress.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. He is of course right to point out that EU citizens who have made their lives in the UK have made a huge contribution to our country. That is precisely why we want to see their rights preserved and, indeed, why we want to see their rights preserved and, indeed, why the Government are legislating that they should be through the withdrawal agreement. I absolutely take on board his comment about the Scottish Government. I reassure him that we will of course continue to work with our colleagues in the Scottish Government to make sure that we get the best results for the whole United Kingdom.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are committed to leaving the single market and that that will allow the United Kingdom to have more control over EU immigration in future?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will know as well as I do that, when people voted in June 2016 to leave the EU, part of that decision for some people was based on
immigration. That is why we are taking back control of our borders and will do so through the immigration Bill when it is introduced.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister seemed to suggest that there is no need to deal with this matter before the transition period because we will have the whole transition period—some two years—in which to sort out new arrangements. Does that mean that we will be retaining freedom of movement during the transition period, in which case why do we not stay in the single market?

Caroline Nokes: We have been very clear that, after our exit, we want a deep and special relationship with our neighbours going forward, but we also want a smooth transition. It is really important that we have an implementation period that enables us to make sure that the 3 million EU citizens who are here are allowed to register smoothly and seamlessly. The hon. Gentleman will be as aware as I am that the Prime Minister has been very clear that we are leaving the single market and we are leaving the customs union.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the referendum sent out a clear message that people want to take back more control over EU immigration, and that it is therefore crucial that we get this right and publish the report when it is fully ready?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is, of course, right that, back in 2016, people sent us a very clear message. It is absolutely imperative that we have a smooth transition and that we publish the White Paper and the immigration Bill when the time is right, not before we are ready to do so.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): With the Government’s position on this topic totally unclear even to Parliament, how on earth can Ministers expect to be taken seriously in the ongoing negotiations with our EU counterparts?

Caroline Nokes: I am not quite sure how I can be clearer: we are leaving the single market, we are leaving the customs union, and we are seeking to implement a process that will last throughout the implementation period that allows those 3 million EU individuals living here, whose contribution we value, to register for their settled status as smoothly and as seamlessly as possible.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): My right hon. Friend says that she will continue the dialogue about immigration with the Scottish Government. When she is doing that, will she remember that a recent opinion poll said that almost 70% of Scots rejected the Scottish National party’s plans to devolve immigration powers from this place to Holyrood?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for taking the trouble to point that out. Of course I will listen to voices from across Scotland.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): With this chaos and delay, is not one thing increasingly clear: the Government’s promise to give EU citizens, and their families and employers, the legal certainty that they deserve is now totally broken? When will 3 million EU citizens get more than warm words and unfinished negotiations from this Brexit Conservative Government?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman makes his point forcefully. However, I can only repeat this: we will bring forward the settled status scheme, which will be a digital scheme, that will enable our EU citizens living here, whom we value and whom we want to stay, to have a smooth and seamless transition as soon as we possibly can. We have allowed a two-year implementation period, because I am very conscious that 3 million people cannot register instantly. If they do so on a smooth basis, that will still represent 5,000 people a day. That will be a challenge, but it is one that we are determined to get right.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What my constituents in Corby and east Northamptonshire want is an immigration system that provides control, but one that is also fair and that treats people equally, regardless of where they come from in the world. Will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that those two principles will underpin the White Paper in due course?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment; I am always pleased to hear views from Corby and east Northamptonshire. What matters is that we have an immigration system that is fair, and that we work to ensure that any proposals that come forward during the implementation period are the ones that will give the best deal for the UK and ensure that our immigration system is sustainable.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This is a two-year Session of Parliament. Does the right hon. Lady expect the immigration Bill to complete its passage through the Houses of Parliament in that two-year period?

Caroline Nokes: Of course.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her new position as Immigration Minister and on her response to the urgent question. Will she confirm that it was the previous Labour Government who let immigration spiral out of control from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands a year, that immigration levels are still far too high, and that once we leave the European Union those numbers will start to fall?

Caroline Nokes: With respect, I point out to my hon. Friend that the numbers are already beginning to fall. It is important that we note that the direction of travel is the right one. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have been very clear that we want a sustainable immigration system that sees those numbers coming down, and it is important that we deliver on that.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Post March 2019, from a practical point of view, the one in five of my constituents who are EU nationals could: have permanent residency or settled status; be eligible for settled status; have future eligibility for settled status; or not be eligible at all. When they are talking to landlords, employers and the health service, how are they going to differentiate which category they fall into?
Caroline Nokes: It is important to note that we will want to register those who are eligible for settled status as soon as possible so that their status can be confirmed. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there will be a period during which it will be difficult to differentiate, which is why we are going to use the two-year period to make sure we can do that as seamlessly as we possibly can.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Just in case anyone—either inside the Chamber or beyond—has inexplicably missed what my right hon. Friend has said, will she reaffirm the Government’s commitment to leaving the single market and leaving the customs union, and that this will ensure that we have control over EU immigration in the future?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is, of course, right. We intend to leave the single market and the customs union, and to retain the control over our immigration system that our citizens told us that they wanted back in 2016.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that roughly half the immigrants who come to this country are from outside the EU and the European economic area. She talks about control, so will she tell me how many non-EEA citizens there are in the UK who have had an immigration application refused, but have not had removal or deportation proceedings initiated against them?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will be aware that we work very hard to make sure that people who are in this country without permission find it a very difficult environment in which to live. The previous and current Home Secretary’s compliant environment policies have made sure that it is harder to have a bank account, harder to have a driving licence and harder to rent property. The important thing is that we know that people come into this country without permission, and we should therefore be seeking to remove them.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): A White Paper is a consultation document, but it seems to me that the Government are delaying consulting on what should go into a consultation document. Are we not in this situation because the extreme right wing of the Tory party, who are extreme Brexeters, have formed a tail that is wagging the Tory dog?

Caroline Nokes: I am not quite sure how I should respond to being called a dog. However, it is really important to note that we are working incredibly hard to make sure we have an immigration system after Brexit that works in the interests of UK citizens. There is no extreme right-wing cabal controlling the Tory party. This is actually about making sure we deliver on what the British people voted for in 2016.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm two things? First, is it not really important, when we discuss immigration, to recognise that the overwhelming majority of people who come to our country do so to work? We are grateful for the work they do and we should always welcome the contribution they make to our country. Will she also confirm that the customs union has got diddly squat to do with immigration?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that people who come to this country to work—whether they are from the EU or outside the EU—make a valuable contribution. That is part of the reason why, through the settled status scheme, we seek to recognise that and to make sure that these 3.5 million people can register as seamlessly as possible.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that the issues around EU nationals in this country have been resolved. Is it not a fact that the European Commission made it clear that the circumstances of EU nationals married to British citizens who have chosen to come into this country using treaty rights under article 21 of the treaty of the European Union and the Surinder Singh judgment have not been resolved? Is there not a large group of people in this country married to people from other EU countries who have a level of uncertainty about their future?

Caroline Nokes: The agreement that the Prime Minister came to with other EU leaders on 8 December was really important, because we are seeking to make the rights of EU citizens and their dependants as clear as possible, and to make it as easy as possible for them to register so that they can have the certainty to which they are entitled.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister keeps talking about achieving sustainable levels of immigration, which suggests that current levels are unsustainable. The reality is that another Scottish farmer reported at the weekend that food was left to rot in his fields because he did not have enough workers. The fish processing industry is struggling, the medical profession is struggling to attract EU immigrants and academics are worried about their future, so the current level of immigration is currently unsustainable for exactly the opposite reasons that the Conservative Government think it is unsustainable. Is this another part of the no-deal preparations that the Government seem to be embarking on? What will happen to immigration policy if there is no deal and no transition period?

Caroline Nokes: Whether deal or no deal—we are confident that there will be a deal—we will need a new immigration system that takes account of the fact that we will have left the European Union. The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about different sectors of the economy. That is one of the many reasons why we have asked the Migration Advisory Committee to consider what our policy should be, and that will give businesses a chance to feed in their views.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Recruitment & Employment Confederation reports that in many sectors there are already insufficient UK applicants to fill the vacancies that exist today. Business cannot carry on with this uncertainty for much longer, so may I urge the Minister to bring forward the White Paper and the immigration Bill at the very earliest opportunity for the sake of our businesses?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Lady that we continue to consult businesses and the universities sector, and that is part of the reason why we have asked the MAC to bring forward a report for us by the autumn. It
is really important to us that we get our immigration policy right, which is why we have not yet brought forward the White Paper and the Bill, but we intend to.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Last week, two consultants in intensive care at Addenbrooke’s Hospital wrote to me. They had been trying to recruit urgently needed staff. They found three people, but those people were turned down by the Home Office because the tier 2 visa cap had been reached for that month. How can that possibly be helpful to our country? Does the Minister agree that the system is basically broken?

Caroline Nokes: Of course we need to ensure that we have a sustainable system, which is why it is important that the Bill and the White Paper take account of all views expressed to us by all sectors. That is what we are determined to do to get this right.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Even if the Minister cannot confirm any other great details, will she re-emphasise the point that there will be no change to the historical rights of citizens of the Irish Republic to travel to and work in Britain?

Caroline Nokes: I think that we have been quite clear that those from the common travel area will be able to continue to travel, as indeed they could from 1920 onwards—from before we became members of the European Union.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In Yarl’s Wood and other such institutions, vulnerable people have been held, effectively indefinitely, when most of them have not actually committed any crime. Does the Minister agree that the Bill, when it finally comes, will provide an opportunity to review this obvious injustice?

Caroline Nokes: Detention will continue to form part of our immigration policy, but I thank the hon. Lady for mentioning the case of Yarl’s Wood. I am going there to visit the immigration removal centre this week, and I have already been to two other removal centres. As the new Immigration Minister, it is imperative that I go and see how our policies are operating, and to seek reassurances where they are required.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Every Friday at my surgeries, I have a queue of constituents who have issues with the Home Office—everything from entrepreneur visas that have been delayed and refused, to people who cannot get their granny over for a visit. Is it not the case that the Home Office is a Department in so much chaos that there is no way whatever that it will be able to cope with an additional 3 million EU nationals?

Caroline Nokes: I absolutely refute the suggestion that we are a Department in chaos. I reassure the hon. Lady that we are determined to ensure that the registration of EU nationals is as simple and straightforward as possible.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Has the Minister had a chance to read the Health Committee’s report on nursing shortages? It clearly sets out how much the NHS relies on nurses from overseas, and how many EU nurses are really worried about their future. Will she tell us how this delay will help the overstretched NHS to plan for the future and ensure that this country has the nurses it needs?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will be aware that nurses remain on the shortage occupation list. Nurses from the EU who are currently living and working here will of course have the same right to settled status as those in other employments.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), the Minister said that the immigration Bill would be passed in this two-year Parliament. If the consultation on the White Paper is coming in October, that will give her about four months to pass the Bill through both Houses. Will she confirm when the Bill is coming and whether she will get it through in the two-year Parliament? This is not something from “Yes, Minister”; it is about people’s lives. We need firm views from the Government on what is happening on immigration.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for comparing this to a “Yes, Minister” episode; I remember that there was a definite paucity of women in that programme. I assure him that we are absolutely clear that we will introduce the immigration Bill and the White Paper when the time is right. We appreciate that we have to get our immigration system sustainable and appropriate for a post-Brexit era, and it is really important to me that we do so.
NHS Winter Crisis

4.10 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government’s response to the resolution of the House of 10 January on the NHS winter crisis.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): Winter is challenging for health services worldwide. With a high number of flu cases this year, we have seen an increase of about 35% in accident and emergency attendances for flu—triple what it was last year—with about 3,000 hospital beds occupied as a result of flu and a further 700 because of norovirus. The NHS saw 1,200 more patients at A&E compared with this time last year. The guidance issued by the national emergency pressures panel sought to free up capacity for emergencies given the high number of flu cases, including from two dominant strains of flu co-circulating this year.

It is important to remind the House that the deferment of operations referred to in that guidance applies to about 13% of hospital beds dealing with elective patients, of which about half were protected within the guidance in respect of cancer and other urgent elective treatments. The guidance was updated on 26 January to confirm that further deferment of hospital operations is no longer needed. In terms of the impact that the guidance has had on operations, we will not know that until mid-March, when that data will be published and placed in the Library for the benefit of those on both sides of the House.

Jonathan Ashworth: I welcome the new Minister to his place. However, the Secretary of State should have been here giving an oral statement, because those were the terms of the motion endorsed by the whole House.

The reason that motion was endorsed is that this winter, in recent weeks, over 95% of hospital beds have been full, we have seen the highest-ever number of A&E diverts, 50,000 elective operations have been cancelled, and urgent operations have been cancelled too. The crisis that our NHS is now in is so deep, and the underfunding so severe, that on Friday NHS England was forced to announce that the target of seeing 95% of A&E patients within four hours is now effectively abandoned until March 2019. If the Secretary of State had come to the House last Thursday, he could have been questioned on the NHS guidance.

Last year, more than 2.5 million patients waited longer than they should have done in A&E. Does the Minister expect that number to rise or fall this year? The 18-week target has already been abandoned. Is it not unprecedented that patients will have to accept, even before the financial year starts, that the NHS will not deliver on key constitutional standards of care? The waiting time standards are legal duties contained in the NHS constitution. What legal advice have Ministers received, or will they be seeking to amend the NHS constitution?

On Saturday, thousands of us took to the streets to demand a fully-funded, universal public national health service—and by the way, we will take no lessons from Donald Trump, who wants to deny healthcare to millions with a system that checks your purse before it checks your pulse. The NHS model is not broke but it does need funding. If this Government will not give it the funding it needs, then the next Labour Government will.

Stephen Barclay: A party preparing for a run on the pound will be in no place to give funding to the NHS. It is the agreed convention of the House that responses to Opposition day debates are provided by the Department within 12 weeks. The Secretary of State will of course do that within that period, and there is a good reason for that. As I set out in my opening remarks, the data will not be available until mid-March, so the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) is premature in asking this urgent question.

The facts are that the NHS was better prepared for winter this year. The number of 111 calls dealt with by a clinician has doubled compared with last year. Over 1 million more people have been vaccinated for the flu virus, 99% of A&E have GP streaming and over 3,000 more beds have been made available since November, reflecting the extent of the plan.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): So everything in our NHS is fine, is it?

Stephen Barclay: If the hon. Gentleman would like to compare with the performance of the NHS in Wales, we will undertake a comparison. The reality is that this year, we have had pressure on the NHS as a result of flu. The difference is that in 2009, the Conservative party did not play politics with the flu pressures. This year, the hon. Member for Leicester South has done so. He should compare it with the pressure in Wales and see the excellent performance we have had in comparison.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Minister will know that pressures in the NHS cannot be viewed in isolation from pressures in the community. It is great to see that he is now part of a Department of Health and Social Care. Will he say what is being done about making beds available in the community, to free up pressures in the NHS?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Health Select Committee, makes a valid point about the need for much more integration in our approach to the NHS. That is reflected in the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) as the Minister for Care, to look at that exact point.

Part of it is also looking at how we address other areas to deliver better outcomes. For example, 43% of bed occupancy at present is from just 5% of patients—those staying over 21 days. One key issue is how we bring down the current average stay from 40 days to, say, 35 days. That alone would unlock around 5,000 beds. We are looking at a more integrated model to address the pathways that I know my hon. Friend has highlighted in the Health Committee as a key priority.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Scottish National party Members want, first and foremost, to put on record our thanks to NHS staff. A number of members of my family work for the NHS. I spent time with them at the weekend, and we got that time because they were working over the Christmas period. We know that Christmas and the winter period has been profoundly challenging due to flu, but it is important that resources follow that.
That is why we have record funding support for the NHS in Scotland and NHS Scotland A&E departments are the best performing in the UK.

Last week, the Scottish Parliament voted to abolish the public sector pay cap and to look at bringing in a 3% pay increase for our public sector workers. That is action, rather than warm words. Far too often we hear warm words from this Government, but in the national health service we need to see action, particularly on the public sector pay cap. What steps is the Minister taking to tackle wage stagnation within the national health service?

Stephen Barclay: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his more mature approach, in recognising the huge amount of work performed by NHS staff. Indeed, as I pointed out, 1,200 more people a day are being treated in A&E, which reflects how much more is being done in our NHS with more resource, more money, more doctors, more nurses and more paramedics.

In terms of the specifics on money, the Government have given £1.6 billion to support performance improvements, which will be used to treat a quarter of a million more patients in 2018-19. The NHS planning guidance also shows that it expects performance to improve in the face of growing demand. That shows how more is being done, and more needs to be done.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): All over the world, every winter sees a spike in illness and pressures on healthcare. Does the Minister agree that this Government have been proactive? In fact, for the first time ever, care home staff can receive vaccinations for free.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of vaccinations. This year we have seen 1 million more vaccinations than last year, which is part of addressing the demand on A&E. The number of 111 calls dealt with by clinicians has more than doubled, which has mitigated much of the demand from the flu virus.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): In the light of the funding problems exposed by the winter crisis, what is the Government’s response to the recommendation of the last chief executive of the NHS, the heads of the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of General Practitioners and the retiring head of the Treasury that there has to be a form of earmarked taxation to provide stable, sustainable funding?

Stephen Barclay: Addressing the challenge of funding was reflected in the Budget, with the additional money set aside by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. On the comments of Simon Stevens, it is important to note what he said about the connection between a strong economy and delivering the finance that the NHS needs. Simon Stevens said:

“It has been true for the 68 years of the NHS’s history that when the British economy sneezes the NHS catches a cold.”

The reality is that if we are to fund the NHS as all of us want it to be funded, we need to ensure that there is a strong economy and only one party will ensure that that happens.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If we restore the beds to Milford-on-Sea lost under Labour, it will reduce the pressure on Southampton General, will it not?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The other issue that puts pressure on beds and hospital finances is many of the legacy private finance initiative deals. We also inherited those deals from the Opposition, which they very rarely seem to want to talk about.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister tell the House why, on Friday, NHS England suspended the requirement for A&E patients to be seen within four hours until 2019, contrary to the NHS constitution, and will he amend the NHS constitution to reflect this advice?

Stephen Barclay: I thought the hon. Lady was going to stand up to reflect on the fact that her trust got £2.9 million of additional funding from what the Chancellor set about doing. The reality is that this Government are putting more money into the NHS and addressing the demands on the system.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend what scope there is as we go forward for conversations between his Department, NHS England and NHS trusts about maximising staff numbers in acute settings in our hospitals during the winter months?

Stephen Barclay: We are in discussion with Health Education England on workforce planning and ensuring that we address concerns about retention and training, part of which is the fact that the Chancellor has lifted the 1% cap as it applies within the health service, and we are of course in active discussions with the trade unions on that point.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It has been reported to me that out of the 17 cubicles at Lewisham A&E one morning last November, five people were awaiting section with severe mental health problems. One person was there for over 72 hours, another for over 26 hours and another for over 21 hours, and all were there for over four hours. When will the Minister acknowledge that the reason why A&Es cannot cope is that the entire system—from social care and GPs through to mental health—is buckling under the enormous pressure of increasing demand, and when is the NHS going to get the funding it needs?

Stephen Barclay: I have already said that I recognise there is increasing demand, and I set out many of the measures we are taking through the 111 service and other areas. The hon. Lady’s own trust has received an additional £3.2 million to address many of those pressures, and the key question is how that will be deployed by the trust to address many of the blockages in the pathways at the moment.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Despite the challenges this winter, does my hon. Friend not agree that we can be extremely proud in this country that we have an NHS free at the point of delivery to all of our citizens? Will he confirm that that will continue to be the policy of this Government, and does he agree with me that we should not listen to the voices from across the Atlantic saying we should adopt a different system?
Stephen Barclay: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that the NHS will remain free at the point of delivery. The reality is that for the majority of the NHS’s existence, it has been run by the Conservative party. We know the value of retaining healthcare free at the point of delivery, and the Secretary of State has repeatedly reaffirmed his absolute commitment to that.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency surgery, two sisters came to speak to me about their father, who went to hospital last month. Because the staff were so overstretched, he was placed in the wrong ward, so he did not get seen by a doctor for four days. Will the Minister reassure the sisters, and will he pause the downgrade of Huddersfield Royal Infirmary and rethink this so that the winter crisis does not become a daily crisis in the NHS?

Stephen Barclay: As the hon. Lady knows, local commissioning decisions are for the clinical commissioning group and local commissioners, but again, not one Opposition Member has recognised the additional funding that has gone in. Her own trust received an additional £3.4 million—[Interruption.] Well, it is never enough for the hon. Lady. The question is, how, with the economic mismanagement under their party, Labour Members are ever going to deliver what they want? Her trust received an additional £3.4 million to address the pressures.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Not only are this Government increasing the funding available to the NHS; crucially, they are also training more doctors, with 1,500 more medical school places. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is not only a crucial factor that will address areas such as Lincolnshire, which are under-doctored, but another reason to put a medical school in Lincolnshire?

Stephen Barclay: I very much note my hon. Friend’s bid for further training places, and he is absolutely right: there has been a 25% increase in the number of places. That is part of ensuring that we have more doctors, nurses and paramedics, which this Government have put in, to address the increasing demand that the NHS faces.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Given that, according to Age UK, one in three older people admitted to hospital is suffering from malnutrition, will the Minister now accept that cuts to adult social care are putting an avoidable and increasing strain on the NHS?

Stephen Barclay: What the hon. Lady’s question points to is how we better integrate care as between hospitals and the care sector. That is exactly the issue that the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), who has responsibility for care, is looking at in the Department, to ensure better outcomes from the money being put into the system.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in praising the foresight, dedication and hard work of the staff and management of Luton and Dunstable, which was the first hospital to bring in A&E streaming and now regularly and comfortably achieves the 95% target? Does he agree that we need to be better at moving best practice in the NHS around the whole system more quickly?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What he points to is the variance in performance between some of the best trusts, such as Luton and Dunstable, and other trusts. One of the key challenges is how we ensure that that best practice is better socialised across the NHS, because unlike Labour we recognise that it is not just about how much money we put into the NHS; it is what we get out for that money. Luton and Dunstable illustrates that point, and more trusts need to follow suit.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): North Tees Hospital staff are doing a great job of dealing with the winter crisis, but even they have been struggling this year. The trust says it is going to record its first ever deficit, because it cannot make the £18 million cuts demanded by the Government. Is the answer really to deprive it of more money or to have it set up a wholly owned subsidiary company to cut the terms and conditions of future staff?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman’s trust has received an additional £1.6 million, so it is simply factually incorrect to say that its budget has been cut.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I thank my hon. Friend the hospitals Minister for the extra £2.6 million given to Kettering General Hospital to help it to cope with winter pressures this year; and, through him, my I congratulate the NHS on this year undertaking the most comprehensive flu vaccination programme in Europe and the largest in this country’s history?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner for his constituency, and he is absolutely right to highlight both the progress made and the importance of the prevention offered through the increased number of vaccinations. I hope many more people next year will continue to take up the vaccination, including Members of this House.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the Minister not realise that 14,000 beds have been taken out of the national health service on this Government’s watch? People are now being treated in ambulances, which is a disgrace. Is he not taking us back to the Major Government of the 1990s, when people were sleeping on trolleys?

Stephen Barclay: Again, the hon. Gentleman is ignoring the increase in the number of doctors. There are now 14,900 more doctors and 14,200 more nurses in the system. As I alluded to earlier, it is not just the number of beds; it is also how we manage those beds. It is how we manage the fact that 5% of the patient population is occupying 43% of beds that will best address bed occupancy rates.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the extra investment in Essex and Harlow in terms of the winter crisis in the national health service, and I very much hope we get a 10-year plan, as suggested by the Secretary of State. Is my hon. Friend aware of the difficulties that Harlow Hospital faces, in that we have among the highest A&E figures per head in England and a hospital that is literally falling down and not fit for purpose, as recognised by the Department? Will he visit the hospital to see what can be done to help us in our campaign for a brand-new hospital for Harlow?
Stephen Barclay: As my right hon. Friend knows, the challenge at Harlow is recognised by the Department. That is why, from memory, its outline business case has been approved and it is now going through the next phase in terms of getting the final business case approved. I am very happy, as always, to discuss the progress of Harlow with my right hon. Friend.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Before the Minister seeks to deflect my question by telling me how much extra my trust has got—his Parliamentary Private Secretary is diligently looking that up at this moment—let me tell him that I am aware of how much we received: £1.1 million. However, I can also tell him that winter cost us £11 million, so there is still a £10 million cost to our trust budget.

However, there is a double hit, because my hospital will be hit by fines as a result of missing A&E targets and handling targets for ambulances, with £120 per missed four-hour target, £1,000 per missed 12-hour target and £200 for each ambulance affected. Will the Minister make sure that those fines are not levied by clinical commissioning groups, and that that money stays where it is needed, which is in frontline care?

Stephen Barclay: Again, the hon. Gentleman is ignoring the huge number of measures that have been put in place. As Sir Bruce Keogh himself recognised, there was much more planning this year at a much earlier stage. We have had better integration between NHS England and NHS Improvement. We have had a much more comprehensive planning cycle. We have had better access to primary care, reducing pressure on the front door. We have had stronger action on delayed discharges, addressing issues at the back door. We have had changes to the way ambulance services respond to calls, so there is better prioritisation. We have also had financial incentives focused on A&E performance, so there is a huge range of measures, in addition, as I said earlier, to 1 million more people being vaccinated against flu. Those are all part of the actions taken by this Government to prepare and people being vaccinated against flu. Those are all part of the actions taken by this Government to prepare and

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We all knew this was going to be a difficult winter for the NHS, but I just wondered whether the Minister felt that his Department had helped the situation by delaying the announcement of additional funds until the November Budget, with most trusts not receiving that money until December. That meant that my trust, for example, had to make plans without knowing whether it would get additional funding and that it was taking a risk.

Stephen Barclay: The Labour party seems to have moved from complaining about the amount of money to complaining that it was not delivered early enough. The hon. Lady’s trust received £3.4 million of additional money, but, as Sir Bruce Keogh has made clear, the point is that preparation for winter this year began much earlier than normal and was far better advanced than has been the case before. That is what the medical director of the NHS has said about how we prepared for winter this year.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Could I reflect on the rather rosy picture that my colleague from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), painted of the NHS in Scotland? We have poor waiting times at A&Es, we are closing a paediatric ward in Paisley, and the chemotherapy unit at Station 15 in Ayr is under threat. Does the Minister think that having the highest tax base in the United Kingdom is a threat to recruitment in NHS Scotland, and that higher taxes in Scotland might play to the advantage of NHS England?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend points to a key point that I have made throughout this session. It is not just about how much money is put into the NHS, but about the outcomes that are delivered as a result. He is right to allude to the fact that in Scotland the SNP has not delivered the improvements it promised on the NHS. That is why there is so much dissatisfaction in Scotland with what is happening in the NHS there.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is not just integration that will solve the problems in the social care sector. In Trafford, social care providers are being promised £14.61 an hour from this April—well short of what we need to sustain the home care market. What will the Minister do to ensure that there is adequate funding for home care providers?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady raises a very valid point. It is exactly why we will have a Green Paper this summer looking at what steps need to be taken to address this issue. On both sides of the House, we recognise that more needs to be done on how we address these concerns, and that is what the Green Paper will tackle.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister did not mean to mislead the House regarding the impact of the flu epidemic on our A&Es, so will he confirm that the delays to people being treated in A&E, and the fact that people have been waiting on trolleys in corridors and that ambulances have been queuing at the doors of A&E, predate the flu epidemic?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman makes quite a serious allegation of my misleading the House. What I was very clear about is that there has been a 35% increase in attendances at A&E as a result of flu this year.
compared with last year, and that around 3,000 beds are currently occupied by patients with flu and around 700 beds are occupied by those with norovirus. Clearly, that has resulted in significant seasonal pressures this year, which have placed strain on the system. That was recognised by the Government in the additional funding that was put in place. It was recognised by the NHS, as Sir Bruce Keogh set out in the early planning that was undertaken, and it is simply wrong for the hon. Gentleman to ignore the impact of flu this year, given the way that in 2009 the then Opposition were very responsible in recognising its impact.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that accountable care organisations, accountable care services and place-based care are being rebranded as integrated care services? Will he explain whether there is actually any difference between those terms, and will he do all he can to ensure that Members in this House are given the opportunity to scrutinise them, as I believe that they are here to act as a Trojan horse to bring in the break-up and privatisation of the national health service?

Stephen Barclay: We continually hear this myth about privatisation. The reality is that this Government appointed to run NHS England, first, Sir David Nicholson, who had previously been appointed by the Labour party, and then Sir Simon Stevens, who has worked for both sides of the House. Numbers show that the level of private healthcare provision has not changed this year compared with last year, and that around 3,000 beds are occupied by those with norovirus. Clearly, that is not a test of the aluminium composite material cladding system that was widely reported and understood to have been present on Grenfell Tower, and it would be wrong to conflate the two.

In the meantime, we understand that Celotex is contacting all its customers who have used this material. We have published advice for building owners on the fire safety of cladding and insulation materials, including this type of insulation, and that advice still stands. As it makes clear, building owners should take professional advice on any further action they think might be necessary, reflecting their buildings’ particular circumstances. More broadly, we continue to expect building owners to progress any necessary remedial works and, where necessary, to implement interim fire safety measures to make sure that residents and their buildings are kept safe.

John Healey: The Government’s fire testing system is in chaos, yet the Minister offers no fresh advice, let alone fresh action, to deal with the problems. More than seven months on from the Grenfell Tower fire, only three out of 300 high-rise blocks confirmed to have unsafe cladding have had it removed or replaced, so thousands of families across the country are still living in homes that are not safe, and other privately owned blocks with the same suspect cladding have not even sent it for testing, despite the Government’s saying they should back in August.

On Friday, the Government’s test centre, the BRE, was asked to withdraw the 2014 safety test results that approved the insulation materials on Grenfell Tower. How many other residents are living in how many other high-rise blocks with that same insulation, which now has an invalid approval? Are any other BRE tests similarly flawed? In particular, is the Government’s own testing programme sound? The industry is now saying that Government-commissioned cladding and insulation tests used different standards from those in official guidance, with cavity barriers three times more fire-resistant. Is this the case? What does the Minister say to insurers
and landlords who tell residents that the Government’s tests are not sufficient to show they breach building regulations, despite what the Secretary of State has said, and that therefore they will pay no removal or replacement costs, leaving leaseholders liable to foot the full bill?

Seven months on from Grenfell, the national testing regime is in tatters. After this national disaster, people look to national leaders for action. Only Ministers can act to make sure that all high-rise buildings are tested, that all tests are sound and that all dangerous cladding or insulation is removed. When will the Government sort this out?

Dominic Raab: I am somewhat disappointed that from this case and the detailed specifications that need to be retested, the right hon. Gentleman has jumped to conflate a much wider range of issues relating to Grenfell. I think that he has done it deliberately, and it is not a responsible thing to do. [Interruption.] Let me now answer his questions directly—and perhaps the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) would like to listen rather than commenting without understanding the facts.

The right hon. Gentleman asks why there was no new advice. There is no new advice because the existing advice is sound. He said that there had been no action. I gave details of the very specific action that has been taken in relation to Celotex. Indeed, on first hearing of this, I ensured at director level in my Department that the managing director of Celotex was contacted. We understand how seriously the company takes the testing issue, and we understand that it will act as soon as reasonably possible to have the product retested. I know the right hon. Gentleman would not suggest that that should be done in a rushed way. We want it to be done correctly, properly and responsibly, so that we understand and can give the reassurances for which he fairly asked.

The right hon. Gentleman suggests that homes were not safe. He already knows that as part of the building safety programme, inspectors have identified 284 buildings with cladding that does not comply with the requirements in the regulation, and the fire service has visited every one of those buildings. There are interim measures in place, including measures relating to car parks and ensuring that fire wardens are present, so that we can confidently say that every home is safe.

The right hon. Gentleman asks why the renovations had not been conducted more quickly. We need to engage with construction services responsibly to ensure that the renovations are carried out correctly, accurately and in a way that can reassure tenants and the wider public, and that obviously cannot be done in a hurry. We have reviewed the advice regularly, and it remains sound. We are taking every action that is necessary, both in relation to this case—which was the pretext on which the right hon. Gentleman based the urgent question—and in relation to the sensitive and important wider issue of housing and cladding as it affects local authority and housing association tower blocks and those in the private sector. That is exactly what the public would expect.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. I welcome the Minister to his post. May I ask him how many local authorities have sought financial flexibilities to help with essential fire safety work, and whether he can confirm that no requests for such flexibilities have been turned down?

Dominic Raab: I have had personal conversations with local authorities that have been affected. We have made it clear that carrying out the necessary remedial works is the responsibility of the building owner, whatever sector it is in, but that when they need financial support or flexibility, they can come to us. As my hon. Friend suggests, we have not declined any such request.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister has accused the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) of conflating issues relating to Grenfell. If the Government wanted to keep the House informed and if they were on top of the situation, the Minister would have made a statement rather than having to rely on an urgent question. The Government promised to keep the House updated on all developments associated with Grenfell, and they have failed badly in that respect.

What steps have been taken to establish how many properties may be affected by the loss of a certificate for this product, and how many other products may be affected in the same way? What investigations will the Government undertake to determine how the wrong information could be supplied to BRE and how tests could have proceeded on the basis of that wrong information? How will the Government ensure in future that correct end-to-end processes—from start to finish—are followed properly and that safe materials are installed in buildings? Will the Government consider giving BRE a wider role, involving more than just carrying out fire tests? How will the fire testing regime feed into future design and product specification? There needs to be a circular procedure. Given that BRE and Celotex seem to be blaming each other, when will the Government get a grip and take a lead?

Dominic Raab: The reason why it is a conflation of the two issues is that the system that was tested in a way that has been found to have been flawed is not the same system that is widely understood to have been the one used in relation to Grenfell. We have no expectation or reason to believe that there is a fire safety issue as a result of this flawed testing, but the responsible thing to do is make sure it is retested as swiftly as possible: then we will know the facts and we can give advice. But if any building owner, let alone tenant, has any concern or question in relation to their property, the existing advice about how to get it tested as soon as possible and take interim measures to protect the property stands; that is the most important thing. There should be no suggestion in this House—or on either side—that those living in their homes are anything other than perfectly safe if they followed that important guidance.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Residents want to know that their safety is paramount, and they want clear information on what is a complex issue, so does my hon. Friend agree that it is irresponsible for others to draw a connection between the recent coverage about Celotex and the Government’s building safety programme? Does he agree that this must not distract from the vital work of making the buildings meet the required standards in London and across the country?
Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right. It is perfectly reasonable to ask questions about how the Celotex case happened, and in relation to the firm and BRE and the action we have taken, it is clear what needs to be done as soon as possible to get that retesting done, to make sure those questions are answered. The leap into the wider Grenfell issue is deeply sensitive, and a wholesale programme on that is under way to make sure, first, that the interim measures are taken, so that people are safe in their homes; secondly, that the renovations are made, so that we have the proper cladding and systems in place around those buildings; and thirdly, in relation to the wider review of building regulations undertaken by Dame Judith Hackitt, that we learn the wider lessons for building regulation. That is the responsible thing to do. My hon. Friend talked about leadership; we are providing it.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Why is the Minister refusing to take action to make the residents in social housing tower blocks safe by backing Labour’s pledge to set aside funding to retrofit sprinkler systems, social housing tower blocks safe by backing Labour’s Minister refusing to take action to make the residents in social housing tower blocks safe by backing Labour’s Minister refusing to take action to make the residents in social housing tower blocks safe by backing Labour’s Minister refusing to take action to make the residents in social housing tower blocks safe by backing Labour’s

Dominic Raab: We are taking the technical advice, we are making sure we have the interim measures in place and we are making sure that the renovations that need to be done to keep those tower blocks safe are done as soon as possible, although that takes time because that requires construction services that have to be contracted. We are making sure that all that work is done. As I have said in relation to the wider question of building regulation, the review conducted by Dame Judith Hackitt will make sure that all those lessons are learned. We have already had the interim report. We have accepted those recommendations and we look forward to the full report.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Decent people up and down the land will want to know that the Government, both centrally and locally, are doing all they can to ensure that people are safe in their homes. The Minister has set some of that out this afternoon. Does he agree that decent people up and down the land will not be expecting party political points scoring on this and people grubbing around for a vote or two?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right. As I said, I think it is perfectly reasonable to ask questions about the testing system and how we get it right. It is the leap into the other sensitive issues on which a range of concerted action has been taken that is wrong.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There are leaseholders living in blocks all over the country, including One Brewery Wharf and Quay One in my constituency, who, having discovered that their homes are covered in unsafe cladding, now face the prospect of having to pay for its replacement, and they are facing difficulties in remortgaging and selling their properties. Since the Secretary of State’s urging freeholders to do the decent thing and pay is not working, what are the Government now going to do to ensure that the recladding of those blocks takes place without the cost falling on leaseholders, who are entirely blameless in this matter?

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman has raised a number of points. First, he talked about cladding that might be unsafe. He did not specify which, but any concerns can be sent to the Building Research Establishment for sampling. We can get that checked in the right way. In relation to the issue between freeholders and leaseholders, we have been clear all along that it is for the owner of the property to conduct the required renovation and to bear the costs, wherever financial flexibility is required, they can come to us. We have not said no to one yet. Housing associations should go to the regulator. In relation to private sector landlords, we have made it very clear that we believe they should bear the cost. It will depend on the specific leases, and of course the legal question of whether costs are being reasonably handed over to tenants can be determined by the first-tier tribunal. That is a legal issue and we cannot interfere in that, but morally, we know that there are plenty of freeholders in the private sector who should be doing just as local authorities and housing associations are doing, and who should not be passing any unreasonable cost to leaseholders or tenants.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is interesting to contrast some of the comments made at the Opposition Dispatch Box today with the reactions of that individual to previous issues when he was a Minister. Will the Minister tell me what is being done to ensure that social housing tenants will be listened to in future? That is one of the big things that has come out of this. People put forward their concerns, but they were just not listened to, even by those who were supposed to be representing them.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes a broader point. We have two important strands of work under way to ensure that lessons are learned. The first relates to building regulations. We have had the interim report from the Hackitt review and we look forward to the full report. We are also conducting a series of workshops for social housing tenants across the country. We have held something like 100 events, and I have attended two of them, in Basingstoke and in relation to Grenfell. That is the right way to proceed. We must ensure that we listen to social tenants with an open mind and an open heart, and that we learn the lessons as we take forward our reform proposals.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister has said that no local authority has been refused assistance when it has asked for help to keep tenants safe. He did not specify which, but any concerns can be sent to the Building Research Establishment for sampling. We can get that checked in the right way. In relation to the issue between freeholders and leaseholders, we have been clear all along that it is for the owner of the property to conduct the required renovation and to bear the costs, wherever financial flexibility is required, they can come to us. We have not said no to one yet. Housing associations should go to the regulator. In relation to private sector landlords, we have made it very clear that we believe they should bear the cost. It will depend on the specific leases, and of course the legal question of whether costs are being reasonably handed over to tenants can be determined by the first-tier tribunal. That is a legal issue and we cannot interfere in that, but morally, we know that there are plenty of freeholders in the private sector who should be doing just as local authorities and housing associations are doing, and who should not be passing any unreasonable cost to leaseholders or tenants.

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman has raised a number of points. First, he talked about cladding that might be unsafe. He did not specify which, but any concerns can be sent to the Building Research Establishment for sampling. We can get that checked in the right way.
he would leave no stone unturned and take every precaution in relation to anyone living in a building with similar cladding. On 22 June, the Prime Minister said that every resource would be made available. Why is the Minister still “in conversation”?

Dominic Raab: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that using that kind of language on an issue that we are all trying to grapple with is quite irresponsible. We have offered the financial flexibility—[Interruption.] He can point his finger in a jabbing manner all he likes, but we are taking this forward as effectively as we can. Some of the technical issues cannot be addressed overnight. We need to get this right and not act in haste. We have made sure that the interim arrangements are in place so that no one sleeping in their home at night is unsafe. The wider renovations will take time to get right because this is a complex technical undertaking.

Bill Grant: The urgency following the events at Grenfell. I should like to compliment South Ayrshire Council, which retrofitted all its high-rise flats some 10 or 12 years ago. I take comfort from that. We are aware of Dame Judith Hackitt’s interim report. It is a good report; it is frank and open. Does the Minister intend to drive forward some of the recommendations that she has made, rather than waiting until the publication of the final report?

Surely there are things that we can do now and I ask him to identify which ones they are.

Dominic Raab: I congratulate my hon. Friend’s local authority on being on the front foot. We encourage all local authorities to do their best to ensure that they address such issues in the same way. As for the Hackitt review, we have accepted every single one of the interim recommendations. We obviously want to consider the final report carefully, but the swift action and decisiveness that he wants are already under way.

Ms Karen Buck: The fire risk is obviously the single most important issue, but there are others. Local authorities such as mine are in the process of removing cladding. In one estate alone, the removal, the fire watch and the replacement will cost £6.5 million. Will the Minister assure me that the confusion over the tests will not mean that any local authority, private provider or housing association will face a delay in the decision making on the replacement of cladding? If they do, will the Government ensure that any interim costs, such as to cover waking watch or damage to buildings from water penetration when cladding is removed, will be fully met by the Government?

Dominic Raab: There is absolutely no reason why the testing and retesting of Celotex should have any impact on the wider re-cladding exercise that is under way. I am happy to speak again with the hon. Lady’s local authority, just as we have with others, to ensure that we get things right.

Jack Dromey: The Government are guilty of inexcusable delay. Acting upon the advice of the West Midlands fire service, Birmingham City Council wants to carry out extensive works to 213 tower blocks containing 10,000 households. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said, the council has put specific proposals to the Government and has repeatedly asked for a reply—not one peep, not one penny. The Government are treating the city and worried tenants with utter contempt. When will there be a response so that the necessary works can start straightaway?

Dominic Raab: We are in constant dialogue, so the suggestion that the council has not heard a peep out of the Government is not accurate or responsible. I will chase up the hon. Gentleman’s specific question and ensure that we get a resolution as swiftly as possible. We are having detailed conversations. We often ask further questions of local authorities and they come back with the specifications. We then know how to get the issue resolved properly.

Mr Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that we have not taken the expert advice. We have consistently done that and have acted on it, but I am happy to look again at the material he mentioned. I have been involved in relation to the Citiscape case in Croydon and we have made it clear to the freeholder there, just as we have done everywhere else, that there is a moral case for avoiding any unreasonable costs to leaseholders or tenants. The leaseholders and tenants also of course have the option of going to the first-tier tribunal to settle an issue legally, and it would be wrong for Ministers to interfere in that process.

Clive Efford: The Minister has constantly referred to financial flexibility for local authorities, so does that mean an additional borrowing allowance? If so, does that come from the housing revenue account or the general fund, or are the Government going to fund it?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right that the flexibility relates to local authorities’ borrowing. Quite how that should be done will depend on the individual circumstances of particular local authorities, but we are willing to discuss that. As I mentioned earlier, we are yet to decline a request, so the support is there.

Matthew Pennycook: The New Capital Quay development in my constituency is just one of hundreds of private freehold developments...
across the country where cladding has failed and where the freeholder in question—Galliard Homes in this case—has washed its hands of all responsibility for interim fire safety measures and remedial works. Does the Minister agree that it cannot be right for leaseholders to pick up the full costs in such cases? Will he urgently set up a working party to consider the matter and give proper guidance as to who is liable under the law for the costs on such developments?

Dominic Raab: It is not just in relation to local authorities and housing associations that the freeholder is responsible for renovations; it is also the case for private landlords. The question of the allocation of responsibility for funding and financing the renovation is partly determined by the terms of the leasehold arrangement, but my understanding is that, as a matter of general law, a freeholder cannot pass unreasonable costs over to leaseholders. There is always recourse to the tribunal and we know plenty of leaseholders have taken such action. We have been very clear that, morally, such costs should not be passed on to leaseholders.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): At the last Housing, Communities and Local Government Question Time, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and I both asked about the review of technical documents. We did not get an answer. To be clear, we are talking not about the Hackitt review, which is doing some good work on the wider issue, but about individual types of cladding and what document B says. We cannot go ahead with the replacement of cladding—we may still put up partially combustible materials on those buildings. The review of technical documents has not yet started.

Dominic Raab: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about that, I will follow it up. There is detailed dialogue with any local authority that raises such issues. If he wants me to follow it up, he should write to me and I will be very happy to do so.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): How much have the Government spent so far on assisting local authorities and the private sector to deal with this situation? Let us have a figure, let us know how much money is available and let us stop this argument about negotiating to borrow so that local taxpayers have to pick up the tab.

Dominic Raab: The financial responsibility is different in all of those cases, but if the hon. Gentleman has an example of where he thinks that has been badly handled, like others, he should write to me and I will look into it personally.
no deal has been done on this railway, and I have not yet made a decision on the successor operator to run the east coast railway until the longer-term plans for the integration of track and train can begin in 2020. There is no question of anyone receiving a bail-out. Stagecoach will be held to all its contractual obligations in full. But, as the Brown review said five years ago, this is what we expect in a competitive franchise system: private businesses risk substantial amounts of their own capital, and if they fail to live up to their stretching targets, they lose out, not the taxpayer. For anyone who thinks that the nearly £200 million that Stagecoach will lose is insignificant, let me put it into context: the combined profit of every train operator in the country was only £271 million last year, and the loss equates to more than 20% of Stagecoach’s total market value. So this is a significant amount of money by any measure, and it should also act as a stark warning to any company tempted to overbid in future. Moreover, the franchising system has now been adjusted to deter further optimism when bidding.

The priority now is to ensure the continued smooth running of the east coast franchise for its passengers. I have therefore asked my officials to conduct a full appraisal of the options available to the Government to ensure continuity of service until we implement the east coast partnership on the route from 2020. My decision on which option to choose will be made in accordance with the key principles set out in the statement on how I use my rail franchising powers. These include: protecting the interests of passengers; preserving the interests of taxpayers by ensuring value for money; and supporting investment and improvement in the railway, including through the deployment of new inter-city express trains on the east coast line.

In order to inform this decision, the Department will assess the extent to which each option performs against those principles. Our value-for-money assessment will be based on a number of criteria, including which option returns most money to the taxpayer, the risks attached to each, and the value of any improvements in passenger services. I will also have regard to the effect of my decision on other franchises. The decision will be taken in a transparent way; the Department’s assessment of the option will be published and it will be properly validated.

At this stage, one of the options is to consider the possibility of Stagecoach continuing to operate services on the east coast line under a very strictly designed short-term arrangement. The current management has a strong record of customer service and to rule out its involvement now would go against the principles I have outlined. However, given the circumstances in which the Government are having to step in to protect passengers on this line, I am prepared to consider that option only on the basis that the franchise would be operated on a short-term, not-for-profit basis. The only acceptable financial reward for Stagecoach could be received at the end of the contract—and only in return for the delivery of clearly specified passenger benefits and improvements. The company cannot be allowed to continue to run this franchise and simply make a profit, given what has happened. It got its sums wrong, and it will pay the price for that, not the taxpayer.

The second alternative is for the east coast franchise to be directly operated by the Department for Transport through an operator of last resort. My Department will subject that option to the same rigorous assessment to establish whether it would deliver value for money for taxpayers and protect the interests of passengers. This option is very much on the table and will be selected if the assessment that I have set out determines that it offers a better deal for passengers and taxpayers than the alternative.

In either scenario, the east coast main line is expected to deliver substantial revenue to the taxpayer. The line will also continue to deliver premium payments to the Government once the east coast partnership is in place in 2020. So let me be clear that the east coast franchise will continue to offer and deliver a healthy operating profit for taxpayers. It has done so over the course of this franchise so far and it will do so in future.

There will be those who claim that because Stagecoach overbid, it should be excluded from bidding for future franchises. I have to be clear that the legal advice on this is clear. As the company is meeting its financial obligations to support the franchise, including with the full parent company’s support, and because it has operated services on the east coast line successfully, the Department has concluded that there are no adequate legal grounds to restrict it from bidding on current and future franchise competitions on this basis. Members will understand that it is my duty to follow legal advice, but let me be clear that we will keep its eligibility for current and future bids under close scrutiny and constant review.

It is vital that we continue to focus our attention on delivering benefits for passengers across the network and on securing the genuine benefits of privatisation, so in addition to the transparent, rigorous process for the east coast line that I have set out, I am making some additional franchising announcements that will deliver benefits to passengers on the west coast and east midlands routes. In December 2016, we set out our plans to award the west coast partnership—the franchise that will deliver the first High Speed 2 passenger services. In that announcement, we made clear our intention to agree a short direct award with the current incumbent to allow the time necessary to design the west coast partnership. The negotiations have been completed and we have agreed a direct award with the existing operator, Virgin Trains west coast.

Let me be absolutely clear that the east coast and west coast franchises should not be confused. As with the east coast franchise, the west coast operator is meeting all its financial obligations, but the west coast franchise has a completely different corporate structure, in which Virgin Trains is the majority shareholder. As was set out 14 months ago, the direct award is a sensible bridge between the existing contract and the west coast partnership. Once that partnership is ready, the direct award will cease to exist.

Virgin has transformed the west coast franchise from a poorly performing service that required a subsidy of more than £75 million a year into a franchise that has one of the highest passenger satisfaction rates, at 91%, and which returns more than £200 million per year to the taxpayer. The transformation has included: the introduction of trains every 20 minutes between London and Manchester and between London and Birmingham, and hourly services between London and Scotland; the installation of wi-fi on every train; the lengthening of the Pendolinos to 11 carriages to accommodate growing passenger numbers; and the introduction of free at-seat entertainment services.
My decision is in keeping with the three key principles that I set out earlier: protecting passengers, ensuring value for money and supporting investment. I look forward to the release of the invitation to tender for the west coast partnership in due course and am confident that we will see strong competition for this exciting new franchise, which will help to transform rail travel in this country through to and including the delivery of the first HS2 services.

In the coming years, we will also transform the east midlands franchise, with the biggest investment in the midland main line since it was completed in 1870. Passengers will benefit from more seats, new trains and dramatically reduced journey times from Nottingham and Sheffield to London. Once the work is complete, there will be almost twice as many seats into London St Pancras during the peak compared with today.

The next operator will be required to deliver many of the improvements, so I shall set out today the next step of the competition that will award the contract. Abellio, Arriva, Stagecoach—the incumbent—and a joint venture between First and Trenitalia have all been shortlisted to run the east midlands franchise that will deliver improved services. As I have said, the Government have no adequate legal grounds to restrict Stagecoach from bidding, but the completion will be run on a fair and transparent basis, with new safeguards against over-bidding. Ultimately, the winner will be the firm that offers the best service to passengers and the best value to the taxpayer.

In a competitive market, franchises will sometimes fail. When that happens, my duty is to protect passengers and taxpayers, and to ensure continued investment in the railway. Stagecoach has paid the price for failure, as stipulated in its contract. Passengers on the east coast main line can be assured that services will continue as normal. The Government will undertake a transparent appraisal of the options available to ensure that passengers and taxpayers are protected.

I know that I will hear a lot about nationalising everything. It is worth remembering that, as we have heard today, renationalising our water companies would cost £90 billion. We have heard nothing about the cost of renationalising the railways—due to not just losing the private investment that is bringing in all those new trains, but the billions that would have to be spent to bring those trains back on to the public books. We remain committed to the success of a private railway. Over the past 20 years, passenger numbers have doubled. We have one of the safest railways in Europe, passenger and taxpayers are protected.

Today’s announcement is yet another monumental misjudgment to add to a growing list of miscalculations by this Secretary of State. It is increasingly clear that he does not care about taxpayers, rail passengers or the rail industry itself, but will do everything in his power to protect and support Virgin, Stagecoach and their ilk, and the failed franchise system.

Members on both sides of the House can be in no doubt: the bail-out culture at the Department for Transport is alive and well—it has never been better. Virgin-Stagecoach failed to deliver on its contract on the east coast route. No problem—the Government will step in and bail it out, kicking goodbye to the £2 billion that Virgin had previously agreed to pay. But, guess what? Let us just give both companies a new contract to run the west coast line as well.

Listening to the Secretary of State’s statement, I did not know whether to laugh or cry. His argument that a direct award to Virgin-Stagecoach for the west coast and east coast represents a good deal is truly laughable. The idea of more profits and less risk for those companies is an insult to Members and their constituents. What makes me want to weep is that he is giving yet more gifts to Richard Branson and Brian Souter. What is more, he is using our public money to fund his failure. Let us not forget that Virgin and Stagecoach are companies that extracted hundreds of millions of pounds in rigged compensation payments from taxpayers during the upgrade of the west coast main line between 2002 and 2006—£590 million to be precise. [Interruption.] Similar tactics are now being deployed on the east coast, as the companies blame Network Rail for their failure to deliver on their contract.

Virgin Group games the system in rail and Virgin games the system in health. It has done it before, and it is doing it again: Virgin Trains is a company that shakes the system down. The Secretary of State’s failure to stand up to Virgin and Stagecoach is a disgrace. He is supposed to protect the taxpayer interest, not to sacrifice it to Branson and Souter, yet he stands by this model. Companies are not bidding for franchises, which makes a mockery of competition, and his taxpayer bail-outs make a joke of train operating companies paying premiums to the Treasury. What does this Secretary of State do instead? He just gives train operating contracts without competition. Since 2012, there have been more contracts directly awarded than franchises let after competitions. Why? Because he is ideologically opposed to running the railways in the public sector. He just will not do it. He cannot do it, even when the clear majority of the public are in favour of bringing the railways into public ownership. His solution is more taxpayer support and ever higher fares for passengers.

The Secretary of State refused to answer my questions about these contracts in a debate in this House on 10 January. He does not do long-term thinking, only crisis management. Franchise failure should mean forfeit. If a private train company cannot deliver on the contract, it does not deserve the contract. That was what the Labour Government did in 2009 with the east coast line. This Government’s failure to grasp reality is costing passengers and taxpayers dear. That is why a Labour Government will bring in a railway for the people and businesses that it is intended to serve, and put a stop to this appalling, profiteering racket.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Secretary of State responds to the shadow Secretary of State, I must say to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who, in his usual fashion, yelled, “It’s a disgrace,” from a sedentary position, that this morning I conducted my weekly Skype session with school students from the Education Centre. They were students of the Herne Bay primary school, one of whom asked me, “Mr Speaker, is there a Member who is particularly cheeky in terms of loud and repeated heckling?” I said, “Well, seeing as you ask, there is a chap called Karl Turner, who is a very agreeable fellow, but he does tend to go from nought to 60 in about five seconds.” I proceeded to educate the pupils of that primary school class in the favoured expressions of the hon. Gentleman—“Shocking” and “It’s a disgrace”—and his ritual exhortation, which fortunately I have not heard today to a Minister, to wit “be’ave”, which he makes while conspicuously failing to do so himself.

Chris Grayling: As we were caught short by the speed of the urgent questions, I know that the hon. Gentleman did not have as much time as he might have wished to prepare, but I am not sure that he listened to a word I was saying. He talked about a bail-out culture, gifts and standing up to people, but I have just announced that we will terminate a contract and that we may bring the operation of this railway back into the system of operator of last resort, which is, if I recall correctly, what Labour did in 2009.

I intend to ensure that I do what offers the best value for the taxpayer and the best option for the passenger at a time when exciting things are happening on this railway. New trains arriving in the coming months will transform the journey for passengers on the route, and that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.

The hon. Gentleman talked about long-term thinking, which is precisely what the east coast partnership is about. It is about unifying track and train in a way that I believe the public of this country want, and people on the railway believe that this will lead to a more efficient railway. The more that we can reunite track and train in a way that is long overdue. In the next control period, there will be investment in different parts of the route in order to improve performance in places where it is desperately overdue. The future is promising for the passengers on this railway, as they will have a better travel experience in the months to come.
than the companies in the rest of the UK. For once, will he seriously consider the devolution of Network Rail to Scotland? That would save his Department money, take away some responsibility—given that it is a failing Department—and perhaps make up for a £600 million shortfall in maintenance monies allocated for the next control period in Scotland.

I have one final question. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] How is the Secretary of State’s new railcard system working? What funding has been put in place for it? Does the inflation-level rise he has agreed cover the new railcard?

Mr Speaker: I simply advise the hon. Gentleman, in all friendliness and candour, that he was only 43 seconds over his time.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It seemed longer.

Mr Speaker: I do not know how long it seemed to the right hon. Gentleman, who is usually quite a patient fellow. Not everybody, I am afraid, is as succinct as the right hon. Gentleman, who has developed it into an art form, but the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) must do better.

Chris Grayling: We are going to hear a lot today about the public versus private argument. What SNP Members, and indeed Labour Members, have not remembered is that if the investment has to come from the public sector, it competes with money for schools, hospitals and the armed forces. That means that, as happened in the days of British Rail, our rail network is starved of investment, and we saw the consequences. By contrast, the new trains that are shortly going to be arriving in Edinburgh Waverley and going up the east coast to Aberdeen are paid for by the private sector.

Andy McDonald: They are paid for by the customers!

Chris Grayling: Of course they are paid for by the customers. The private companies make the investment and they make the return on that investment because the passengers pay for fares. That is the way that business works. Perhaps Labour Members do not understand the way that business works. Customers buy something they want to buy. I am absolutely certain that customers want to travel in brand-new trains. That is long overdue on the east coast main line, where they have regularly failed to do so. However, there are clearly lessons to learn on this. That is why we have moved much more towards a quality basis for new franchises. I want an increased quality of service delivered to be the basis for the allocation of new franchises.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) asked about the west coast main line direct award. As I said, it will run for between one and two years. It will finish as soon as possible. I want this up and running. We are going to issue the ITT for the west coast partnership very shortly.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of staffing. The private sector—run east coast main line is today employing more people than it did in the public sector. As somebody who believes passionately that we need more customer service staff on the railway rather than fewer, I think that is a good thing.

The hon. Gentleman asked again about the devolution of Network Rail. I simply reiterate that I think that the SNP Government have quite enough to do without going beyond the devolution recommendations that we have put in place.

As regards the travelcard, it is being issued by the industry, which is moving ahead quickly with preparations for it.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The last time the Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box, I asked him about open-access rail and competing rail firms. He rightly waxed lyrical about the benefits to customers in terms of choice and value that open-access rail can produce. As he looks at the options for the east coast main line, will he consider, in addition to the two options he has laid out for the House, an open-access alternative so that we can get away from the state-led and potentially even nationalised set of alternatives that we are otherwise being pushed towards?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend feels very strongly about this. He is right about the benefits of open access. My view is that open access holds the existing operator’s feet to the customer service fire to make sure that it delivers. It would not be realistic to do this in timeframes available to me for making the change that we are going to need. However, I am very clear that the rules around the creation of the east coast partnership must and will leave room for open access.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The reason given for not providing residents of Grimsby and Cleethorpes on the east coast a direct service to London was the impact on Virgin’s profits. Will today’s announcement see any progress on a direct rail link line for my constituents, or perhaps a cut in the amount they are shelling out for their fares?

Chris Grayling: I very much hope and believe that we will be able to create opportunities for more direct services to east coast towns in the years ahead. There is no reason why this route cannot be used for further open access, if the Office of Rail Regulation judges that the capacity is there. It is very much down to the regulator to decide what is realistic and what is not. It is as much about whether it can be done logistically as anything to do with profitability. [ Interruption. ] The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) says, “Easy get-out.” There is only so much capacity available. I hope, however, that the investment going into the east coast main line during the next control period will free up additional train paths and additional capacity. Of course, when HS2 arrives it will create a complete step change for the east coast main line and allow for services to a whole range of new destinations.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): With Stagecoach remaining on the shortlist for the East Midlands franchise, which serves my constituents, will my right hon. Friend keep the bid under review and revisit the legal advice he has received over the coming months?

Chris Grayling: I will be immensely careful about both the legal position and what is right for the midland main line. We will take the bid that will deliver the best outcome for passengers, and we will do so in a way that fulfils the legal advice. I am not interested in a second-rate
solution for passengers. We will be providing much upgraded services and new trains, and the people who operate those new trains have to be the right ones.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware that I am very disappointed he did not inform me he was attending a well-publicised meeting in the centre of Huddersfield in my constituency on Friday? He had the opportunity to talk to me and some of my constituents about the deterioration of the east coast line over recent years and the fact that not only the east coast line but the network across the north of England is a very great concern for my constituents who use it to get to work.

Chris Grayling: Just to reiterate, I did make sure that my office contacted the hon. Gentleman’s office on Friday morning to tell them I was going later in the day to meet Conservative councillors ahead of the council elections—an event that I would not normally invite him to. I was particularly struck by how thoughtful the Conservative team in Huddersfield is about the potential transport improvements for that area. It was a very valuable set of discussions.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not in the middle of the statement.

Mr Sheerman: Is it not right that Members should be told of another Member visiting their constituency?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point. The Secretary of State says that the hon. Gentleman was notified and his office was informed. I must say, I think the spirit of the requirement is not always honoured. It is quite important that a genuinely conscientious effort is made to contact the Member concerned, but, to be fair, the Secretary of State did start by saying, “I informed his office.” That may or may not be entirely satisfactory, but we will have to leave it there for now, because notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman’s considerable perturbation about what he regards as late notification, other hon. Members are now waiting to ask their questions and will become very perturbed if they do not have the chance to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We will start with one that I feel sure, from experience and precedent, will be very brief. I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How good is Lord Adonis’s memory?

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is it not right that Members should be told of another Member visiting their constituency?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point. The Secretary of State says that the hon. Gentleman was notified and his office was informed. I must say, I think the spirit of the requirement is not always honoured. It is quite important that a genuinely conscientious effort is made to contact the Member concerned, but, to be fair, the Secretary of State did start by saying, “I informed his office.” That may or may not be entirely satisfactory, but we will have to leave it there for now, because notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman’s considerable perturbation about what he regards as late notification, other hon. Members are now waiting to ask their questions and will become very perturbed if they do not have the chance to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We will start with one that I feel sure, from experience and precedent, will be very brief. I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How good is Lord Adonis’s memory?

Chris Grayling: I am not a doctor, but I know that there is no record whatever of any ban on National Express continuing to bid for franchises after 2009. I am sure that the legal advice then was the legal advice I have now. Whatever one may say in public, the reality is that no legal constraint was placed on National Express from further bidding for franchises.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I think it is the Secretary of State who has the short memory, so I will remind him that this is the third time in 11 years that a private sector franchise on the east coast line has failed. Can he explain to the House why his Department prevented East Coast, a public company that ran the railway superbly for both passengers and the taxpayer, from bidding for this contract? Will he today commit to changing the rules so that public sector companies can bid for these franchises?

Chris Grayling: The key point to remember is that this is a franchise that has increased the number of services, increased the number of staff it employs, improved its passenger satisfaction rating and is providing a larger payment to the taxpayer, notwithstanding the troubles I have set out today. That, to me, suggests that it is getting something right. I want to be absolutely clear—Notwithstanding the sedentary comments, it is really important for me to pay tribute to the hard work of the staff who work on the east coast main line, who have done a good job in improving the quality of service for passengers. It is not their fault that their company got the financing of this wrong.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that every penny of the £165 million guarantee that was insisted on in the franchise agreement will be reclaimed by the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely, and indeed, that has already happened. I am absolutely clear that Virgin-Stagecoach will fulfil this contract to the letter.

Andy McDonald: What about the £2 billion?

Chris Grayling: The shadow Secretary of State has failed to understand what I keep saying, which is that this railway every year continues to generate a substantial contribution to the taxpayer, and that will continue right the way through until 2023 and beyond.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): May I ask the Transport Secretary for an update on station accessibility improvements? Hither Green in my constituency was due for a major upgrade in this control period, but that was kicked into the long grass by his predecessor. How much has been allocated for these improvement projects in the next control period, and will projects that were priorities last time around but lost out continue to be priorities?

Chris Grayling: There will be a continuation of the accessibility fund in the next control period. We have not decided exactly how much it will be, but I can give the hon. Lady an assurance that I will want to make sure that where commitments have been given in the past, we will seek to fulfil them in the next control period.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that privatisation has brought investment of £6.4 billion to our railways over the past 10 years, and that when awarding franchises both on the east coast main line and on the Cotswolds line—the GWR franchise, which is being consulted on at the moment—his guiding light will always be the quality of service provided to passengers?

Chris Grayling: This is now very much my approach. My view is that if the service is really good, revenues will follow. While it is absolutely essential that one seeks to achieve best value for the taxpayer in a bidding process, there is already a different balance between the amount
of money bid and quality, and the balance will continue to evolve towards quality. That is what matters to passengers, and what drives revenues.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If the Secretary of State were to make Stagecoach miscalculate, overbid and is now paying a £200 million price. Can anything more be done to avoid private sector companies overbidding and setting themselves up to fail, and can those lessons be learned in time for the east coast project, they will have them clawed back?

Chris Grayling: Given that the company has lost nearly £200 million over time and has, I believe, effectively wiped out all its profits from rail operations for the past four years, I would be extremely surprised if its management wanted to pay any bonuses at all. If they do, they will not be paid for by the taxpayer, but out of the company’s reserves, but I will be gobsmacked if they are paying bonuses on this at the moment.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the general tone of the Secretary of State’s statement, in particular the emphasis on Stagecoach taking the hit rather than the taxpayer. Can he tell me what lessons will be learned for the great western railway franchise from what has happened with the east coast franchise?

Chris Grayling: I am very clear that when the great western franchise is let, it has got to be based to a much greater degree on quality. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we are consulting on the possibility of having a separate south-western franchise. I am looking forward to hearing responses on that—I am open-minded about it—but I am clear that the next great western franchise has got to deliver better and more innovative services for people in the south-west. It is why, for example, we are now working with Great Western with a view to reintroducing a passenger service to Okehampton, which is something there is a clear opportunity for.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State was very casual in dismissing the comment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson). People who use the west coast main line feel that it is very expensive, because there is so little competition. During this period, when he has imposed a new contract, will he do to guarantee that there is value for money and that we will not simply see ticket prices go up, when they should be going down?

Chris Grayling: All I can say, again, is that this railway line is well used and has seen an increase in passenger growth and customer satisfaction—it is the highest-rated railway in the country. I never want to see fares go up, but pay rises happen each year and there are costs to meet. Therefore, I am not offering a cut in fares, but we will operate a tight regime around the franchise to make sure it is not abused.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I thank the Rail Minister for agreeing to meet the formidable Kettering rail users group this coming Wednesday in his office? They are going to bring with them constructive proposals for how the rail service to and from Kettering
might be improved. May I urge the Secretary of State to recognise that Kettering is the most northerly junction from London between the Corby-to-St Pancras service and the midland main line itself? Thus, Kettering's status during the next franchise should be enhanced.

Chris Grayling: Both my hon. Friend and the Kettering rail users group are powerful advocates for Kettering. I am sure they will be pleased by the investment going in. I was on the line the other day, and I could see all the engineering work taking place north and south of Kettering. There will be much better train links into London and, importantly, far more seats at peak times from Kettering, and we will be looking carefully at how we can ensure that passengers from Kettering have the best possible experience.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): With the collapse of this contract and the collapse of Carillion recently, is this not a moment for us to be clear with the public that we are learning the lessons of these contracting exercises? People are coming in, overbidding or undercutting—or however one likes to put it—to kill off the competition and yet cannot afford to provide these public services. We need to be really clear with people that we have learnt the lessons and understand and that this will not happen going forward.

Chris Grayling: Actually, I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. We do need to learn the lessons—that is absolutely clear. That is one reason why we have shifted much more clearly towards a different risk-based approach on current franchises and why we are moving towards a greater element of quality on current franchises. It is worth saying that the winning bid for the new south-western railway franchise was not the highest bid; it was the highest-quality bid. That is important. We can never militate against corporate failure. What has happened with Carillion has been tragic, but we took a lot of precautions on the rail network and HS2 to make sure there was not a significant impact if the worst happened, which it did; but, yes, of course lessons have to be learned.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): While privatisation has certainly resulted in more investment in the network, it is also clear that the existing franchise system needs reform. At the moment, we have competition for gaining the franchise, but very little competition in the actual provision of rail services. If we are to have improvements to services such as the direct service to Grimsby and Cleethorpes, which has already been referred to, we need to look again at the franchise system. Does my right hon. Friend have any plans for longer term reform?

Chris Grayling: We are looking at the way the franchise system works to try to make sure it is as effective as possible for the future. However, as I discovered, things would like to do at a number of places on the network are constrained just by the limitations of what is there. My hon. Friend would be surprised by how often it is impossible to deliver a service improvement I would like to deliver, because, in the days of British Rail, a length of track was taken out, a station was closed or whatever. I would not want to go back to the days when services were being axed: I want to be part of a railway and a transport system that is actually expanding and growing, and that is our ambition.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): On passenger satisfaction, is the Secretary of State aware that, this morning, every service on the east coast main line from my constituency to London was either delayed or cancelled? There is no competition on the line, and this is the third time the franchise has failed. Does he not understand that passengers and staff on the line just want certainty, and that is why they are keen on having a public sector body managing the franchise?

Chris Grayling: I do not know for certain the cause of this morning’s incident—

Jenny Chapman: Signalling.

Chris Grayling: Of course, signalling is the responsibility of the public sector Network Rail, so there is a gentle suggestion that the hon. Lady’s proposal may not be the all-encompassing panacea. What our signalling needs is what we are giving it, which is £20 billion of investment over the next four years to renew infrastructure that is old and, in many places, worn out. We are still dealing with the years of under-investment before this Government took office.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Mr David Linden.

David Linden: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You are far too kind.

The Secretary of State spoke in his statement about protecting the interests of passengers and taxpayers. When will he look at the example being taken forward in Scotland, where Scottish Government Minister Humza Yousaf has said he is minded to accept a public sector bid to run the railways? What is the Secretary of State’s objection to that? Is it ideology or just an obsession with corporate recklessness?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, my ideology is very straightforward: I want more investment in the railways, I want more trains and I want newer trains and new opportunities. Of course, the model the hon. Gentleman is articulating would mean less investment in the railways, because we would lose all the private investment in new trains, for example. I do not believe that that is what the public want.

Sir Edward Davey rose—

Mr Speaker: We shall now hear from a Kingston and Surbiton knight—Sir Edward Davey.

Sir Edward Davey: Thank you, Mr Speaker—that was a difficult choice for you.

The Secretary of State has today acted when a franchiser overpaid, hitting its shareholders. Will he commit to the House that when a franchiser under-delivers, hitting the passengers, he will also act?

Chris Grayling: If a company is systematically failing to deliver, yes. However, in many cases—indeed, I suspect I know precisely what the right hon. Gentleman is
talking about—the infrastructure is the problem, rather than the train company. I cannot blame one person for another person’s failings; what I can do is try to sort out the failings that lead to these problems in the first place. If we look at the Waterloo line, for example, where the problems last autumn were caused by a technical problem around the Waterloo works, which took about two months to get rid of, that is a good example of where Network Rail problems caused the issues. That is why we need that £20 billion investment in renewing those parts of the infrastructure that are too prone to fail.

5.53 pm

Nick Smith: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During business questions last Thursday, I asked the Leader of the House about the “eye-watering” interest rates charged by rent-to-own firms. In response, she said that the Financial Conduct Authority “has capped the interest rates that such companies are allowed to charge”—[Official Report, 1 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1002]. Unfortunately, no such cap has yet been placed on these interest rates. I thought that I would aid the Leader of the House by clarifying the point for the record.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman has achieved his objective. Moreover, he may feel gratified that the Leader of the House is in her place. She is under no obligation to say anything, but she is welcome to do so if she wishes.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me prior notice of his point of order. It was a genuine mistake on my part, for which I apologise to the House, and my officials will be setting the record straight.

Mr Speaker: I think that is fulsome. We are extremely grateful to the Leader of the House.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to receive your guidance. I have been seeking meetings with Transport Ministers regarding a possible Flockton bypass and the services delivered by TransPennine trains. I secured a meeting with the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) before the reshuffle, but the Department has been unable thus far to honour that commitment.

I learned that the Secretary of State was in Kirklees last Friday. I asked on a number of occasions via his office to meet him, but I was refused and told that he would meet only Conservative members and activists. Those members have since indicated on social media that they discussed the very two issues I wished to discuss with the Secretary of State. I now understand that members of the public were also present at those meetings—something for which there is photographic evidence.

I have sought to raise the issues I mentioned with the Secretary of State for months, as the MP elected by the constituency. Can you please advise whether Ministers in this House should be prepared to meet Members on issues relating to their constituencies?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me advance notice that she wished to raise this issue.

What I would say—and it is very commonplace for me to get points of order of this type—is that I understand her concern to achieve a meeting with Ministers on a matter which is of importance to her constituents. Clearly, she had that prior commitment. It is customary, but not to be guaranteed, that a commitment by a Minister will tend to be honoured by his or her successor. While I would hope that Ministers would be even-handed
in their response to Back-Bench Members on both sides of the House, I have nevertheless to say to the hon. Lady that it is not for me to tell Ministers whom they should meet; it is for an incoming Minister to decide whether to continue with a meeting arranged by his or her predecessor.

If a Minister goes to an area and is principally concerned to have what would be called a political meeting with members of his or her party, that may be exceptionally irritating to a Member who is not a member of that party, but it is not, of itself, illegitimate. There is no bar on Ministers undertaking party political activity alongside their ministerial duties.

All that said, I think that this place works best when there is a basic courtesy and respect from one Member to another. The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who was previously the serving Minister, has always struck me as a most courteous fellow, but, looking at the Treasury Bench, I have known the Secretary of State for at least two decades, and we have always enjoyed very cordial relations—he is a most courteous chap. As for the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), well, I think my cup runneth over—the hon. Gentleman is personable to a fault. I cannot understand why neither of them is willing to meet the hon. Lady—I would have thought that they would think it a most worthwhile enterprise.

Mr Speaker: If I may say so—it may not please everybody—that seems to me to be a reasonable compromise, because what the hon. Lady really wants is to meet the Secretary of State. She may be interested in what the Secretary of State has to say to her, but I think she is, in particular, extremely interested in what she has to say to him. If they get a meeting, it does not matter that it is not in Dewsbury or a neighbouring constituency; it is a meeting about the matters of substance, and that should be the source of much merriment for all concerned.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for not having given you prior notice, but pursuant to the comments that have just been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), you will recall that I raised a similar point of order last week about the Secretary of State attending my constituency, not giving me prior notice and then meeting Conservative colleagues. If it becomes a pattern of regular behaviour that a Minister on ministerial duties seeks to meet only Conservative councillors and fails to give proper notice, how might we remedy that in the House to prevent embarrassment for the Minister should he accidentally do that in the future?

Mr Speaker: Well, I suppose Members can keep raising tedious points of order about the matter, which may disincentivise Ministers from behaving in this way. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I am not defending it or saying that I think it particularly desirable, but I think this phenomenon of Ministers meeting only with members of their own party on a visit is what I would call “seasonal”. It tends to apply in the run-up to local and by-elections, so it may be that a meeting at another time of the year would be easier to arrange.

I think that we will probably have to leave it there. We seem to have excited a member of the public, who is standing in the Gallery. We normally discourage that, but I am very grateful to him. On the whole it is best not to stand in the Gallery, but nevertheless, sir, thank you for attending our proceedings. [Interruption.] Yes, maybe he was going to raise a point of order—I do not know. If we have exhausted the appetite for points of order at least for today, we shall proceed. I thank the Secretary of State and other colleagues.
Social Security

6.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider motion No. 2:

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Kit Malthouse: With the forbearance of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for any prior confusion, I move the motion. In my view, you will pleased to hear, Mr Speaker, the provisions in both orders are compatible with the European convention on human rights.

The draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018 is an entirely technical matter that we attend to each year in this House and I do not imagine that we will need to spend much time on it today. The statutory instrument provides for contracted-out defined benefit occupational pension schemes to increase members’ guaranteed minimum pensions that accrued between 1988 and 1997 by 3%.

I turn to the rates that are included in the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order. The Government continue to stand by their commitment to the triple lock guarantee, which means that, this year, the basic state pension and the full rate of the new state pension will go up by the increase in prices, at 3%, as outlined in the autumn Budget on 22 November last year. We will increase the pension credit standard minimum guarantee by more than the growth in earnings to match the cash increase in the basic state pension, and we will increase benefits to meet additional disability needs and carer benefits by 3% in line with prices.

The Government’s continuing commitment to the triple lock for the length of this Parliament means that the basic state pension rate for a single person will increase by £3.65 to £125.95 a week from April 2018. As a result, from April 2018, the full basic state pension will be £1,450 a year higher than it was in April 2010. We estimate that the basic state pension will be around 18.5% of average earnings—one of the highest levels relative to earnings for more than two decades.

In 2016, the Government introduced the new state pension for people reaching their state pension age from 6 April 2016 onwards, with the aim of making it clearer to people at a much younger age how much they are likely to get and providing a solid base for their saving and retirement planning. We are committed to increasing the new state pension by the triple lock for the duration of this Parliament. As a result, the full rate of the new state pension will increase by 3% this year, meaning that, from April 2018, the full rate of the new state pension will increase by £4.80 to £164.35 a week—around 24.2% of average earnings.

The benefits of the triple lock uprating will also be passed on to the poorest pensioners through an increase in the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit to match the cash rise in the basic state pension. That will be paid for through an increase in the savings credit threshold. To match the cash increase in the basic state pension, the standard minimum guarantee will rise by 2.29%, which exceeds growth in earnings of 2.2%. That will mean that, from April 2018, the single person threshold of this safety net benefit will rise by £3.65 a week, to £163.

On the additional state pension, this year, state earnings-related pension schemes will rise in line with prices by 3%. Protected payments in the new state pension will be increased in the same manner. Consistent Government support for pensions has seen the percentage of pensioners living in poverty fall dramatically in the past few decades; it is now standing close to the lowest rate since comparable records began.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister will know that state pension is deducted from pension credit, leaving those pensioners no better off than if they had not contributed to qualify for a state pension. Because state pension is also taxable if other income is brought into the household, the pensioner may have both to pay tax on it and to see it deducted from their pension credit. Therefore, they could be worse off than if they had not contributed to qualify for a state pension. What are the Government doing to address that long-standing inequity?

Kit Malthouse: Significant measures have been taken by the Government to deal with pensions and, in particular, pensioner poverty over the last few years. We have seen that fall from something approaching 46% to around 16% in the last few years. One measure, in particular, that will have benefited many millions of pensioners is bringing the personal tax threshold. That has taken millions of people out of the tax system altogether and particularly those, such as pensioners, who are on a fixed income.

I turn to disability benefits. The Government will continue to ensure that carers, those who cannot work and those who have additional needs as a result of disability get the support that they need. We continue to follow the principle in our welfare reforms that more of the money should get to the people who need it most. That results in disability living allowance, attendance allowance, carer’s allowance, incapacity benefit and personal independence payment all rising by 3% in line with prices from April 2018. Disability-related and carer premiums paid with pension credit and working-age benefits will also increase by 3%, as will the employment and support allowance support group component and the limited capability for work and work-related activity element of universal credit.

All in all, the Government will spend an extra £4.2 billion in 2018-19 on uprating benefits and pension rates. With that spending, we are upholding our commitment to the country’s pensioners by maintaining the triple lock on their state pension, helping the poorest pensioners who count on pension credit, and providing support to disabled people and carers. I commend the orders to the House.

6.7 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I will focus initially on the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order and then move on to the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order.

The uprating order provides for the annual uprating of social security entitlements excluded from the Government’s freeze to levels of social security enacted in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. As we have heard, that includes attendance allowance, carer’s allowance,
disability living allowance, personal independence payment, industrial injuries disablement benefit, bereavement benefits, incapacity benefit and severe disablement allowance. This year, the Secretary of State proposes to uprate those limited social security entitlements by inflation under the consumer prices index measure, which currently stands at 3%, together with the new state pension in accordance with the triple lock, and pension credit.

We will not delay the measures to increase the new state pension and the adequacy of the social security provision provided by the uprating of payments in the order. However, although I welcome the upratings contained in the order, this needs to be seen in the context of the support that is not being provided or has not been uprated, as well as the Government’s wider approach to social security. The uprating order does not include child benefit, jobseeker’s allowance, employment and support allowance, income support, housing benefit, local housing allowance rates, child tax credit, working tax credit and the majority of comparable elements of universal credit.

The Government’s decision to limit the cap on uprating to 1% between 2013 and 2015 and the subsequent freeze on the vast majority of social security payments has seen low-income households suffer a significant deterioration in the adequacy of social security support. The freeze to payments and support is having an extremely detrimental impact upon millions of people on low incomes across the UK. Over the last year, inflation has more than doubled, hitting a five-year high of 3.1% in December 2017. It currently stands at 3%.

The payments subject to uprating were uprated by just 1% last year, with the vast majority of social security payments remaining frozen. To put that into context, research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that the price of essentials has risen three times faster than wages over the past 10 years. Food prices have increased by 4.1%, transport by 4.5% and clothing and footwear by 3%. People are suffering a continued increase in the cost of living, and that is being exacerbated by wage stagnation and the rise in insecure work caused by the Government’s inadequate economic policies. Last year, in-work families on the national living wage saw minimum costs rise faster than their net income because in-work payments were frozen and any rises in pay were clawed back by tax credit reductions. While millions of families are seeing their incomes fall in real terms, the wealth of the richest few continues to soar, with FTSE 250 bosses seeing their pay rise by 11% in the last two years alone.

Despite promises to tackle these burning injustices, the income gap between the richest and poorest in our society has almost doubled. Britain’s top bosses are paid, on average, 165 times more than a nurse, 140 times more than a teacher and 312 times more than a carer worker. Research from the Resolution Foundation shows that the poorest families will see their incomes drop by an average of 2% by 2021, while the richest fifth of households will see their wealth increase by 5%. It is clear that the Government’s cuts to social security support are pushing more and more people into poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has called on the Government to end the freeze on social security payments, as has the Child Poverty Action Group, which states that “the failure to uprate benefits in line with inflation is the single biggest driver behind child poverty”.

Following the 2015 summer Budget, the Government’s flagship universal credit programme saw cuts to the work allowance. That was on top of the scrapping of severe disability premiums, the imposition of the minimum income floor for the self-employed and the limiting of child tax credit support to the first two children. As a result of those cuts and the freeze, not only is universal credit failing to make work pay, but instead of reducing poverty it is actually exacerbating it.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend may also be aware of the difficulties people are having claiming the childcare element of universal credit—the bureaucratic burdens which are compounding the freezes and cuts she is talking about and which mean that families cannot get the childcare support they used to be able to fund relatively easily under the tax credit system.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are many different aspects to the Government’s still inadequate response on how they will fix universal credit. She has highlighted one, and we heard earlier in oral questions about the debacle of free school meals and how more children will be deprived of free school meals.

What is the Minister’s assessment of the impact of the social security uprating cap on poverty levels? Does he accept the Child Poverty Action Group’s analysis that 1 million more children will be pushed into poverty as a direct result of the cuts to universal credit? Does he accept the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s report on the cumulative impact on disabled people, which estimates that a disabled adult will have lost on average £2,500 a year since 2010?

Despite announcing a small amount of additional investment in the autumn Budget to prop up universal credit, in reality, the Chancellor has only reintroduced £1 for every £10 cut by his predecessor. Why are the Government choosing not to uprate social security payments in a way that reflects the economic reality for those in most need? I remind hon. Members that the Child Poverty Action Group estimates that cuts to universal credit will force 1 million additional children into poverty by 2020. The social security system should prevent people from getting into debt and poverty, not make things worse.

By continuing the freeze on social security payments not included in this order, the Government are subjecting 10.5 million households to an average cut of £450 a year up to 2020. The order was a chance for the Government to recognise the desperate reality for many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society, but they have failed to do so. As charities across the sector have been asking, will the Minister ensure the end of the freeze on other social security payments in next month’s Budget statement?

The order allows for discretionary upratings to be made by the Minister where he deems it necessary and appropriate. I want to be clear that we welcome the Minister’s decision to include a 3% uprating to the work allowance element of universal credit in the list of discretionary upratings in these measures, but the reality of people’s lives demands more. This again raises questions about the consistency of the Government’s argument to uprate some social security payments and not others. If he believes that the work allowance element of universal credit should
be uprated, as the Opposition do, will he explain why tax credits are not also being uprated by the same amount? Why the disparity?

The Government cut the work allowance element of universal credit in 2015, yet subsequently have recognised the need to uprate it through the discretionary element in the order—although not to a level that reflects the reality of the rising costs of living and previous cuts. Is that an admission that they were wrong to cut work allowances in 2015?

Moving on to the pensions element of this uprating, I welcome the uprating of the state pension via the triple lock. I am glad to see that has survived, given the Government’s indifference to it last year, but I want to put on record concerns about the public’s levels of understanding of the new single-tier pension and the paucity of information the Government have made available. As we know, there are both winners and losers as a result of the Government’s changes and most new pensioners will not receive the full single-tier pension. Before its introduction, it was estimated that only around 22% of women and half of men reaching state pension age would be entitled to the full single-tier pension. Will the Minister update the House on that?

In addition to the numerous social security payments subject to the Government’s benefits freeze and not uprated in this order, there are some very significant further omissions. Although the state pension is being uprated, people who have frozen pensions are excluded from the uprating and will not see an increase in their state pension in line with inflation. Pensioners living abroad face very different circumstances depending on whether their country of residence has a reciprocal agreement with the UK for the uprating of state pensions. Pensioners in countries without this arrangement see their pensions frozen at their initial retirement level, which means that the value of their pension falls in real terms every single year.

More than half a million people currently have their pensions frozen, mostly in Commonwealth countries such as India, Australia, Canada, parts of the Caribbean and New Zealand, and in countries with strong family and historical links to the UK such as Pakistan and parts of Africa. The Opposition believe that their pensions should be protected in the same way that the pensions of other UK citizens living abroad are in the future, yet the Government are choosing to withhold the pension uprating in this order from 550,000 recipients living outside the UK. This is a chance for the Government to make an historic change to our pension system and support our policy to end future arbitrary discrimination against some British pensioners living overseas by uprating in line with inflation from this point. Will the Minister look again at that issue and take action to address that inequality?

Not only have the Government failed to support pensioners living abroad; they have failed to address the current injustice faced by many millions of women born in the 1950s. It is important that the Government not only recognise the real injustice that women born in the 1950s have been dealt as a result of Government changes to pensions policy, but take action to remedy this injustice.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I agree totally with my hon. Friend. Millions of people living in this country have suffered discrimination because of the Government’s policies, particularly the women born in the early 1950s. The Government could do something about it and I can say this to them: as long as they refuse to do something about it, we will keep raising it.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend speaks strongly on behalf of his constituents and women born in the 1950s, given what they are going through, and long may he continue to do so.

There can be no doubt that women have borne the brunt of the Government’s cuts over the past seven years, but that applies particularly to women born in the 1950s, who have been dealt a real injustice through the accelerated increase in their state pension age. The Government have no excuse not to bring forward retirement for women born in the 1950s and early drawdown of their pension, as it is entirely cost-neutral. Alongside our proposals for the extension of pension credit, these additional measures would mean that people affected by the Government’s chaotic mismanagement of state pension equalisation would have the option to retire earlier, and would allow for much-needed financial support. The Government are in a position to implement proposals for early drawdown immediately, but they refuse to do so. I should be grateful if the Minister could explain exactly why that is.

Let me make it clear that the proposals are a “starter”. They do not in any way preclude further action, or even compensation, for this group of women. Will the Minister commit himself to reviewing the Government’s approach to pensions provision for women born in the 1950s, and will he release the original legal opinion contained in the “pink files”?

In the context that I have set out, a 3% uprating of some social security entitlements is unlikely to do much for those who are “just about managing”. As a matter of principle, the uprating should apply to all entitlements, not just the ones that the Government have cherry-picked. In the meantime, although we regret the limit on the groups who will benefit from the uprating, we must support the order, because otherwise those identified will lose out.

Let me now turn to the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018. We support the uprating of the guaranteed minimum pension in line with inflation, but we believe that some of the issues that were raised last year about the new state pension arrangements that came into effect in April 2016 remain unresolved.

The old state pension had two main components: a basic state pension; and a state earnings-related pension. People who made national insurance contributions at the full rate built up a basic state pension, but an option was created in 1978 enabled people to contract out into another pension scheme, either voluntarily or via their employer on their behalf, on the basis that the other scheme met certain criteria. Between 1978 and 1997, schemes that took on such new members were required to provide a “guaranteed minimum pension”. The guaranteed minimum pension system was discontinued by the then Government in 1997.

In 2016, the Government’s introduction of the new state pension ended contracting out by replacing the additional state pension with a single tier. Working-age people now have their existing state pension entitlement adjusted for previous periods of contracting out and
transferred to the new state pension scheme. For people who have guaranteed minimum pensions rights under an old pension scheme but who reached retirement age after April 2016, the Government no longer take account of inflation increases in guaranteed minimum pensions when uprating people’s new state pensions. The changes mean that any guaranteed minimum pensions accrued between 1978 and 1988 will not be uprated, and the scheme provider will uprate guaranteed minimum pensions built up between 1988 and 1997 only to a maximum of 3% each year.

When the National Audit Office investigated the impact of the changes, it concluded that there would be some winners and some losers under the new arrangements, depending on the time for which people were contracted into a scheme. Those whose state pensions have been pushed back because of the rise in state pension age will lose out on guaranteed minimum pensions inflation-linked increases that would have been received under the old rules. However, those who lose under the new rules may be able to build up additional entitlement to the state pension. The issue here is a lack of clear information, as is too often the case with the Government.

The NAO report stated:

“Some people are likely to lose out and they have not been able to find the information they need.”

Why did the Government fail to provide information that would enable people to make informed decisions? The NAO also said that it was “concerned that the Department has limited information about who is affected by the impact of pension reforms on Guaranteed Minimum Pensions.”

Will the Minister provide a much-needed update on the number of people who have been affected since the relevant legislation came into effect? What support is available to help people to understand the changes?

I hope that the Minister will address all the issues that I have raised in respect of both orders.

6.24 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be able to set out the Scottish National party’s position.

You will not be surprised, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I am rather critical this evening, because I have been speaking about the matters covered by the social security order since my election nearly three years ago. Like the annual review of social security payments, the order covers everything from pensions to maternity allowances, but for many people, there is no annual review, because a number of social security benefits are automatically frozen, regardless of the impact on people who need that support to get by, regardless of the rise in household costs, and regardless of widespread opposition to the continuation of the freeze. Jobseeker’s allowance, child and working tax credit, local housing allowance, income support, child benefit, and the work-related activity group element of employment and support allowance have all been frozen.

That means that people who are desperately seeking work, families with children, parents who are working hard but receiving poverty pay, and sick or disabled people will see their support frozen, although their household costs have risen significantly in the past year.

In December, the consumer prices index hit 3%, which means that families in and out of work who need the support of the social security system to get by will need to find extra money just to stand still. The Resolution Foundation has calculated that working families with two children will lose £315 a year as a result of the benefit freeze, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that as a result of higher CPI rates, benefit entitlements will be reduced by an average of £450 per year by 2019-20. We know that this is the worst decade for wage growth in 210 years, and that as a result people who are in work but also in receipt of social security support have had their chances cut off at both ends. As costs rise, they cannot rely on work or social security to help them to keep up.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Another issue—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will come to it—is that of the third child and the so-called rape clause. Nothing has been done about that.

Neil Gray: I entirely concur with the hon. Gentleman. He is right to draw attention to one of the Government’s most iniquitous and disgraceful policies. As he has said, no action has been forthcoming to address it.

The End Child Poverty coalition has said that it is because of the four-year benefit freeze that more than 50% of children in the UK’s poorest areas are growing up in poverty. Earlier today, at Question Time, the Minister defended the freeze, saying that overturning it would require primary legislation. I say, “Bring us that legislation and let us vote on it.” The evidence clearly shows the damage that is being done, and I would challenge any Government Back Bencher to vote for its continuation in the face of such evidence. It is time to end the freeze and lift children out of poverty.

Apart from anything else, the Government do not need to continue this, even by their own reasoning. Figures obtained by the SNP from the House of Commons Library show that while the four-year benefit freeze introduced by the Tory Government in April 2016 was intended to result in £3.5 billion of cuts by 2019-20, that figure could now be £5.2 billion owing to rising inflation. The decision not to uprate the bereavement support payment in line with inflation is completely unacceptable while the cost of funerals continues to rise at an incredible rate. What is worst is that the DWP’s own statistics show that 75% of recipients of the new combined payment who have children will be worse off, and that the figure rises to 88% for those who are bereaved with children and in work. The resignation of the entire board of the Social Mobility Commission in December should have been seen as the climax of the Government-driven poverty crisis, but today we see it being driven on.

There are some welcome elements in the order. I am glad that Ministers have used their discretion to uprate statutory sick pay, statutory maternity and paternity pay, adoption pay and statutory shared parental pay, all of which will rise by 3%. They may have done so in the light of a report from the European Committee of Social Rights. I quizzed Ministers about that report earlier, but they appeared to know little about what I was talking about. It states that social security provisions for the self-employed, the sick and the unemployed in the UK are “manifestly inadequate”. The UK is now “not in conformity” with a number of legal obligations in the European social charter, which is a legally binding economic and social counterpart of the European convention on human rights.
Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an impassioned speech and I respect his position on these matters, but it is worth asking this question: since 2016, the Scottish Government have had powers to top up reserved benefits—indeed, they have a wide range of powers in relation to welfare matters—so what do the SNP Government in Scotland intend to do in relation to those benefits?

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the new Scottish social security agency Bill is going through the Scottish Parliament so that we can bring in measures that allow us to make changes to how things are done down here. He will also be aware that we have put in place hundreds of millions of pounds of mitigation spending over the past few years, including to ensure that none of his constituents have to be impacted by the iniquitous bedroom tax.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Neil Gray: I think we have heard enough, and I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman wishes to, he can make a speech later.

The order will not do much to make up for the lack of conformity that the European Committee of Social Rights has highlighted, and that Ministers seem so clueless about. Its latest report follows the High Court ruling on the UK Government’s changes to personal independence payments, which said that the system “blatantly discriminates” against people with mental health problems, and a report from the UN saying that Tory benefit cuts “violate human rights”. This Government have another new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who has thankfully accepted the High Court ruling on PIP. Perhaps it is time for her to take a fresh look at all the other areas of international criticism as well.

On pensions, Ministers will not be surprised at my disappointment that another year has gone by without any action on frozen pensions or to sort out the state pension inequalities faced by women. Accompanying the order are regulations—they are brought forward annually under the negative procedure—ensuring that the state pension uprating will not apply to people entitled to the pension living in certain countries around the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochalsh (Ian Blackford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) have been pressing the Government on this matter since their election in 2015. It is an injustice that some people, who have earned the right to their pension like everyone else, have their payments frozen at the rate they first received for the rest of their life abroad. It is just not right that the pensions of those who live in some countries continue to rise while those of others are frozen. Some 550,000 British pensioners are affected, who represent 4% of all recipients of the state pension and half of all those drawing their pensions abroad.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about overseas pensions. I am sure he recalls—I think this was last year or the year before—that a number of representatives from different countries came to lobby us about this situation, which has been ongoing for a number of years. I am sure that we have all received many emails on the subject.

Neil Gray: We have indeed, and I am sure I have been copied into the same emails that the hon. Gentleman has received. It is wrong that people still face this glaring injustice, and the new DWP team must look at it again to ensure that there is action upon it.

The DWP must also finally act to rectify another pension injustice: that suffered by women born in the 1950s. The WASPI campaign has been the clearest, most persistent and compelling of the dozens we have seen before us in the last two and a half years. It is a scandal that the UK Government continue to refuse to address this issue, which is not going away.

I turn to the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018. Under the old state pension system, which was made up of the basic state pension and the state earnings-related pension scheme, people built up their basic element through national insurance contributions, but built up SERPS depending on their circumstances. Some people—doing so themselves, or because their employer did it—were contracted out of SERPS. Contracting out occurred because it allowed both parties—the individual and the employer—to pay reduced national insurance contributions. However, to ensure some standard was maintained, the employer had to guarantee that their company pension would match at least the SERPS the employee would have received if they had not been contracted out. That is the guaranteed minimum pension, or GMP.

The system ran for a number of years between the 1970s and 1990s, but was discontinued by the Labour Government, and now the new state pension works in a completely different way. Complicated rules apply to uprating, depending on when the pension was built up. We know that people will be impacted in different ways, but people who were extensively contracted out may just receive the basic state pension, and for some this might come as a shock.

Clearly this is an extremely complex matter and we know that people are struggling to understand their circumstances. Our main concern regarding the order is that the UK Government ensure that people are adequately informed of the impact of the new state pension on their own pension pots.

Not all those who were contracted out were made fully aware of the impact on their eventual pension pot. While it is good that a minimum guarantee is linked to CPI, there are adverse impacts for some people. We understand that the Government’s changes to the state pension mean that any GMPs that people have accrued between 1978 and 1988 will not be uprated, and that a maximum of 3% each year will be uprated for GMPs built up between 1988 and 1997. This applies to those who have retired after 6 April 2016. Whether or not people benefit depends on their circumstances, and some people will get less money than they expected. People who were contracted out were not necessarily aware of what that meant at the time, or did not necessarily understand its implications, and they certainly could not have anticipated that their retirement income would be impacted by such future changes as the Government have made to the state pension. For those without further savings to fall back on, like many of the WASPI women, this can mean a loss in income. The UK Government should have better communicated the impact of these changes for those who were contracted out.
All in all, what this points to is the urgent need to establish an independent pensions commission. The Government continue to ignore the needs of pensioners, as well as the looming pensions and savings crisis. We may well encounter in the future. The Government need to ensure that people’s retirement savings are on a sustainable footing so that future generations can plan for their future. The SNP has long called for the establishment of an independent pensions commission to ensure that employees’ savings are protected and that a more progressive approach to fairer savings is looked at as we move to a period in which defined benefit schemes are becoming a thing of the past and the new state pension begins to take effect. The need for that independent commission is greater than ever.

6.36 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): While I too am pleased that a number of benefits have been uprated in the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018, overall I am disappointed in it for the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). In too many cases, in failing to offer any uprating at all of certain benefits it serves to embed meanness in our social security system, particularly against the backdrop of rising prices that we have heard about.

We see a number of specific instances in this order where the Government simply say the benefit rate “remains unchanged”—or, in other words, is frozen—despite the rise in prices. We see that, for example, for income support, for jobseeker’s allowance and—I was shocked to see—for the bereavement support grant. We also know from my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth that the consequence of the freeze and other cuts will be a very significant rise in the number of children growing up in poverty.

The consequence will be huge hardship for families. We have already seen food bank use rise tenfold over the last decade, and it will increase further. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported that the lowest income households are already struggling with personal debt and paying the bills; their situation will simply worsen as a result of these frozen benefits.

I have to say that the decision to impose this freeze for a period of four years is, frankly, wicked. In a civilised society, our social security system is here to meet need, and there is no way the Government can assure this House that it will do so if prices continue to rise over that period while benefits remain frozen.

Contrary to what the Government appear to believe, meanness—a lack of generosity in the system—does not improve its legitimacy. Conversely, one thing that does improve the legitimacy of the system is recognising contribution, so it is depressing that the order misses the opportunity to improve a number of the contributory benefits that it covers. We are in the ridiculous situation where some contributory benefits are being reduced pound for pound from the equivalent means-tested benefit. While this is not a new problem, it is exacerbated by the introduction of universal credit. For example, income-based jobseeker’s allowance in universal credit is not taxable, but contributory-based JSA is deducted from universal credit pound for pound, and it is then taxed into the bargain, leaving the claimant worse off than a claimant who has not contributed. We see a similar situation with widowed parents allowance, which is based on the deceased partner’s contribution record. Because universal credit brings together a number of benefits in one single payment, deductions of contributory benefits can be taken not just from the equivalent income-based component of universal credit but from other help in universal credit such as payments towards housing costs or towards the cost of raising children.

As I say, this problem is not new, but in some respects it is being made worse, and I hope that the House will uniformly agree that to penalise people who have made a contribution in this way is not actually moral. Disregarding at least a proportion of contributory benefit for the purpose of calculating means-tested entitlement would be a powerful recognition that people should be rewarded, not penalised, for making a contribution. That is important for building confidence in the social security system. It is also a matter of simple justice. I find these orders disappointing at best, and in some respects downright cruel, perverse and unethical. I urge the Minister to make good on these defects, and to do so as a matter of urgency.

6.41 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a privilege to respond to the social security benefits uprating order on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. As the Minister knows, the Government have been obliged by law since 1992 to increase the value of certain disability benefits in line with inflation, and I am pleased to see that attendance allowance, carer’s allowance, disability living allowance and the personal independence payment will be going up by 3%. My colleague from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), also noted that the Government have recognised that they made a tremendous mistake over PIP for people with mental health issues, and I am glad that it is being increased by 3%. However, over the next few months while this absolute shambles is sorted out, I doubt that the many people on PIP who have mental health issues will appreciate that increase as much as they might have done if the Government had not been so foolhardy in the first place.

I value the fact that pension credit is going up by 2.2% and that the widows pension in industrial death benefit is increasing by 3%. To be fair, I also appreciate the fact that the Government have used their discretion to increase working-age benefits for disabled people in line with inflation, particularly around the support group component. As the Minister will be aware, people who are on support group employment and support allowance often have a profundity of disability which means that they cannot work, irrespective of the support they get. I welcome the fact that the Government have increased that by 3%.

It is always good to see the state pension triple lock. The last time I was here, we were in coalition, and I am delighted to see the Government continuing to implement Lib Dem policy by introducing an increase of 3% this year. However, I also want to flag up my disappointment, as other colleagues have done, that the Government have not used this opportunity to give some succour to the many women born in the 1950s and who are part of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. This would have been a good opportunity to send a
message that the Government are listening and are prepared to come up with something to save the frustration and anger of many millions of women across the country. As I have said before in the House, I believe that all the parties are culpable in this regard. The Conservatives originally brought in the changes through the Pensions Act 1995 without telling anyone. Labour did nothing for the 13 years it was in government, and then we had the coalition. As we are all culpable, I hope that we can work together to come up with the kind of transition payment that I profoundly believe the WASPI women deserve. I am disappointed that the Minister has not mentioned this today.

I shall move on to the elements that I am unhappy with. In accordance with the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, working-age benefits will be frozen until April 2020. I will not go through the whole list of benefits, but the consequences of this freeze will be absolutely deplorable. I shall give the House an example. The Child Poverty Action Group and the Resolution Foundation have identified that, from this year onwards and for the next four years, single parents stand to lose an average of £2,380 per annum. That is an enormous amount of money for anyone to lose from their annual budget. I am on a very good salary here—we all are—and I would notice if that amount were suddenly taken out of my salary. For single parents to have to suffer that over the next four years is absolutely wrong. I am very disappointed that the Government are continuing with this freeze despite all the evidence from robust, independent organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Resolution Foundation. As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) so eloquently said, the impact of the benefits freeze is simply cruel.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One of the consequences of this is that people have not been assisted with burials, because nobody ever looks at burial charges, and I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has noticed that the number of pauper burials is starting to increase in this country. Surely that is quite an indictment.

Stephen Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman might know that an additional aspect of the benefits freeze is that the bereavement support payment is frozen. That is just unacceptable, and I will also keep banging on about the cuts affecting single parents.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight how particularly unfair these freezes are to single parents. It is obviously extremely difficult for them, as the sole carer of their children, to increase their family income by increasing their working hours. Does he therefore agree that special attention should be paid to their needs in the benefit system?

Stephen Lloyd: I heartily agree with the hon. Lady. There are more than 2 million single parent families, which must involve many millions of children, and the effect on them will be devastating if the Government do not address this matter very quickly. If they leave it for another four years, I can barely comprehend the damage that it will do to many of those children.

I am also disappointed about the employment and support allowance work-related activity group benefit—the WRAG—which is for disabled people whom the DWP recognises as having the capacity to work but who need a certain amount of support in order to get back into work as a consequence of their disability. This is an area that I have been supporting for many years before I came into politics, because I totally share the view of many others in the Chamber that work is the best way out of poverty and the best way to boost self-respect. However, after the coalition—the Liberals would never have allowed this—the Government cut the WRAG payment by 30%. I see that that has not changed. In fact, the Government are looking at removing it completely.

I ask hon. Members to imagine that they have a disability, that they have been unemployed for six or seven years, and that they want to get back into work. They will be supported by their local Jobcentre Plus and by the DWP, but because they have been away from work for a long time, they might lack confidence. They will therefore be gently directed, guided, assisted and mentored into work. I now ask them to imagine what would happen if the DWP then said, “Oh, by the way, we are going to reduce your income by 30%.” What would that do to their self-confidence, and to their determination to stay in the work-related activity group? I can tell them that because human nature is what it is, more and more disabled people will try to move into the support group as a result of this cut, and that will cost the state more. This shows the Government’s complete lack of understanding of disability and of human nature. Bad move!

Turning to the work allowance, one of the first things that George Osborne, now editor of the Evening Standard, did after the Liberals were defenestrated in 2015 was to slash £3 billion per annum from the work allowance. When I was on the Work and Pensions Committee, along with the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston, I was so supportive of universal credit because, despite all its chunky bits, the work allowance meant that work really did pay. By removing £3 billion per annum since then, which will continue for the next four years, work no longer pays, which is completely counterproductive. The Government have kept all the worst elements of universal credit and have dumped the best element: the work allowance.

I pointed out in DWP questions earlier that universal credit is not working for the self-employed due to the minimum income floor. People who are self-employed may earn x amount of money one month and y the next—it could be less or more—but the way that universal credit is designed can mean that, at the end of 12 months, someone who is self-employed and earned £15,000 will have received less in benefits than someone who is employed and earns £15,000 or £20,000. The Conservative party, which always trumpets itself as the aspirational party, is specifically working against the self-employed, which is absolutely daft. As we know, the Government have abolished housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds, which is absolutely daft. As we know, the Government have abolished housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds, and housing benefit payments in the private rented sector have been frozen since 2016.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the cancelling of benefits for under-21s leads to a perverse incentive? If young people are in supported accommodation, it does not actually make any sense for them to leave and go back into ordinary rental housing, because they cannot afford it.

Stephen Lloyd: I thank the hon. Lady, who makes such a good point. Again, it is a false economy, because the situation just leads to more dysfunction and challenging
circumstances for families. It will prevent younger people becoming independent, and it will cost the state more money.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I want to return to the issue of single parents once again. I urge the Minister to take responsibility for his Government and to listen to these figures. There are more than 2 million single parents in this country, who will have x million children, and they stand to lose nearly £2,500 a year in benefits under the benefit freeze. Those people do not have a lot of money; they are just trying to bring up their children. The situation is unacceptable. I urge the Minister not to ignore that important issue when he responds and to say something that we can perhaps take back to those many hundreds of thousands of single parents.

6.53 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this relatively short but necessary debate. I was encouraged to see the words “social security” appear on the Order Paper for this debate today and to see them on the annunciator. Over the years, we have sadly moved away from talking about social security to talking about welfare and, latterly, to benefits. Tempting though it is, I will resist lambasting Members, particularly those on the Government Benches, for their use of words like “scroungers” or “skivers” and the divide-and-conquer mentality that we see from the Conservative party—[Interruption.] I see that I have woken them up. The title of today’s debate—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is chuntering from a sedentary position. Does he want to intervene? No, perhaps not. The title of today’s debate is a good reminder to us—

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: I am more than happy to.

Mark Pritchard: I am happy to intervene on the hon. Gentleman. Will he give the precise constituency of the Member who used the words that he suggests were used?

David Linden: It was the former Chancellor, so I think that it is Tatton. He now edits the Evening Standard, but it was not so long ago that Conservative Members were charging away behind him and saying how wonderful he was. [Interruption.] I will make some progress with my speech while Conservative Members chunter away.

I rise to express my profound disappointment at the UK Government’s continued obsession with the punitive benefit freeze. As a constituency MP, I am acutely aware that a clear majority of the people I speak to in my surgeries on a Friday do not choose to be on benefits. Circumstances largely dictate that. Broadly speaking, people end up receiving state support because they are disabled, sick or out of work. Contrary to what some right-wing newspapers print, being on benefits does not constitute a life of luxury. If people outside this House or Conservative Members genuinely believe that, they ought to go and study the Trussell Trust’s annual statistics, which show that the top three reasons people use foodbanks are changes or delays in benefits, low income at work and insecure employment. The charge for all three falls squarely at the door of this Tory Government.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: I am more than happy to give way.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He says with great assurance that everything lies at the door of this Government. However, the Scottish Government have had powers to adjust, top up or change things or to introduce new benefits since 2016. In fact, the Scottish Government have done none of those things. The only thing that they have done is make some changes to how universal credit can be changed. The Scottish National party has the power at its disposal in the Scottish Government to change the benefits package in Scotland, so why is it not doing it?

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his speech. He will perhaps want to have a glass of water after that. Scottish Conservative Members often come to the Chamber and act as Rottweilers and have a go at the Scottish Government. After a certain amount of time, Conservative Members will realise that they have been sent here from their constituencies to hold the United Kingdom Government to account. Until that happens, I am more than happy to debate with the hon. Gentleman about the powers that the Scottish Government have taken on.

Stephen Kerr rose—

David Linden: No, the hon. Gentleman can sit down for a wee minute. His remarks are disappointing, because we broadly see a good cross-party consensus in the Scottish Parliament, including from the Conservative party, about moving forward. The hon. Gentleman’s rather pathetic intervention is perhaps a bit of an insult to his colleagues in the Scottish Conservative and rape clause party.

As I have said, I am acutely aware as a constituency MP that people do not choose to be on benefits. We want a Government who are willing to stand up and build a country that works for everyone, but that cannot just exist on the side of buses. During the general election campaign, the Conservatives were talking about building a country that works for everyone, but if they are serious about that, it has to work for everyone. The people whom Conservative Members denigrate and have a go at might not vote for them, but the reality is that the Government need to give them more support.

I am conscious of the time, and I want to give the Minister the opportunity to respond to the debate, but I first want to place on the record my concern about the lack of support for the WASPI women. One of the first things that I did as an MP was to bring together many of the women in my constituency who have been unfairly affected by this Government’s attack on women born in the 1950s. In my remaining time, however, I want to issue a plea to the Government to halt the roll-out of universal credit in Glasgow, end the benefits freeze and scrap the medieval, barbaric two-child policy.

Before I entered this House, I worked for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss)—I am glad to see her here—and she has doggedly pursued the Government over their barbaric rape clause and medieval two-child policy.
Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend mentions the rape clause. Conservative Members asked him earlier about MPs who had said things that we would not accept were right, but the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) said that people should have vasectomies rather than children, because vasectomies are free. Does my hon. Friend agree that that sort of attitude—thinking that poor people are having hundreds of children just to scrounge off the state—is completely unacceptable?

David Linden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. That takes me quite nicely on to my next point, and the hon. Member for Stirling takes a keen interest in such matters, so I am sure that he will be concerned about this. Government policy is meant to go through a family test, so for the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) to start suggesting that poor people should have vasectomies is deeply worrying and provides a real insight into the mindset of a Tory MP.

Stephen Kerr: I have a simple question: does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Scottish Government now have power over things such as tax credits? The Scottish Government have not done anything with those powers since 2016. SNP MPs stand up here and give these virtue-signalling speeches about concern and compassion, but if they think that something needs to be fixed, the Scottish Government have the power to fix it.

David Linden: I am entertained by the fact that the hon. Gentleman has not sought to catch your eye to make a speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, but has instead decided to try to use my speech as an opportunity once again to attack the Scottish Government. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is not even listening, so I do not know whether he should continue to address the point, but Scottish Conservatives come to this House and use the opportunity to rail against the Scottish Government as much as possible, yet he has absolutely no clue that tax credits are not being devolved to the Scottish Government. If he had spent any time reading the order in the back of this debate, he would know that that is the case.

Despite widespread condemnation from every corner of the globe, including from the United Nations, Ministers have pursued a two-child policy that would frankly make China blush. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the two-child cap, which is tantamount to social engineering, will mean that some 600,000 three-child families will lose £2,500 a year on average—that is families in Stirling losing £2,500 a year because of this Government’s policy. That is not £2,500 a year on catalogues, gambling or lavish nights out; it is £2,500 a year that should go towards hot, nutritious meals for our communities, the only place that some children can get a hot, decent meal is at school. Only last week, MPs on both sides of the Chamber voted to spend billions of pounds on tarting up this royal palace so we can enjoy yet more luxury, yet tonight we are being asked by the Minister to support an order that will continue the benefit freeze for some of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: No, I will not give way at this point. Continuing the benefit freeze is fundamentally wrong, and it is time to call it out. It is time for an end to the punitive benefit freeze.

7.1 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I rise to focus on the pensions aspect of this debate. We would all agree it is the duty of the United Kingdom Government to make sure that pensioners fully understand the impact that pension changes will have on their retirement planning. This is, of course, an extremely complex matter, and we know that many people struggle to understand the impact that changes to their pensions will have on their pension pots. The movement from a basic state pension and a state earnings-related pension scheme—commonly known as SERPS—to a one-off calculation is far from straightforward, and it will have an impact on people’s ability to understand their pension pots. Indeed, some people who have been extensively contracted out will get just the basic state pension figure.

We have heard tonight from my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) that it is good that there will be a minimum guarantee linked to the consumer prices index, but there will also be some adverse impacts. We know, for example, that those who were contracted out were not necessarily aware and did not necessarily understand what it meant, and certainly could not and would not have anticipated that their future retirement income would be negatively affected by the Government’s changes to the state pension. Those without savings to fall back on, such as the WASPI women, are hit very hard. They face a significant loss of income and real hardship.

Many of us are tired of saying it, but I hope that the Minister is not tired of hearing it—he is hearing it, but he and his Government do not seem to be listening. The UK Government should have better communicated the impact of these changes on those who were contracted out. It is absolutely imperative that the UK Government make sure they adequately inform people of the impact of the new state pension on their pension pots, as they have a duty to do.

That is worth saying because, apart from Government Members, just about everyone agrees that the UK Government have completely failed in this duty with regard to WASPI women. Changes under the Pensions Act 1995 began to be made in 2010, but women were written to only from 2009. Many were simply not told, so they were completely unaware of the changes being made to their pensions. That is an appalling abdication of responsibility, and it shows complete disregard for the impact of such changes on the lives of those affected.

Many WASPI women were simply unaware of the changes, but the Government have not been listening. It is worth remembering that DWP research carried out in 2004 found that less than half the women surveyed were aware of the impact the changes would have on their state pension age, with awareness particularly low among those who would arguably be worst affected—women who were economically inactive.
In addition, the Pensions Commission said in 2005 that
"a policy of significant notice of any increase (e.g. at least 15 years)
should be possible".

In 2008, the Pensions Advisory Service also reported
low levels of knowledge about the state pension and
said that that “must be addressed” by the Government.
The warning signs were all there, despite how much the
UK Government insist that they did enough to inform
women of changes to their pension age.

This whole episode has undermined the social contract
that the state pension represents. If Members do not
believe that, perhaps it is worth spending five minutes
with a WASPI woman. With the impact of contracting
out, it is extremely important that the Government tell
the House what provisions are in place now, and have
previously been in place, to ensure that people are fully
informed of the impact on their pension pots. If some
people are unable to make ends meet due to lower
pension payments because of contracting out, the
Government need to explain what support and advice
will be made available to them.

The fact is that pensions are far too important to be
kicked about by Governments of different political
persuasions. Once again, as we have heard from my
hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts, we in
the SNP are asking for an independent pensions
commission, and we will continue to do so. Only then
can we properly address the needs of pensioners and
prepare for the looming pensions and savings crisis that
many fear will come to pass. I draw the Minister’s
attention to the spike in pensioner poverty, which shows
that many of those in the over-60 age bracket are being
failed by the Government.

Stephen Lloyd: Does the hon. Lady agree that perhaps
one way forward is for the parliamentary ombudsman
to look at what was clearly poor-quality communication,
from the 1995 Act onwards, and to make a ruling on
whether the communication was good enough? We
would then find out for sure what I think is true, which
is that there was poor communication. We rely on the
parliamentary ombudsman to give us that steer.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his
insight. That idea is worth pursuing, but, rather sadly, I
fear that the WASPI women now feel that the only
option left to them is a legal challenge in the courts. If
that is where the matter finds itself, that in itself is an
indictment of a Government who have let these women
down. Either way, the WASPI women are not going to
go away, and perhaps through the parliamentary
ombudsman and perhaps through the courts, this matter
is far from over.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that 300,000
more pensioners have been driven into poverty over the
past four years, which is the first sustained increase in
pensioner poverty for more than 20 years. That, on its
own, should give us pause for thought. /Interruption/
The Minister shakes his head, but he should take it up
with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which is a very
credible organisation.

There has been a sustained attack on pensioners, and
we saw that in the Government’s election campaign
with the attack on the triple lock and the threat of a
dementia tax. Thankfully those threats have receded,
because they cost the Government their majority, but the
matter requires the Government’s full attention. The
Government should reflect on the electoral consequences,
as well as the moral consequences, of these attacks.

According to the European Commission’s 2015 research,
the UK has a wider than average gender pensions gap.
We are trailing behind the rest of Europe on how we
work our pensioners, which is a matter the Government
should take seriously. After the WASPI fiasco, confidence
in pensions has been undermined at a time when we are
trying to encourage younger generations to plan for
their future. Those two situations do not sit side by side
very comfortably.

An independent pensions commission would ensure
that employees’ savings are protected and that a more
progressive approach to fairer savings is considered, as
we move towards a period when the new state pensions
take effect. An independent pensions commission is
needed more than ever. It is time for the Government to
consider it seriously in the long-term interest of pension
security, and I urge the Minister to do so.

7.9 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and
Strathspey) (SNP): I, too, commend my hon. Friend the
Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for covering
the issues so completely. He welcomed the changes that
are there to be welcomed, while making the criticisms
that are due. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow
East (David Linden) succinctly covered many of the
points I would normally make in a speech such as this
and, as we have just heard, my hon. Friend the Member
for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) covered
the pensions issues, particularly the treatment of the
WASPI women, a subject dear to my heart. Given that
that territory has been covered so completely, I wish to
concentrate on one aspect that we face from this measure:
the fact that most working-age benefits will now be
frozen in cash terms from 2015-16 to 2019-20 inclusive.

That continued freeze on social security, in the light of
the consumer prices index of 3%—

Stephen Kerr rose—

Drew Hendry: I will make some progress. That situation
means punishing costs for families, which are trapping
thousands of them, including the children, in poverty.
All they have to look forward to is the noose getting
tighter every year. The fall in the pound has led to food
prices rising at their fastest rate in four years, with an
increase of 4%. Meat prices have risen by nearly 4% and
vegetables have gone up in price by nearly 6%. Even
taking refuge in a cup of tea is more unaffordable, as
coffee, tea and cocoa prices soar—they are more than
8% higher. In these debates, we are talking about the
effect on families at their kitchen tables—about them
eating and about them making choices. When we are
going through the technical nature of these debates, we
would do well to reflect on that.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): The hon.
Gentleman used the words “all they have to look forward
to” and then went on to talk about benefits. Are benefits
not supposed to be temporary and about getting people
into work? Are these people not looking forward to
getting into work, which is what this Government are
getting them into and investing in?
Drew Hendry: This is clearly part of the problem: the understanding of people’s real lives. We are not just talking about people who are out of work; we are talking about a range of people, including those suffering in-work poverty. This all comes at—

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way unbidden. Let me ask him the same question. I do not dispute the sincerity or passion that SNP Members have on this issue, but since 2016 the Scottish Government have had powers to top up reserved benefits. So if SNP Members feel as passionately as they seem to, what are the SNP Government doing and end this policy and the dogmatic approach of the arguments made—not least as much of the order—

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have now heard in painstaking detail the grandiloquence of the hon. Member for Stirling on this point, where he has spectacularly failed, not once or twice, but thrice, to make the point—

Stephen Kerr: Answer the question.

Drew Hendry: Let me answer the hon. Gentleman’s question directly. In Scotland, tackling child poverty is at the heart of decision making. Scotland is now the only UK nation to have child poverty targets set out in law—the Tories scrapped such targets for the whole of the UK and we now know why. In Scotland, we have initiatives to see fairness delivered: the Poverty and Inequality Commission; a new £50 million fund to tackle child poverty; our use of the limited social security powers to support young families at key stages of—

Bill Grant: I am going to make some progress, as this question needs answering. We are using the limited social security powers to support young families at key stages of children’s lives with the best start grant. We are providing free childcare—up to 45%. We are providing free school meals for primary 1 to 3 and expanding all early years. We are mitigating the Tory bedroom tax and maintaining council tax benefit. And we have the Scottish welfare fund.

Patricia Gibson: Will my hon. Friend confirm something that may be of interest to Conservative Members? Is he telling me that the Scottish Government have put in all these measures to tackle child poverty in the face of a £2.6 billion cut over 10 years?

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes that point extraordinarily well; this comes against a background of having to backfill to deal with the poverty and misery caused by UK Tory policies. Lessons could be learned, but will they be? They should be, in order to provide justice, fairness and dignity. In order to achieve that—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No. In order to achieve that aim, the lessons must be seen to be learned. It is shameful that we have to fight policies such as the cap and freeze, given that children in Scotland and across the nations of the UK are condemned to poverty by them. The UK Government should wake up to the harm they are doing and end this policy and the dogmatic approach through austerity that is driving it.

7.18 pm

Kit Malthouse: This has been a lively debate—certainly more lively than it has been in the past. Doubtless many of the arguments made—not least as much of the debate was about what is not in the order rather than what is in it—were exactly the same as those made last year. Therefore, I do not propose to detain the House for too long. A number of Members raised a series of detailed points, which I will try to address in writing, if I may, should I fail to address them in my speech.
The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) raised a couple of issues I want to address. First, she asked when the Government will produce a cumulative impact assessment of all welfare reforms. The Treasury published a cumulative distributional analysis alongside the Budget, in November last year, showing the impacts on household income of tax, welfare and expenditure, so I would point her to that. She also asked about the new state pension communications, as did a number of other hon. Members. She will be pleased to know that, following the National Audit Office report last year, from which she quoted, the Department for Work and Pensions launched an online “Check your State Pension” service.

Debbie Abrahams rose—

Kit Malthouse: I will carry on. The service has had 7 million views since February 2016. Notwithstanding that, there is obviously more work to do on communications.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) asked why bereavement support payments have not been uprated. A bereavement support payment is not a cost-of-living benefit and is paid in addition to means-tested benefits to protect the least well off, so it is not necessary to uprate it in line with the cost of living. Unlike bereavement allowance and widowed parent’s allowance, bereavement support payment is paid in addition to other benefits to which the recipient is entitled, helping those on the lowest incomes the most. The hon. Gentleman will know that the up-front payment for those with children has been increased from £2,000 to £3,500.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: I will not; I do not really have time and the hon. Gentleman and his friends had plenty to say during the debate.

A wider point was raised by several Members that for me distils the difference between the Government and Opposition on this issue. There seems to be on the Opposition Benches a kind of Stockholm syndrome attachment to the old benefits system, despite the fact that it is obviously a fraud perpetrated on the poor, more often than not designed to keep them poor rather than to give them the tools and ladders to climb so that they can take control of their own lives and financial control of those of their families into the future. I understand and would never seek to doubt Opposition Members’ motivation to do the best by their constituents and the rest of the country, but for some reason they seem to think that that motivation applies only to them, rather than to Government Members as well. I reassure the House that the motivation of every Conservative Member of Parliament is the betterment and welfare of our fellow citizens, which is what the order is designed for. With that, it gives me great pleasure to commend the orders to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

PENSIONS

Resolved,
That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—

(Kit Malthouse.)

SMART METERS BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,
That the Order of 24 October 2017 (Smart Meters Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—

(Richard Harrington.)
Smart Meters Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

OWNERSHIP RESTRICTIONS TO SUCCESSOR LICENSEES

“(1) The Secretary of State may impose conditions on to the future DCC successor licensee as appropriate.

(2) Conditions in subsection (1) may include restrictions to British owned companies subject to the expiry of any contrary obligations under EU or retained EU law, as defined in the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018.”—(Dr Whitehead.)

This new clause would allow the Secretary of State to restrict future DCC successor licensees to British owned companies.

Brought up, and read the First time.

7.23 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Review: Use of powers to support technical development—

“(1) Within 12 months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State shall commission a review which shall consider how the extended use of powers provided for in section 1 will support the technical development of smart meters, with reference to—

(a) alternative solutions for Home Area Network connections where premises are not able to access the HAN using existing connection arrangements,

(b) hard to reach premises.

(2) The Secretary shall lay the report of the review in subsection (1) before each House of Parliament.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review how the extension of powers will support technical development of smart meters.

New clause 3—Review: Use of powers to support rollout of smart meters—

“(1) Within 12 months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State shall commission a review which shall consider how the extended use of powers provided for in section 1 will support the rollout of smart meters, with reference to—

(a) providing for efficient removal and disposal of old meters,

(b) reviewing the exemptions for smaller suppliers from a legally binding requirement to roll out smart meters.

(2) The Secretary of State shall lay the report of the review in subsection (1) before each House of Parliament.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review how the extension of powers supports the rollout of smart meters.

New clause 4—Review of smart meter rollout targets—

“(1) Within 3 months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State must prepare and publish a report and a cost benefit analysis relating to the Smart Meter Implementation programme and lay a copy of the report before Parliament.

(2) The report under subsection (1) shall consider—

(a) progress towards the 2020 completion target;

(b) smart meter installation cost;

(c) the number of meters operating in dummy mode;

(d) the overall cost to date of the DCC;

(e) the projected cost of the DCC; and

(f) such other matters as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish details about the cost and progress of the smart meter rollout with reference to the 2020 deadline.

New clause 5—Requirement on suppliers to provide information on cost of smart meter programme to consumers—

“(1) The Energy Act 2008 is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of section 88(3) (power to amend licence conditions etc: smart meters), insert—

‘(m) provision requiring the holder of a supply licence to include information with consumer bills on the cost to consumers of the Smart Meter Implementation Programme.’

This new clause would allow the Secretary of State by order to amend licence conditions so that energy suppliers are required to include the cost to the customer of the Smart Meter Programme in all customer energy bills for the period covered by the energy bill.

New clause 6—Smart Meter Implementation Programme: review of cost to consumers—

“(1) Within 3 months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State shall commission an independent review of the cost to the consumer of the Smart Meter Implementation Programme.

(2) The review under subsection (1) shall include—

(a) a breakdown of the costs to consumers of component parts of the Smart Meters Implementation Programme including the cost of the DCC;

(b) the potential benefits to consumers of information on the cost of the Smart Meter Implementation Programme being included on energy bills and statements;

(c) a longitudinal estimate of the cost to consumers to date and the projected future cost of the Programme; and

(d) such other matters as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a report of this review before both Houses of Parliament as soon as practicable after its completion.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the cost to the consumer of the Smart Meter Implementation Programme that must consider the potential benefits to consumers of including a summary of the cost on their energy bills and statements.

Amendment 2, in clause 1, page 1, line 12, at end insert—

“(c) in section 56FA(3) after “including” insert “the supply of such meters to energy companies” and”

This amendment would allow the Secretary of State by order to add“the supply of smart meters to energy companies” to the list of licensable activities.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 19, at end insert—

“(c) in section 41HA(3) after “including” insert “the supply of such meters to energy companies” and”

This amendment would allow the Secretary of State by order to add “the supplying of smart meters to energy companies” to the list of licensable activities.

Amendment 1, in clause 6, page 6, line 27, at end insert—

“(15) Prior to making modifications under this section the Secretary of State shall commission an independent evaluation on the potential impact the modifications available to the Secretary of State to secure funding of smcl administration could have on consumer energy prices and shall lay the report of the evaluation before each House of Parliament.”

This amendment would require that, before considering modifications to ensure funding of smcl administration, the Secretary of State must seek independent evaluation of the impact such modifications would have on consumer energy prices.
Dr Whitehead: As all the new clauses and amendments are grouped together, I intend to address them in turn. I promise that I will not say anything after this speech, but will instead make all my points in one go.

When the Bill went into Committee, it did two things. However, as the Minister himself agrees, an opportunity was taken in Committee to add to it what is effectively another small Bill, so it now does three things. First, it extends to 2023 the period during which the Secretary of State has powers over the roll-out to organise and command licensable activities. It does so in part because the end date for such control was set out in previous legislation as 2018. It is now apparent that the roll-out will go on until at least 2020 and, depending on progress, perhaps even later. It is therefore not only prudent to change the date but important, because as things stand the power over the roll-out will be lost halfway through its implementation.

Secondly, the Bill provides for the circumstances under which the functioning of the Data Communications Company, which has been set up to manage and co-ordinate all the communications necessary to make smart meters work—the data they are collecting and sending; and the communications within and around the home, and on a wider network—can be maintained in the event that that company goes into administration. That is important because the functioning of the DCC is central to the whole operation of the roll-out and what happens afterwards, and a hiatus in that function while any administration was being processed would be disastrous—so much so that we might question, as we did in Committee, why such a provision was not in the original legislation that set up the procedures for smart meter roll-out, and why it has taken several years of the DCC’s operation, albeit not live, to get around to implementing such a crucial measure.

Thirdly, the Bill now provides for arrangements to bring about the half-hourly settlement of domestic bills, which was hitherto not possible, but has been facilitated by the smart meter roll-out. We welcome this potentially enormous benefit of smart meters, in that it eliminates estimated bills and allows for accurate billing on the basis of what has been supplied each half hour, thereby allowing households to pitch their use at times of best value. The provisions inserted by the Government allow such a system to be organised and regulated.

Altogether, we have a set of proposals relating to the existing smart meter roll-out, which has been under way since 2016, that are uncontroversial in the main and, indeed, strengthen the fabric of the roll-out. The Opposition support the objectives of the smart meter roll-out and believe that smart meters will lead to considerable benefits, not only for billing and the use of energy by householders, but for the future operation of the whole system. We share the aim of ensuring that as many as possible of Britain’s 30 million households have a smart meter installed by the end of the roll-out target date, albeit on the clear understanding that this is a voluntary programme and that no one will have a smart meter forced on them if they do not want one to be installed.

Why, then, have we tabled the new clauses and amendments? I assure the House that it is not because we want to derail the roll-out process or to place obstacles in its path. Some real questions are emerging from the roll-out process, and our prime aim is to ensure that those questions are addressed, and that the roll-out takes account of them and their potential solutions.

I have identified six major questions that have appeared as the roll-out has progressed. First, what is the actual progress of the smart meter roll-out, and is it realistically on target to ensure that everyone who wants a smart meter can have one installed by the end of 2020?

Secondly, bearing in mind that the huge cost of installing smart meters now falls on the consumer, what assurances can we have that the cost-benefit ratio of the whole programme remains positive? How can the costs of the programme be properly managed so that it remains positive for consumers in the end?

Thirdly, why have millions of first generation SMETS—smart metering equipment technical specifications—meters been installed to date and virtually no SMETS 2 meters? SMETS 1 meters were supposed to be a small proving mode and SMETS 2 meters were supposed to be the backbone of the roll-out, originally from 2014 onwards.

Fourthly, why has the DCC taken so long to get up and running, and how much of an impediment to the full roll-out of smart meters will that prove to be? If the DCC does go into administration, for whatever reason, what guarantees are there that it will be subsequently owned by a body that has the security and integrity of the programme at its heart?

Fifthly, will everyone be covered by the communications network that is being put in place? Will people who live in blocks of flats, for example, have home-area networks that are fully able to reach them? Will those who live in remote areas enjoy the wide-area coverage that will enable their meters to work reliably?

Finally, what will happen to all the old meters, and indeed to a considerable number of SMETS 1 meters that will be replaced by SMETS 2 meters? Will they be recycled or reused in a suitable way?

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Does my hon. Friend accept that another problem—I have just had a response to a written question on this issue—is that when some people, particularly in rural areas, have a smart meter installed, their boilers are condemned because they are not compatible? There is no scheme or funding to help those people to put heating back into their houses. Does he agree that that is a significant problem?

Dr Whitehead: I agree that when that occurs, it is a problem, but I am not sure that it is just related to smart meters, so a combination of issues needs to be addressed. We need to ensure that such occurrences happen as little as possible and can be overcome.

Our new clauses and amendments seek to address the six questions that I have identified in the context of the Bill. By doing so, they would considerably strengthen the Bill. After all, as I am sure that all hon. Members will agree, it is important in such a large project that requires public confidence that questions are properly anticipated and addressed, and that assurances are given, otherwise we will have a roll-out that eventually rolls out to not many people, and that fails to achieve the aggregate coverage that will enable the sort of benefits that we would want from the roll-out as a whole.
7.30 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about public confidence. Is there not a danger that when people with SMETS 1 meters switch energy supplier and lose their smart meter’s smartness, they will lose their confidence in the whole programme?

Dr Whitehead: Like me, the hon. Gentleman sat through many of the evidence sessions during the Committee stage, so he will know that an advanced programme is in place to ensure that SMETS 1 meters are compatible and interoperable, and indeed can work online, to ensure that that problem does not occur. That is a recent development. I agree that if it turns out that many SMETS 1 meters become completely dumb, that might be a problem for the overall roll-out. Perhaps the Minister will have something to say about that later, because it is important that we get this right.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Following on from the previous intervention, does the hon. Gentleman believe that consumers’ concerns about their ability to switch energy suppliers smoothly to keep costs down, and about keeping the system going and keeping providers “on their toes”, are adequately addressed in the Bill, because some people say that they are not?

Dr Whitehead: I will come on to talk about how far more SMETS 1 meters have been installed than was ever intended, which was due to various reasons. The hon. Gentleman is certainly right that if a substantial number of installations eventually give rise to non-smooth transfers when people want to switch, that will be deleterious to the roll-out as a whole. Indeed, that is something that needs to be very carefully and urgently addressed so that we ensure that such switchovers can be as smooth as possible.

When we think about the roll-out, we do not need to look very far into the timescale to conclude that, whatever might be said about the numbers already installed, it is not going well. We are more than halfway through the period originally specified for the mass installation of smart meters, but we are far below halfway towards the target of installing smart meters in 30 million homes. In fact, the latest quarterly installation figures show that only 8.6 million domestic and non-domestic meters have been installed to date. That issue has been exacerbated by the transition from SMETS 1 to SMETS 2 meters. SMETS 1 meters were supposed to be essentially proving meters that would have very little role to play in the overall process. However, the DCC—the body required to set up and implement all the communications systems to allow meters to talk to the system—is now two and a half years behind in going live, and is still not really functioning as intended. Millions of SMETS 1 meters have therefore been installed to make up the gap before SMETS 2 meters can come on stream, and we are still in a precarious position with regard to the new meters, because end-to-end testing of them is still not really available. A programme that should by now have seen the installation of a few SMETS 1 meters and millions of SMETS 2 meters now has the opposite position. To be precise, when I asked the head of the DCC how many SMETS 2 meters had been installed, the figure he gave was 250.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Smethwick) (Lab): As I recall, that figure of 250 was given to the Committee by the DCC’s chief executive. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Department initially announced last week that it did not know the figure, but then admitted that it was 80, and that most of those meters actually belonged to company officers, not members of the public. Does that not suggest that this programme is woefully off track compared with what was planned?

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend gives a very important qualification to that figure of 250. I must admit that when I heard that figure from the head of the DCC, it struck me as being pretty shocking in its own right. It is interesting, to say the least, to hear that the 250 figure is on the optimistic side, and that the number that are actually on the wall and working—in the homes of friends and family, as my hon. Friend says—is only about a third of that figure.

The slippage is reflected in the latest cost-benefit analysis, which is from last year. It shows the cost-benefit gap narrowing, at least in part because of the SMETS 1 and 2 hiatus. The analysis indicated a high spike in proposed installations at the end of 2019, with some 15 million meters needing to be installed at that point. That is a substantial shift in the predicted curve of installations, and an enormous increase in the rate of installations since the time of the 2014 cost-benefit analysis. Sticking by the timetable under these circumstances becomes fairly heroic. Perhaps it can be done, but it is clearly a daunting task.

That is the context in which the change in the date for Government oversight is important—the process of changing the date by which licensable activities will have ceased from 2018 to 2023. Whether or not it was a wholly wise idea, the 2004 and 2008 Energy Acts and subsequent regulations specified a date for licensable activities to end, which means that as things stand at the moment, the Government will have no control over what goes on after 2018. Everybody knows that we will still be at a relatively early stage of the roll-out in 2018, so it is impossible to conceive that it would be wise to continue with the original timetable. We therefore support the idea of specifying a more satisfactory date in the statute book.

The Bill specifies a date of 2023, but that does not appear to coincide with the Government’s publicly stated ambition for the end of the roll-out. I say that with caution, because while their statements about the roll-out have changed over time, they have always revolved around the idea of ending it in 2020, and there has been a lot of talk from the Government about the installation of 53 million smart meters by then. Indeed, the frequently asked questions page of the Smart Energy GB website states:

“By the end of 2020, around 53 million smart meters will be fitted in over 30 million premises (households and businesses) across Wales, Scotland and England.”

That is also the basis on which Ofgem is working in terms of its licence enforcement. However, the Government have changed their position, as they now say that, by the end of 2020, 53 million customers “will have been offered a smart meter”.

That is a very different proposition. We could interpret that as 53 million people being offered a smart meter by 2020, but only 10 million having them installed,
although I assume that that is not what the Government mean. The statement might be meaningless or meaningful, depending on what happens before the end of 2020 and a variety of issues that will appear along the road. I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify those matters today. We surely cannot mean that the whole obligation for the roll-out would be discharged by doors being knocked on and someone saying something. If the smart meter installation programme is pursued on the basis of just making a desultory offer, the result will be way below the critical mass necessary for the overall aggregate data to work properly and lead to decent decisions. At that point, £11 billion or some such amount would have been wasted on nothing much.

The smart meter installation programme is voluntary. But, at the same time, we need a proportion—not 100%, but getting close to it—of smart meters installed in order to make the programme work by having worthwhile aggregated data. Some people have said that we need 70% of smart meters installed and others have said 80%; we need something to make the overall aggregated data significant. We clearly need to put a lot of effort into ensuring that the benefits of the programme are explained to the public.

The evidence suggests that the public overwhelmingly like smart meters when they are introduced and they want to have them in their homes. We therefore need to make a lot of effort over the given period to ensure that the two ends—the voluntary nature of the programme and the need for substantial roll-out—can be reconciled. What do we need to do that has perhaps not yet been done to ensure that the roll-out programme gets its output properly organised and smart meters installed? That is the purpose of new clause 4, which would require the Secretary of State to publish a report to keep us firmly on track. But, of course, much of the progress towards the target at the end of 2020 now depends on how SMETS 2 meters can be rolled out and how the DCC performs.

It was always necessary for the DCC to start its roll-out to enable smart meters that have been installed and those that will be installed to connect with it, and therefore to go live at the earliest possible date. However, the DCC systematically failed to go live when it should have done. It repeatedly announced delays and eventually went live in autumn last year under circumstances in which eyebrows were raised substantially by most of the industry. That was because it went live just before the point at which it would have faced penalties for not going live. It also only went live in part of the country and did not go live with some of its peripheral activities. Indeed, it is still having problems as far as its liveness is concerned. However, the DCC is not a stand-alone company. It was set up in order to run all these things and was then successfully auctioned out to a company that could drive it. And that successful bidder was Capita plc. As far as running the system is concerned, the DCC is effectively a subsidiary of Capita plc. The rest of the smart meter programme now crucially depends on this company. If we look at the timeline of what was supposed to have happened, we see that it presents a really sorry picture.

According to the joint industry level 1 plan, the start of the mass installation of SMETS 2 meters was supposed to be in October 2014, and the DCC was supposed to go live in December 2015. The then Secretary of State approved the DCC re-plan to go live on 1 April 2016, but received a contingency request from the DCC to delay going live until July 2016, and even then to split into core functionality and remaining functionality, which was not supposed to go live on the new date. A further contingency request was made by the DCC for a delay until August 2016, and there were even further contingency requests for delays. The DCC finally went live, in the way I have described, in October 2016. But it was actually only live for central and south England in November 2016 and went live for the north of the country later that month. The remaining functionality eventually went live, but not until 20 July 2017.

I looked at the plans that were put forward when the DCC went live, and they were accompanied by pages and pages of so-called workarounds—that is, things that did not really work. That is still a problem today. A lot of the industry is saying that the DCC is not really live to the extent that it had anticipated, which remains a considerable problem for the end-to-end testing of SMETS 2 meters. That is why, among other reasons, there are currently only 250 or 80 on the wall, depending on whose figures are right.

Stephen Kerr: Is it the hon. Gentleman’s understanding that the DCC is operating—not fully live—for only 80 SMETS 2 meter customers? The SMETS 1 meters do not connect to the DCC.

Dr Whitehead: That is the unfortunate truth, yes. The total number of SMETS 2 meters to which the DCC is connected is 80—or 250, for those who are a little more optimistic. That means that there is rather a long way to go to connect up the rest of the SMETS 2 meters, assuming that they can be end-to-end tested in order to get the right circumstances in the different parts of the country to allow the testing to take place.

7.45 pm

The Bill itself restricts legislation to the circumstances in which the DCC is rescued if it goes into administration. These are reasonable provisions, but they do not really address the current situation with the DCC and the sorry picture that it currently presents to us. The assumption behind the provisions is that the DCC might fail to carry out its functions because contributing bodies—that is, companies engaged in smart meter roll-out—might default on their obligations. But there are now surely two other scenarios in which the clauses in the Bill might need to be actioned: one if the company running the DCC decides to reorganise itself and walks away from the contract; and another if the company itself is unable to trade. Those scenarios are both unlikely, but they do need consideration.

I must say, for the record, that the Government might well have intervened regarding the contract on the DCC. My ideal way of running the DCC would be for it to be a public body, not responsible to a company. The formation of the DCC—maybe at a future date, should the circumstances be different—as a not-for-profit public interest body concerned with the proper administration of the whole smart meter arrangement, in the public interest and for the public good, would be the best way to organise things. That is not the position now, however, and it may not be for some time.
Amendment 1 would address some of those issues, as do new clause 5 and new clause 6, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). New clause 1 would deal with how one might align the public interest and public good with circumstances in which a successor company might be called on in the event of administration procedures. On this occasion, it would give the power to the Secretary of State, as it would give the Secretary of State discretion to look at the circumstances of a tender or a post-administration arrangement—presumably also by tender—in circumstances in which, for example, a non-GB company were to become the successor or putative successor company running the DCC.

Without entering into any great conspiracy theories, we have to have some regard for the ownership and running of an organisation that holds a huge amount of information about what we do, who we are and how we work. That is vital information concerning not just our activities but our aggregate activities. Ensuring that the company running the DCC is working appropriately in the national interest with that information and with that crucial role seems quite an important issue to consider. It would be prudent for the Secretary of State to have that power available to him or her so that we can put our affairs in order concerning what continues to be an unlikely, but not completely impossible, sequence of events. We ought to have it on our minds, however, in case these events occur. In that way, we can rescue not only the position of the administrator, but what the company subsequently does in the national interest as far as keeping control of all this data and running a smart meter programme are concerned.

It will also be important to know what the possible effect on bills will be in the event that the company went into administration. There might be circumstances in which the DCC goes into administration, is rescued in the manner suggested in the Bill, is put forward on a different basis and ends up being a net cost-benefit problem to the public. But apparently we do not know the likely cost in such circumstances or what the benefit might be, and we do not have any mechanism for appraising that against what else is in the cost-benefit analysis. Amendment 1 gives the Secretary of State a tool to do just that.

The DCC will also be crucial to the ability of the system properly to reach to everyone who wants a smart meter installed. The Minister himself accepts that it is by no means clear how we are going to be able to solve some of the problems of the home area network and the wide area network, known respectively as the HAN and the WAN. The home area network deals with the communications between the meter, the house and the immediate external data receiver. The wide area network relates to the extent to which data receivers can operate in certain areas where population is sparse or where there are geographical difficulties in getting coverage and so on. In those circumstances, the Government reported in the documents that went before the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee:

“Smart meters make use of a home area network to link the smart meter to consumer devices such as the in-house display or smart appliances. The technical solutions already being delivered currently apply to approximately 96.5% of premises. In some premises such as apartments in high-rise buildings where there is a long distance between the smart meter and the premises, these solutions are not viable.”

That means, basically, that a number of properties in cities and urban areas will not be able to receive home area networks in the way that we want them to. Also, a number of homes that are not in urban areas but in rural areas will not get any signal at all. We need to make sure that they can receive, on a wide area network basis, the signals that they need to make their smart meters work. The Department considers that “99% of premises in Great Britain are capable of being connected to the DCC through the wide area network.”

The alternative HAN forum is hard at work on trying to work out how to get smart meter signals into flats. I do not know whether there is an alternative WAN forum working out how to carry out wide area network reorganisation. The Department states:

“A different solution may be necessary to provide coverage to smart meters in the remaining hard to reach premises which the wide area network does not cover. It might be considered appropriate to create a licensable activity that relates to arranging the establishment of communications to these properties.”

The Department has in mind two licensable activities that may arise when those solutions are under way. As regards the wide area network, I understand that technical solutions such as patching—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, and I appreciate that he is dealing with some complex issues that require explanation, but it may have escaped his notice that he has been at the Dispatch Box for almost half an hour. He might not be aware, but I am, that there are other people who wish to take part in this debate, so he might like to consider bringing his remarks on this particular part of the Bill to a conclusion quite soon.

Dr Whitehead: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I accept that we are dealing with difficult and rather technical issues, and so I thought it was necessary to try to set out for the benefit of the House how these matters might work, but I will of course be very mindful of your guidance to try to make sure, within the restraints of not getting too over-simplified, that I do indeed bring my remarks to a close.

New clause 2, in essence, asks the Minister to consider a specific review to get these arrangements properly under way.

My final question concerns the meters that have been removed as a result of smart meter installation or will be removed because they are SMETS 1 meters replaced by fully interoperable SMETS 2 meters. This problem is not just theoretical; it is happening now. It has several aspects. What about malfunctioning and existing smart meters that are no longer installed and are now redundant? What about the huge number of existing meters that will be removed and need to be disposed of as smart meters are installed? Those meters are not owned by installers but by meter asset providers that finance and ultimately own the meters that are put in. It has been a long-standing arrangement in the industry that meters are not owned by the suppliers but merely read by the suppliers. That means that when a programme is pursued of removing old meters, whether dumb meters or previous generation smart meters, there is a problem in identifying whose meters they are.
The difficulty that we are facing right now—it is not a problem for the future—is that we might see meter mountains arising in this country because the people who are removing the meters do not know who their owners are or who is going to take them away and recycle and dispose of them. I do not want to see, as a result of this roll-out programme, meter mountains, or alps, appearing across the country. We need to be clear about what method of disposal is going to be the most appropriate and workable. If we are not careful, the issue will overwhelm the roll-out, or at least have a significant negative effect on its overall atmosphere. In Committee, the Minister, encouragingly, agreed to set up a roundtable to consider this issue further. New clause 3 now addresses the issue, and I hope that it will be a way of taking it forward.

I have dealt with a number of important questions that have arisen as the smart meter roll-out has progressed. I hope that the roll-out can proceed to a successful and timely conclusion, because that will be important for the future of our energy systems as well as for the future sustainability of people’s electricity and gas supplies, and their ownership of what their bills will look like in future. However, we should not shirk from addressing the real problems that stand in the way of realising that. It is not sufficient to state that all is for the best in the best of possible worlds, and proceed on that assumption. I know that the Minister is working hard to get this right, as are his team in BEIS. The addition of these amendments would give them greater authority and support in making the roll-out work.

**Stephen Kerr:** I compliment the Minister and the Opposition Front Benchers for the way in which I have witnessed, as a relatively new Member of Parliament, how a public Bill is progressed through the legislative process. I have learned from observing the Bill Committee that for legislation to have durability and solidity, it is vital that there is strong collaboration between those on both sides of the House. It is in all our interests to make sure that legislation is well constructed and well meaning.

I support the Bill on the basis of a considered view that the roll-out of smart meters is a vital national infrastructure project that will bring benefits to consumers and businesses and to the whole country. I am not entirely convinced that we have done a good enough job so far in selling the proposition to the whole country, and I have concerns about our readiness to meet the Government’s objective. In fact, in the evidence that we heard in Committee, very few of the people we spoke to seem to believe that at the current rate of progress it is possible to complete the roll-out of smart meters by the perceived target of 2020. I want to come back to the target in relation to new clause 4.

None of this sort of work is ever going to be easy, as was highlighted in the evidence that we heard in Committee, but the trick is not to make it harder for ourselves than it would be otherwise. How do we get the job done—the deployment of these smart meters into nearly 60 million premises—in the most cost-effective way? There are still questions that should be asked and considered. We should not lose sight of the total cost of the programme—northwards of at least £10 billion. I think that £1.3 billion has been spent, or is earmarked to be spent, on the DCC alone. We are talking about 50 million-plus—nearly 60 million—separate installations of smart meters.

I have a lot of sympathy for the amendments tabled by the Opposition, because they do tackle issues that are pertinent and relevant to the purposes of the Bill. However, I will not support them if they are pressed to a vote, because I very much hope that the Minister will be able to provide such reassurance that the issues raised will be covered off in some other way than by making changes to the Bill, so there will be no purpose in calling a vote. I am very confident that that will be the case, because that has been the spirit of the process so far.

8 pm

Smart meters facilitate a smart grid. A smart grid facilitates smart homes, smart businesses and smart communities. There are all kinds of benefits available to consumers from smart meters and the creation of a smart grid, and powerful environmental and conservation arguments stand up in favour of the smart grid. The Internet of things will facilitate smart appliances connected to a smart grid, and everything hinges on the flow of data. We are back then to the smart meter.

The most obvious and immediate advantage, which the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) referred to, is the end of estimated bills for those who have smart meters, with accurate meter readings that reflect real-time energy usage. I hope that that will mean there is more accuracy in the adjustments that should be made to monthly direct debits. While I appreciate the importance of spreading the cost of a year’s supply of energy across 12 monthly payments, there should be scope for greater accuracy, with more valid and true information available. The total cost of energy used will, I hope, then be more closely monitored, which should allow direct debits to reflect the true cost of the energy used in a person’s home.

**Steve McCabe:** Both the Government’s and Ofgem’s justification for the smart meter programme is that it is meant to save customers money. If we reach the stage where it is actually costing customers rather than saving them money, will the hon. Gentleman regard that as a failure of the programme?

**Stephen Kerr:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The purpose of the Bill, in facilitating the roll-out of smart meters, is to create a more energy-efficient economy, which should be reflected in cost savings for families, individuals and businesses. If that was not to be realised through the smart grid, that would be very disappointing.

There is so much in the future in terms of the changes we are seeing in the economy. I think of ultra-low emission vehicles, where there will be a necessity for smart meters and the smart grid for us to cope with the increased load on the grid. In response to the hon. Gentleman, I hope that somewhere in the not-too-distant future is the promise of an energy market that is more competitive and more responsive to its customers’ energy requirements.

Mass usage of ultra-low emission electric vehicles is inevitable. We will get to a tipping point with those vehicles, on account of the cost per unit, improvements in battery technology and the visible availability of the necessary infrastructure for charging at home and recharging away from home. All those things will create new demands on the grid, and all the flexibilities we will need to meet those demands depend on the smart grid and smart meters.
[Stephen Kerr]

Things such as new tariffs, variable tariffs and smart devices that can interact on the basis of the smart grid will all be a feature of the future.

However, there are things referenced in the new clauses and amendments that concern me. We heard evidence in the Public Bill Committee from Dr Richard Fitton of the University of Salford, who is responsible for a task group for the International Energy Agency on the use of smart meter data for determining the energy efficiency of properties. He made the point that for consumers to be fully engaged with smart meters, they need to be able to log on to the smart meter and connect it to smart devices in and around the home. He described the frustration that he and his team of experts have had in being able to make that connection happen. He said:

“a magic black box called the consumer access device...streams real-time data to things such as smart appliances and smart heating systems for homes.”—[Official Report, Smart Meters Public Bill Committee, 21 November 2017, c. 48, Q94.]

He went on to say that neither he nor any of his colleagues had ever been successful at connecting SMETS 2 meters to those devices. That is a concern, but it is not directly related to the amendments, so I will return to them.

There is evidence about the impact of smart meters on consumer behaviour. The literature produced by the Department talks about how these meters will facilitate switching. In fact, all the evidence that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Public Bill Committee received suggests that smart meters probably will not have a direct impact on the rate of switching in the energy market. It should change consumers’ behaviour by piquing natural curiosity. When we first get a smart meter and have an in-home display, we can see how the energy usage in our home is affected by using different appliances around the house. That is very interesting and makes us aware of which appliances are the most energy-greedy, which could lead to a change of behaviour.

I would like to make some other points on energy awareness and my concerns that relate to new clause 4, with which I am broadly sympathetic but will not vote for. Even though I have sat through the Public Bill Committee and all the Bill’s stages, I am still not clear exactly what the Government’s objective ultimately is. They say they will make an offer of a smart meter to every consumer by 2020. That seems a rather fuzzy objective. How will SMETS 1 meters be upgraded and when?

Despite the fact that this subject could sound quite boring, it is actually very interesting, because this infrastructure is the basis for the fourth industrial revolution that will be seen in the homes of our countrymen and women. Given the current level of roll-out and the state of readiness of installation teams, it is highly likely that the Government can achieve their objective of offering smart meters to everyone, but it is highly unlikely that we will achieve anything like 100% installation of smart meters in all possible premises.

So far, somewhere between 8 million and 10 million SMETS 1 meters have been installed. I mention that estimated range because I am not sure what the recent figure is, and the update we received did not have a specific number. I think that it has been proved beyond any doubt that, as things stand, SMETS 1 meters are not interoperable. In other words, they do not communicate with any other supplier than the one that installed them; nor are they capable of sending data to the DCC at present. That is my understanding.

In the Public Bill Committee, we heard evidence about whether SMETS 1 meters could be made interoperable. The burden of evidence seems to be that without some sort of adjustment or update, SMETS 1 meters are not interoperable. That is my experience, which I have related before in a variety of settings, as someone who installed a smart meter and then tried to switch.

I have questions about SMETS 1 meters. How easy will it be to upgrade them at the appropriate time, so that we have the functionality of the new SMETS 2 meters? If they can be upgraded to the same functionality and interoperability, do we need to have SMETS 2 meters? How will SMETS 1 meters be upgraded and when?

There are many interesting points that have been covered by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test and that I have tried to make in relation to the Bill. There are questions that, if answered by the Minister, will facilitate this programme, which I completely acknowledge is of vital strategic importance to the future economy that the Government are trying to build.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Steve McCabe.

Steve McCabe rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry. I had not realised that the SNP spokesperson wanted to come in. It has been so long, we got lost somewhere along the way.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You and I are sure the House will be relieved to hear that I am going to keep my remarks on Report very brief, because there will be another opportunity to speak and we are all keen, interested and excited to get to Third Reading.

I want to make one or two comments about new clauses 2 and 3, which are very important. I genuinely feel that the deadline to complete the roll-out by 2020 is simply not realistic. Beyond that, I am genuinely concerned that aggressive tactics have been deployed, and the fact that the energy companies face heavy fines if they do not meet this 2020 deadline only makes this more concerning.
As I have said to the Minister, I feel there is a genuine conflict between best practice in rolling out smart meters to consumers and the potential penalties imposed on companies that do not meet the targets for the roll-out. I am very concerned about the deadline of 2020 because the data show that, as of June 2017, only about 7.7 million smart meters had been installed out of a target of about 60 million premises. We know that the first generation of smart meters revealed some issues, and it is not yet clear whether there will be similar issues with the deployment of the second generation. In Scotland, many flats and tenements have banks of meters installed in communal areas, and there does not seem to be a solution for the installation of smart meters in those cases.

New clause 4 would require the Secretary of State to publish details about the cost and progress of the smart meter roll-out with reference to the 2020 deadline, which is very important. It is worth remembering that the cost of smart meters is £11 billion and rising, and that cost is borne by every single household. Not every single household is necessarily told that when they are contacted, but it is important to put it on the record.

Smart Energy GB has referred to a Government cost-benefit analysis. Everyone in the House agrees that there are cost benefits, but the figure of £11 billion is one to watch closely. The UK Government must be transparent and publish the cost and progress of the roll-out, given that the 2020 deadline seems unrealistic to many people, myself included. It seems clear to me that the deadline ought to be reviewed, so that the roll-out is completed efficiently and shields consumers from unfair tariff rises. I urge the Minister to take on board these comments. I will say no more about the other new clauses—time is short, and I will let other Members speak—but I look forward to Third Reading.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I want to specifically oppose new clause 5. Although I have some sympathy with its intentions, I am concerned that, by including the cost of the smart meter implementation programme in billing, there is a danger of misleading consumers about the cost-benefits of the roll-out, as well as of deterring from the overwhelmingly positive impact that the programme will have on consumers’ ability to monitor their energy use and to manage the cost of their bills in the long term. The programme is clearly in the best interests of the consumer, yielding £1.50 of savings for every £1 invested. Furthermore, I am satisfied that the cost of the overall project is already available to consumers, and has been scrutinised both by Parliament and in the detailed impact assessment carried out by the Department.

I firmly believe that what consumers such as those in my constituency really care about is the savings that can be achieved by having a smart meter installed. By having near real-time information about energy consumption displayed in the home, consumers will for the first time be able to manage their usage properly. If done correctly, that will result in a pounds, shillings and pence saving on their energy bills. I apologise for using pounds, shillings and pence, but it has a big impact. On reflection, the new clause does little to improve the quality of the Bill and I am unable to support it.

In summary, it is clear that smart metering is central to the wider energy revolution currently taking place in Britain, and I commend the Government for the action they have already taken to ensure that we have a cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy future. I am pleased to support the Bill tonight in its unamended form, and I congratulate the Minister and his team on piloting it to this stage.

Steve McCabe: As they say, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will try that again.

Amendments 2 and 3 would give the Secretary of State the power to license and regulate meter asset providers—or MAPs, as they are more commonly known. They are independent companies that secure funding and provide asset management and meter disposal on behalf of the energy companies. They are the middlemen who have come to play a very dominant role in the development of the Government’s smart meter strategy. We might think of them as being to smart meters what football agents are to the world of football.

I firmly believe that what consumers such as those in my constituency really care about is the savings that can be achieved by having a smart meter installed. By having near real-time information about energy consumption displayed in the home, consumers will for the first time be able to manage their usage properly. If done correctly, that will result in a pounds, shillings and pence saving on their energy bills. I apologise for using pounds, shillings and pence, but it has a big impact. On reflection, the new clause does little to improve the quality of the Bill and I am unable to support it.

In summary, it is clear that smart metering is central to the wider energy revolution currently taking place in Britain, and I commend the Government for the action they have already taken to ensure that we have a cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy future. I am pleased to support the Bill tonight in its unamended form, and I congratulate the Minister and his team on piloting it to this stage.

Steve McCabe: As they say, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will try that again.

Amendments 2 and 3 would give the Secretary of State the power to license and regulate meter asset providers—or MAPs, as they are more commonly known. They are independent companies that secure funding and provide asset management and meter disposal on behalf of the energy companies. They are the middlemen who have come to play a very dominant role in the development of the Government’s smart meter strategy. We might think of them as being to smart meters what football agents are to the world of football.

8.15 pm

MAPs have established their place in the energy sector by securing the initial funding for smart meters, so that energy suppliers can arrange to have smart meters installed without absorbing the initial costs. The MAPs provide the capital and then rent their meters to the suppliers, which pass the meters on to their customers. I argue that this needs some regulation and oversight because MAPs have emerged as one of the factors leading to the rising costs of the smart meter programme. The rental costs charged by MAPs are increasing and these costs are being passed directly to the consumer. The costs are known as deemed rentals.

Where a supplier acquires a new customer and does not have a contract with the MAP that owns the new customer’s smart meter, the supplier has a choice either to pay the MAP a substantially higher rental cost, or to turn the existing meter to dumb mode and, usually, replace it with an identical meter from a different provider.

As hon. Members can see, that leads to rising prices, but no customer benefit. Ofgem claims that it sees smart meters as an important step in protecting consumers, but it has done nothing to protect them or suppliers from the rise of the middleman market.

The continuing uncertainty over SMETS 2—we have already heard about that—and the DCC has led to a situation where it is rarely in the interests of the supplier to take on the high cost of the deemed rental on a SMETS 1 meter. They are constantly told that SMETS 2 is just around the corner. Equally, MAPs are going to charge as much as they can get for their SMETS 1 meters because they do not know how long the SMETS 1 market will last. The unresolved interoperability problems and delays with the DCC are creating a market where the customer is the clear loser. It is absurd that we should end up in a situation where it makes more sense to switch an existing meter to dumb mode and then install an identical one because of the MAP charges.

In the Public Bill Committee, the Minister acknowledged this issue, but he said he regarded it as a technical failure, rather than a market failure. The smart meter industry is of course a technology trade and, consequently, a technical failure must also lead to a market failure. The Minister assured the Committee that the technical
interoperability issues would be resolved in the timeframe outlined by his Department. That means that the interoperability problem of SMETS 1 meters so far have not been resolved by now. Will he tell the House today whether his confidence has been justified—has it been resolved?

The longer the uncertainty over the roll-out continues, the longer this farce will persist. The constant waivering over the date by which SMETS 1 meters will no longer count towards the 2020 target is part of the problem. As we have heard, the Government have repeatedly revised the date, most recently from July to September this year. Will the Minister say whether this is the last change, or can we expect another postponement?

The Minister will know that the problem of high deemed rentals will not go away, even if he resolves the SMETS 1 interoperability issue, and that many smaller suppliers have already been in touch with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about this, because they fear a similar problem if we ever reach a mass roll-out of SMETS 2.

I understand that, in origin, the issue is certainly a technical rather than a market problem, because unlike mobile phones, which are data-level interoperable, SMETS 2 meters are required to be device-level interoperable. The concern is that SMETS 2 meters might not technically merge at the device level alongside other SMETS 2 meters—for example, there might be no device-level interoperability for electricity and gas meters. That defeats the purpose. The excessively high deemed rentals need to be brought under control. Regulation is essential to protect consumers. The amendments would empower the Government and Ofgem to do just that. If the Minister will not accept them, I hope that the other place will take a serious look at them.

Let me quickly touch on new clause 4, which relates to the legal obligation on energy suppliers to take all reasonable steps to meet the 2020 target of every household being offered a smart meter. New clause 4 simply outlines some reasonable steps for the Government to take to ensure a timely, cost-effective and successful completion of the roll-out—one that protects consumers and ensures that the benefits are fully realised. As we have heard, only about 15% of the 53 million meters that could be installed by 2020 have been installed to date. I am advised by an industry insider that, even if the programme were to be brought under control, Regulation is essential to protect consumers. The amendments would empower the Government and Ofgem to do just that. If the Minister will not accept them, I hope that the other place will take a serious look at them.

The costs have been increasing spectacularly and the roll-out now represents a net cost to consumers, rather than a benefit. We do not know how many smart meters are currently operating in dumb mode. The last figure that the Government provided was 460,000 meters, but some suggest that it may be as high as 20% of all installs—three times what the Government suggested. The costs faced by the DCC—as we have heard, it is basically owned by Capita, whose economic health the Government should now be at least concerned about—have increased by 56% since 2014. There do not appear to be any proper cost controls, so as the cost rises, so do customers’ bills.

The Minister will remember that he promised to “deliver further information via the annual update of the smart meter implementation programme.”—[Official Report, Smart Meters Public Bill Committee, 28 November 2017; c. 167.]

I do not recall him explaining why publication of annual reports ceased. No doubt it was just a coincidence that it happened when we began to see persistent delays and missed targets. As the failures associated with the programme grow, I believe it is vital that we have an unequivocal commitment to a regular progress report, so that Parliament and the wider world can properly assess the roll-out and cost of the programme. As we have heard, new clause 4 would require the Secretary of State to publish an updated cost-benefit analysis. The last one is two years old. At that time, the net benefits had been revised down by £500 million. Surely the customer and Parliament need to know if we are on course for any net benefits at all.

The Minister will remember that, as we heard earlier, we were led to believe in Committee that 250 SMETS 2 meters had been connected to the DCC network, which at the time everyone agreed was a rather low number. Last week, after first denying in response to a freedom of information request that the Government knew the figure, his Department claimed that it was 80, not 250, and that most of those meters are staff test meters. Does the Minister regard that as the kind of new evidence that he thinks might lead him to think again about a cost-benefit analysis of the programme?

Let me touch finally on new clauses 5 and 6. According to the explanatory notes accompanying the Bill, the purpose of extending the powers is so that the Secretary of State can ensure that the benefits of the roll-out are fully realised and customers properly protected. One way to protect consumers, especially from rising costs, is to tell everyone the truth about what things are really costing. That is what new clauses 5 and 6 are designed to achieve. They would give the Secretary of State the power to amend the supplier licence, so that suppliers included the cost of the smart meter programme in all customer bills. New clause 6 would require the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the costs to the consumer. Utilita Energy, which supplies part of the prepay meter stock, has claimed that the roll-out cost per household has risen from £5 to £13 over 12 months. As the Minister will know, Centrica says that the cost to its customers is up to about £40 per year for the average household. Almost all the large suppliers now say that the rising costs of the smart meter programme are one of the main reasons for the rise in customer bills.

Of course, were Capita and the DCC to find themselves in financial trouble—something that was ruled out in Committee—that would have serious implications for who would pick up the tab. If the costs of the roll-out continue to increase and visible benefits decrease, this could obviously become a very expensive IT white elephant. I believe that the Government’s position is that they will intervene if they believe the costs to the customer are rising beyond what is reasonably acceptable. Can the Minister say whether he thinks £13 or £40 per year is acceptable, or how much higher the cost has to go before it is not acceptable? Who pays at that point? Will it be the taxpayers? Of course it will, but they are also the customers.

There is still time for Ministers to show that they have not got their heads in the sand on this programme. There is still time for the Bill to be improved and for concern about rising costs and the impact on consumers to be taken seriously. I hope that the Minister will indicate tonight that he is prepared to accept some changes.
I regret that we are not pushing harder for them as an Opposition, but I hope that the other place will look seriously at the risks of a technology white elephant, outrageous rises in energy bills and the risk of a failed smart meter programme brought about because some people just will not listen to common sense.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I would like to speak briefly on new clauses 2 and 3, which deal in essence with the accessibility of smart meters and their environmental impact.

Accessibility is crucial. Smart meters do make a difference by putting consumers in control of their energy use and thus their energy bills. That gives people the ability to budget better and can help to prevent debt, hence the importance of accessibility for all, which new clause 2 seeks to achieve. I have small rural villages and some very remote properties in my constituency, so I understand the need to prioritise access. Everyone should be able to benefit from smart meters, and it is important to note that those homes often double as offices.

New clause 2 seeks a review to see how we can support the technical development of smart meters to facilitate both greater accessibility for hard-to-reach premises and alternative arrangements for providing a home area network where the standard equipment does not work. My concern about the new clause is that a review would not necessarily affect existing policy, but it would require a great deal of time, resources and management, and might duplicate existing work. We can support and encourage the industry to make advances without calling for a review. While I agree with the aim of the new clause, I do not agree with the means, and I do not think that it would improve the accessibility of smart meters.

In fact, work is already being done with the industry-led alternative HAN forum to monitor activity through wider programme governance, with milestone publications available from quarter 1 of 2019. In addition, work is being done to facilitate supplier innovations to maximise benefits for consumers in no-WAN instances, which are currently less than 1%.

Let me turn briefly to new clause 3, which is designed to make smart meters more environmentally friendly. It must be stressed that the use of smart meters will, by reducing energy consumption, help not just consumers but the environment. The new clause would specifically provide for the efficient removal and disposal of old meters.

Again, while I agree with the principle of the new clause and I do want to ensure that smart meters are as environmentally friendly as possible, the issue is covered by existing waste legislation. In addition, a commitment was made in Committee to a roundtable on recycling issues such as these. That will include representatives from across suppliers, helping to reinforce obligations and highlight best practice in relation to meter recycling and disposal.

The second aspect of the new clause is a call for a review of exemptions for small suppliers from a legally binding requirement to roll out smart meters. Such a provision was tabled and dropped in Committee. However, small suppliers are not exempt from their obligations from 2020, so I am a tad confused by this proposal.

In conclusion, although I have focused on only two new clauses, I shall not support any of the proposals tabled today. I believe that the Bill that sits before us, following its consideration in Committee, is robust and fit for purpose.

8.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): May I say what a pleasure it is to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, even though it obviously means a higher level of behaviour from all of us, as well as our obeying your edicts on timekeeping and so on? I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate, particularly the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead); the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe); the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—I always forget the second bit—and my hon. Friends the Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan).

We have covered a number of areas in our debate, which has built on the consideration given to the Bill on Second Reading and in Committee. The main point about the Bill and the roll-out of smart meters—I am not making light of any of the comments made by Opposition Members, or indeed Conservative Members—is that the prize is a great one: everyone, in their own household, controlling a smart grid that will give them independence, flexibility and consumer choice. In the long run, I hope that that will lead to very significant savings for them. I felt that I should put that into perspective.

Steve McCabe: I recognise that that is the Minister’s genuine view, but how much should consumers pay for the privilege, and at what point will he feel that they are not getting the benefits they have been promised?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman said, I am convinced that consumers will get the benefit from smart meters. In this day and age, it is absurd that people—I include myself—have to read their meters on their hands and knees, with a torch and a duster to remove the cobwebs and everything else. I think that the hon. Gentleman would agree that that is an intolerable situation and that smart meters are the cure.

Let me respond to the shadow Minister’s comments about progress to date. There are now over 8.6 million smart and advanced meters operating across homes and small businesses across Great Britain. Nearly 400,000 smart meters—obviously they affect a lot more people, because of the number of people per household—are installed every month as suppliers ramp up their delivery, and that figure is increasing significantly every quarter. The Government are committed to ensuring that all homes and small businesses are offered smart meters by the end of 2020.

Let me turn to new clause 1. Future smart meter communication licensees will need to demonstrate that they are a “fit and proper person” to carry out relevant functions. That will include factors such as the ownership and the proposed licence holder, but it is not appropriate to judge suitability solely on that basis, nor to exclude non-GB companies by default. Doing so would risk failing to deliver value for money for consumers, which
could undermine the effectiveness of the smart meter system. I also emphasise that the Government take the national security implications of foreign control and ownership seriously. We have powers under the Enterprise Act 2002 to intervene in mergers and takeovers that give rise to public interest concerns, including about national security.

New clause 2 is about the technical development of smart meters. Overall, we expect that more than 99.25% of premises will be covered by the national communications network. In homes, the standard wireless network will serve the majority of premises successfully. We want 100% of energy consumers to be able to benefit from smart meters, but it is true—that was raised by the Opposition—that the physical characteristics or location of a consumer’s home can affect connectivity. Challenges for systems include a diverse range of building types, including those in which meters can be a long way from the living space. We are working with the industry to identify innovative solutions and extend regulatory powers, because it is very important to have that flexibility.

Dr Drew: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I will, but I will make some progress first.

New clause 3 concerns the efficient removal and disposal of old meters. My officials have discussed this in detail with those from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, as this falls within their remit. This point was brought up very eloquently by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak. I am satisfied that energy suppliers, installation contractors and meter asset providers are already subject to appropriate regulation for the proper removal, recycling and disposal of redundant meters. However, as I said in Committee, we plan shortly to host a roundtable so that interested Members can hear from representatives from across the meter disposal chain. It is my intention that that will allow us collectively to agree some action. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman and other interested Members being there, because the whole supply chain has to understand fully its responsibilities.

I will briefly focus on concerns raised about the programme costs and benefits.

Dr Drew: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: Yes, I apologise.

Dr Drew: I thank the Minister for giving way. What I am concerned about, as always, is the urban-rural divide. We know that many rural areas are still suffering from a lack of access to broadband. Will he assure us that the rural delivery of this project is a priority, given that a lot of people in rural areas suffer because they are off the gas grid anyway?

Richard Harrington: I totally give that undertaking to the hon. Gentleman, and I apologise for saying that I would take his intervention and then forgetting to do so. I hope he will forgive me.

I said during previous debates that we would update our analysis if there were new and substantive evidence or changes in policy design. As a result of the representations that have been made in Committee and today, I am prepared to go further by committing to publishing an update of the programme cost-benefit analysis in 2019. As hon. Members know, 2018 marks a significant programme transition, with the shift from first to second-generation smart meters, so I think that 2019 really is the time to assess this.

As for new clauses 5 and 6, I do not believe that it is sensible to establish powers that enable the Government to require the provision of information on the costs of the programme in consumers’ energy bills, because I do not understand what benefit such a move would have for consumers. However, it is important that consumers understand the information that smart meters and in-house displays give them, because in that way, they understand the cost of their energy usage in pounds and pence—or as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) would say, pounds, shillings and pence, and probably farthings. She is a lady after my own heart. That will empower them either to change how they use energy, or to get a better tariff.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak has raised concerns, as he did in Committee, about the MAPs—not pictures of the world, but meter asset providers—because he believes that the supplier market is not working to deliver the programme objectives. I remain of the view, however, as I have clearly stated to him before—we will have to agree to disagree, I think—that the market is operating competitively and that there is no need for regulatory intervention. There are currently two typical rental arrangements available: churn contracts and deemed contracts, which he mentioned. Churn contracts are often similar to the original rental agreements, including with the presence of an early-repayment charge in the event that a supplier chooses to remove the meter from the wall early. Deemed contracts do not include that charge, but carry the added risk for a MAP that they can involve higher rental charges. The important point is that the DCC has published its detailed plan for the enrolment of SMETS meters from late 2018, and as progress is made, I fully expect energy suppliers’ confidence in choosing churn contracts over deemed rental to increase. Initial indications support that expectation.

I turn briefly to the amendment on the draft licence modifications envisaged under a power in the Bill to allow the costs of smart meter communication administration to be recouped from the industry, in so far as there is a shortfall. The potential scale of the costs will depend on a number of factors, including the timing and reason for the DCC licensee entering special administration, and costs arising from any legal and technical expertise appointed by the administrator in support of the execution of its duties. As I committed to doing in Committee, we have formally agreed to consult on these licence modifications. We will consider and set out an assessment of the estimated potential costs that need to be recouped from the industry.

I would like to reflect on the points made about the DCC’s parent company, Capita, and to emphasise that Smart DCC Ltd is required to operate at arm’s length from Capita. Provisions in the licence prevent Capita from taking working capital out of Smart DCC Ltd. Furthermore, the DCC’s financial arrangements are constructed so as to make the risk of insolvency low. Putting in place a special administration regime is entirely precautionary and, I believe, the prudent thing to do.
The smart metering programme will secure an overall net benefit to the nation of £5.7 billion. The Bill is important to ensuring that this vital platform for our smart energy future is rolled out effectively, allowing the Government to respond to developments as the roll out continues. I hope that these arguments will persuade Opposition Members not to press their new clauses and amendments.

### Dr Whitehead: I am disappointed that the Minister did not give us a better explanation and understanding of what “offer” means as far as smart meter roll-out is concerned. Indeed, that question was raised from the Conservative Benches. It might be that the Secretary of State can better illuminate us on Third Reading. Strictly speaking, however, that does not relate to the new clauses and amendments, on which we have had a good debate. If necessary, there will be further such debate in another place. This evening, however, it would not be wise to divide the House, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

**Third Reading**

8.43 pm

The **Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

The roll-out of smart meters, on which the Bill is focused, forms an important foundation for the smart systems and flexibility plan, which was published last year, and which sets out a number of actions to deliver a smarter, more flexible energy system that supports innovation in smart products and services. It is part of our industrial strategy ambition to make Britain one of the best places for energy innovation and clean growth, to the benefit of consumers, workers, investors and the environment. More broadly, the roll-out is an important part of our reforms of the energy market, driving engagement and competition. Smart meters will offer consumers much more knowledge about their energy use, which they can use to get the best deals possible. It complements the measures in our forthcoming retail energy Bill, which will protect consumers and ensure that the market is working for loyal customers.

Before I say more about the Bill, let me take a moment to express my gratitude to Members for the way in which they have engaged with the Bill. I thank all Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to its development, especially those who participated in the Committee and Report stages. I thank my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Clerks and the House authorities, the experts who gave oral evidence to the Committee, the organisations that took time to provide expert written evidence, and my officials, who have worked very hard and will continue to do so as the Bill proceeds.

I also thank both Opposition spokesmen. As ever, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) brought to bear his long-standing interest in and deep knowledge of these matters. Members have offered challenges and insight throughout the Bill’s passage, and their contributions—in response to many of which my hon. Friend has been able to make commitments—will aid this important programme.

Debates on a number of amendments have resulted in commitments to publishing more substantive annual reports on the progress of the smart meter roll-out, undertaking a public consultation on the expected cost impact on consumers before laying the licence modifications enabling the special administration regime cost recovery mechanism to take effect, and working with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), to promote best practice in the recycling and reuse of old meters.

The extended regulatory powers proposed in the Bill will enable the Government to continue to oversee and facilitate the smart meter roll-out. It will enable them to maintain appropriate consumer safeguards, and, in particular, to act on the findings of monitoring and a post-roll-out review. It will protect smart meter services for both consumers and businesses by providing the enabling framework for a special administration regime for the national data and communications provider. Having been amended in Committee, it will also support the efficient and effective delivery of half-hourly settlement by the energy regulator Ofgem.

As the House knows, half-hourly settlement is another important stepping stone to that smarter, more flexible energy system. It will help to deliver benefits both to consumers and to the energy system as a whole by incentivising energy suppliers to develop and offer time-of-use tariffs. That will empower consumers by enabling them to use energy when it is cheapest, and reward them for being flexible about when they use energy. It will also help to make the energy system more resilient as we move towards an increasingly low-carbon generation mix.

The Bill will ultimately ensure that this country is more efficient, resilient, empowered and smart in its consumption of energy. I commend it to the House.

8.47 pm

**Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab):** My comments will be brief.

The Opposition do not oppose the Bill, and will support its Third Reading. However, there are still a number of outstanding issues, two of which have come to the fore since the Committee stage. First, there is the alarming fact that Capita, which wholly owns the Data Communications Company, has issued a profit warning, and company shares, as of last Thursday, have fallen to a 20-year low. All the communications and infrastructure for the operation of smart meters have been outsourced to Capita, and, in turn, Capita has engaged partners in the DCC to operate aspects of its overall function. As a result of the Bill, a special administration regime will hopefully mitigate the impact on smart metering should Capita’s fortunes worsen, but I reiterate the Opposition’s concern that if the DCC goes into administration, consumers will pay the price through this administration regime. Why should they pay the price for yet another failed outsourcing? I wonder what the Secretary of State’s rationale was for forcing them to pay for such failure.

In the case of the DCC, there will be some protection should Capita fail, but what about the detail, and what about contingency plans in relation to Capita’s other ventures? Indeed, what immediate measures are the Government putting in place for any potential collapse...
of Capita? Capita is a major outsourcing firm which last year alone was awarded 154 Government contracts. My colleague the shadow Cabinet Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), last week said “that the Government’s behaviour in response...has been marked by indifference to corporate mismanagement, incompetence in office and complacency in the face of a crisis.”—[Official Report, 1 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 980.]

We need assurances that any contingency plans will protect services and information, guarantee jobs for current employees, and protect the pensions of those employees and the pensions of the public sector workers that the company is managing. Will the Secretary of State in time provide those much needed assurances?

The second development is that the National Audit Office has announced it will be investigating the economic case for the roll-out of smart meters and looking at whether the Government are on track to achieve their target to roll out meters by 2020. The report is expected in the summer of this year. I would not want to pre-empt the National Audit Office, but it would seem that it is not only Opposition Members who are concerned that the Government are on track to miss their target at consumers’ expense. Indeed, it seems extremely likely they will miss this target, given that 40,000 gas and electricity meters would need to be installed per day even on present projections; that is no mean feat and perhaps why the language has changed to state that consumers will be offered smart meters rather than there will be installation per se. It seems irresponsible of the Government to have rejected Labour’s new clause 4, which would require the Secretary of State to publish a report and a cost-benefit analysis relating to the smart meter implementation programme and lay a copy of the report before Parliament within three months of the Act coming into force.

I referred to the energy price cap on Second Reading and I do so again now as it has been three months since then and still no action has been taken. It is estimated that customers are to pay somewhere between £130 and £200 on their bills to recover the costs of the installation of a smart meter on their property. This is in addition to the price increases inflicted by energy providers. The Government have promised a price cap and we have had sight of legislation to implement it, but we are still a long way off an energy price cap having any real impact on household bills. I would like to take this opportunity to say to the Secretary of State that although the days are starting to get longer and the weather milder—although this week is a slight exception to that—we on this side of the House have not forgotten the Conservatives’ promise of an energy price cap, and specifically to knock at least £100 from 17 million household bills.

I join the Secretary of State in thanking all those who have spoken throughout the passage of this Bill and all Committee members who have worked so diligently. I thank the Front-Bench teams for the good nature of the debates we have had on this issue, and especially my Labour colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), an expert who revels in the detail and minutiae of smart meters and has seen not one but two Bills through the House over the last two months—and who could forget his jovial use of the props Gaz and Leccy on Second Reading?

Resizable. I also thank the Public Bill Office and the Clerks of the House for all their assistance on this Bill.

8.53 pm

Patricia Gibson: It is important to point out that we in the SNP accept that there are some real advantages to the consumer in switching to a smart meter and to smart meters in general. However, that does not mean that I suggest that the roll-out will be trouble-free and that I have no concerns about it, because that would not be true. Before proceeding, however, I would like to point out that I accept that the Minister has been receptive throughout to my concerns and the concerns of others across this House in Committee and beyond, and I thank him for that. I know he is keen to get this right, as we all are, and I thank him for his listening, consensual and constructive approach.

In the past, I pointed out to the Minister that I had concerns about aggressive selling which I believe is, as I have said, a result of Ofgem having the power to fine energy companies up to 10% of their annual turnover if they fail to meet their licence conditions—or certainly not assisted by that fact. One of the licence conditions is that each energy company should install smart meters in consumer homes by the end of 2020. Failure to do so can result in a massive penalty for the company. That being the case, aggressive selling starts to make more sense, given the pressure that energy companies are under to deliver smart meters to consumer homes within a rather tight deadline. I continue to detect a level of suspicion and scepticism about smart meters among far too many consumers. I hope that the Minister will accept that the licence conditions place pressure on the energy companies to roll out smart meters by 2020, and that that can place pressure on consumers in turn.

I am sure that, like me, the Minister will have been disturbed to learn of recent reports of energy companies employing salespeople to go out and proactively sell smart meters to consumers. If the reports are true, those salespeople can earn commission of more than £1,000 week, which equates to bonuses of twice what the average worker earns in a year. Will the Minister acknowledge that this can lead to overbearing and aggressive doorstep selling, which can put consumers under pressure? Does he share my concerns about this? If so, what steps can he take to address it?

Cold calling is a discredited way of selling that puts undue pressure on consumers, particularly vulnerable ones. Does the Minister think that this is an acceptable way to proceed, given the rewards that sales reps can earn if they “persuade” enough people to install a smart meter? Is sending target-hungry salespeople to chap on the doors of the elderly and vulnerable the most desirable way we can think of to roll out smart meters? I would be extremely disappointed if the Minister—and indeed Ofgem—thought so. We know that doorstep energy selling was left with a very poor reputation after a series of investigations by Ofgem led to suppliers being fined millions of pounds for misleading customers over how much they could save. This resulted, between 2011 and 2012, in all the big six suppliers scrapping face-to-face sales practices, but smaller energy companies are now once again sending staff out to knock on doors. Is the Minister entirely comfortable with that? What reassurances
can he offer to consumers and vulnerable members of our communities that they have the protection they need from such companies?

The Minister will also be aware of concerns about misleading letters being sent to consumers suggesting that smart meters are compulsory rather than optional. I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for sending me samples of letters that have gone out to consumers from various energy companies, in order to reassure me. However, very few of those letters point out that smart meters are optional, and that the customer can refuse to have one. All the power companies in the sample of the largest suppliers say absolutely nothing about smart meters being optional. Does the Minister think that that is acceptable? Is he, like me and the trading standards authorities, concerned about this? If so, what action can Ofgem take to address the situation?

What is going on with the “You have been chosen for a free upgrade to a smart meter” letters that some companies are sending to consumers? I wish all consumers were aware that when a business tells them that they have been “specially selected” for something, it usually means that everyone has been “specially selected” for it and that the term is meaningless. Another old favourite involves the words “You are eligible”, which is also misleading, because everyone is eligible. If we all have the option to have a smart meter, why do some companies feel that it is honest and in order to tell us that we have been “specially selected”, or that we are “eligible” for one? Does the Minister have concerns about this way of misleading customers?

Richard Harrington: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I was trying to attract her attention while she was mid-speech. The type of sales proposal she has mentioned is totally unacceptable. It is not within the regulations, and if she would like to write to me or see me with specific examples, I will take the matter up with the regulators myself.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for his response, but the information that I am imparting tonight comes from the sample of letters that the Minister sent to me, so some energy companies are clearly using this sharp practice. I would not say that all of them are, but some are certainly not saying that smart meters are optional, instead using language such as “You are eligible” or “You have been specially selected,” which is unacceptable.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my worry that vulnerable citizens may fall foul of such things? For example, my constituent Mr Vezza ended up with no power for three years when his electricity was cut off due to a misunderstanding because he did not want a smart meter installed. He was so fearful about getting in touch with the energy company that he has been living without electricity for three years.

Patricia Gibson: Yes. The Minister will be interested in the Minister’s reflections on that.

I have real concerns about the mythology being sold to consumers that smart meters are free. That needs to be addressed, because they are not free. We all pay for them through our energy bills. Why has that not been communicated to the consumer? The Minister and I do not see eye to eye on this, but if there is no intention to mislead, why is the consumer not being told that smart meters are not free—in the sense that a normal person would understand the term? Free means that it costs nothing. Smart meters are being paid for by all of us through our bills. As I said on Report, the cost of smart meters is £11 billion and rising. Smart Energy GB has referred to a Government cost-benefit analysis, but I am particularly worried about the figure. I will not be the only person in the House to be closely monitoring it, because I fear that it may rise, and that goes to the heart of consumer confidence. If there is no intention to mislead, what is the harm in energy companies clearly communicating with consumers about the costs that will be incurred when they get a smart meter? I would be interested in the Minister’s reflections on that.

Some of the letters from energy companies that I have seen about deemed appointment are pushy. One particular company sent a letter to consumers stating that smart meters are flawed and will not work if they switch supplier, meaning that consumers should not switch after receiving a smart meter. That is what I call the cart pulling the horse. What does the Minister think of that practice? Ofgem talks about the deemed appointment system being acceptable, but I do not agree. Ofgem states that suppliers must ensure that they are compliant with their wider regulatory and other legal obligations and that suppliers should monitor consumer experiences. I wonder, then, what Ofgem makes of letters telling people that it is not advisable to change supplier once a smart meter has been installed because it will not work.

The Minister is well aware of my concerns and of the fact that many people are extremely suspicious about smart meters, not because they do not want to have greater control over the energy they use, not because they do not want to know which appliances are consuming high levels of power, not because they want to put estimated bills behind them, and not because they do not want to see the energy they are using in real time. People are suspicious because of the hard sell and the misinformation telling them they do not have a choice when they know that they do. Reports of target-driven, sales-hungry cold callers will do nothing to dispel that suspicion; it will only increase it.

I will end where I began. Despite everything that I have said, there are benefits to having a smart meter. However, as I have been saying for a long time, the Government and the energy companies need to ensure that consumers are at the heart of the process. Consumers will get on board by having access to correct and accurate information. Misleading information will only further alienate the consumers who could potentially benefit most from smart meters. That cannot be good. Energy efficiency is extremely important, and never more so than in households that are struggling to make ends meet, in which fuel poverty remains at 78%. Smart meters can help people to take measures that may help them and their household to have greater control over energy consumption. That is why we must get this right, and we must take consumers with us. I fear that we have a long way to go, given some of the concerns I have raised.
I urge the Minister to reflect further on the very real concerns I have raised—from my past experience, I know he will—and to do all he can to address them.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 8 together.

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

WORK AND PENSIONS
That the draft Financial Assistance Scheme (Increased Cap for Long Service) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2017, be approved.

HUMAN FERTILISATION AND EMBRYOLOGY
That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2017, be approved.

HUMAN TISSUE
That the draft Human Tissue (Quality and Safety for Human Application) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2017, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
That the draft Littering From Vehicles Outside London (Keepers: Civil Penalties) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 21 December 2017, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (6 FEBRUARY)
Ordered,
That at the sitting on Tuesday 6 February, the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may continue until 7.00pm or for one and a half hours after its commencement, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(Rebecca Harris.)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (7 FEBRUARY)
Ordered,
That at the sitting on Wednesday 7 February, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

(1) the Motion in the name of Secretary Amber Rudd relating to Police Grant Report not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, and
(2) the Motions in the name of Secretary Sajid Javid relating to Local Government Finance not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion or six hours after the commencement of proceedings relating to Police Grant Report, whichever is the later;
proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

HIGH SPEED RAIL
(WEST MIDLANDS – CREWE) BILL
Ordered,
That James Duddridge, Sandy Martin, Mrs Sheryll Murray, Bill Wiggin, and Martin Whitfield be members of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill Select Committee.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 12 to 17 together.

Ordered,

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT
That Fiona Onasanya be discharged from the Communities and Local Government Committee and Matt Western be added.

HOME AFFAIRS
That Preet Kaur Gill be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and John Woodcock be added.

JUSTICE
That Laura Pidcock be discharged from the Justice Committee and Ms Marie Rimmer be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
That Andrew Jones be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Robert Jenrick be added.

TRANSPORT
That Laura Smith be discharged from the Transport Committee and Grahame Morris be added.

WELSH AFFAIRS
That Thelma Walker be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Susan Elan Jones be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)
Jobcentre Closures

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

9.7 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am pleased to have one hour and 23 minutes for this debate, having arrived in the House earlier today to be told by the Whips Office that I would do well to have the debate today, as opposed to early tomorrow morning. I take that as an early Valentine's gift from the Government, and perhaps they will go further by addressing the series of asks that I and other hon. Members have for them.

The Minister will have briefed himself on the folly of the jobcentre closure programme, particularly in the city of Glasgow, where the Government wished to reduce the provision of jobcentres across the city from 16 to eight. Although I am immensely grateful, immensely proud and pleased that the one jobcentre the Government removed from the programme is the Castlemilk jobcentre in my constituency, for which I pay tribute to the trade unions, local campaigners and anybody who signed a petition on the various campaign days we had to save the two jobcentres in my constituency—I pay tribute to everybody who took part in that campaign—the Government, however, continued with the closure of Langside jobcentre, to which I will return later in my remarks.

I will remind the House how this all began. It began with a story in the Daily Record, which is how Members of Parliament representing Glasgow constituencies found out that the Government wished to slash the city's jobcentre provision in half. That was followed the next day with a letter from the then Minister—now the Education Secretary—to Members of Parliament representing constituencies in which jobcentres were set to be closed.

It is worth remembering that, where Ministers were relying on Google Maps to tell them which bus services people could use to move around the city to get to those jobcentres, despite the fact that Google Maps tells people to use bus routes that no longer exist and have not done for some time. Even after that was pointed out to senior managers at the Department for Work and Pensions and even after it was raised by myself and a number of colleagues in this Chamber, in Westminster Hall and in written questions—even after all that—still no effective transport study was carried out. I believe that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) who said that if a school or a nursery were to close, the local authority would be duty-bound to carry out some form of transport analysis to determine how people would use the service they then had to use instead of the original service they relied on. Government by Google cannot be the way this is done.

We pressed Ministers on several occasions to contact directly every person who would be affected by the closures, but they did not do so. Of course, Ministers know all the people who would be affected, because, as you will know in your role as a constituency Member of Parliament, Mr Deputy Speaker, when someone goes to the jobcentre to sign up for whatever support they are seeking, they do not get to leave that jobcentre until they have given the Government every single detail of their life. So I cannot understand why the Government did not take it upon themselves to contact people directly, instead relying on a couple of posters thrown up in the jobcentre, which many people would pass by.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend will have had the same experiences I have had. Many people I contacted to let them know that this was happening did not know and had not been told about it. Unless they were going into the jobcentre regularly, they just would not find out, so they would go along when they needed the service only to find that it had gone.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. As hon. Members can imagine, this was a big election issue in the city of Glasgow in June last year. During the campaign in my constituency, I told people that I was campaigning to save the jobcentre, and I met folk who used the jobcentre and it was the first time they found out about its potential closure; there can be no excuse for that, because there was no reason the Government could not have let those people know —they had every detail necessary.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue before the House. A positive campaign to retain the Ballynahinch social security office in my constituency was successful due to extensive lobbying, cross-party and cross-community support and the realisation that rural communities need a local office to make attendance possible and to encourage people to seek work. May I encourage him to continue to campaign, as there are clearly occasions when right wins and wrong decisions are defeated?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It would not be an Adjournment debate without an intervention from the hon. Gentleman, so this one now almost feels complete. I commend him for the work he has done to save a jobcentre in his constituency—of course I understand that the powers over that are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I welcome his words of encouragement for myself and other colleagues to continue our campaign, but gently point out to him that he has more sway over Ministers here than we do, so any effort he can swing in behind us on this issue will be most welcome.

I wish to discuss another hugely important issue in this whole topic: equality impact assessments. Undoubtedly, Ministers will have carried out such assessments, as they have come to the Chamber and said repeatedly that they abide by all the requirements that they must follow under the Equality Act 2010, and they could come to that conclusion only having carried out an equality impact assessment, so where are they? Why have we never seen them? Why have the trade unions and Members of Parliament never seen them? They are not anywhere in the public domain. When the Minister responds, will he tell us why they have not been published and whether they will be published? If he does not intend to publish them for wider public viewing, will he at least endeavour to share that information with MPs?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): We are seeing a scythe tearing through the poorest communities in Glasgow, with the closure of Maryhill and Possilpark, Easterhouse, Parkhead and Bridgeton jobcentres. The idea that a quarter of a million people
[Mr Paul Sweeney]

will be reliant on Springburn and Shettleston to sustain these critical services is absolutely appalling. The equality impact assessments have been identified through freedom of information requests, which have shown that the closure of these jobcentres would disproportionately affect people from ethnic minorities, women and people on low incomes. That is clear already. What is the Minister doing to mitigate that effect? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is essential that that justification is presented tonight?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. Indeed, the issues he raises were the very motivations for our demanding that equality impact assessments be carried out before a decision was taken. It was obvious, though, that a decision was taken before the sham consultation that the Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming to hold.

I have asked Ministers about the impact of the closures on disabled people, minority ethnic communities and women. For example, in a recent written question, I asked the Government how many disabled people used Langside jobcentre, which they closed two weeks ago. They told me that they do not hold those figures. If that is true for one jobcentre in my constituency, what is the answer for all the jobcentres across Glasgow? What is the answer for all the jobcentres that they are closing throughout the United Kingdom? This is a ham-fisted decision that has been handled in a ham-fisted way. The Government have relied on Google and do not know how the closures will affect huge numbers of people because they do not hold the data. I suspect that they do hold the data. I have to be honest: when I read that answer, I did not quite believe it. We would like to see the data and I can see no reason why the Government cannot give us the answers.

The other issue is that the Government have not actually thought through what they want jobcentres to do. I would have loved to have had a debate, when the Government announced the closures in December 2016, about how jobcentres can properly serve the people who use them and the communities in which they are based. The problem is that we were not offered that debate. We were offered a straight up choice: closure or non-closure. Rather than have a discussion about how jobcentres can, for example, better work with citizens advice bureaux and other employment agencies, perhaps under the auspices of local or devolved Government, all we were offered was a straight up closure programme. The Government did not even want to consult the very people who would be affected.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for the tenancy that he and my other colleagues from Glasgow have shown in their campaign against the closures. Does he share my concern that, in such debates or when we talk about social security issues at Question Time, Ministers increasingly turn around and direct claimants to seek advice from jobcentres—the very same jobcentres that the Government are closing?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Consistency never was the Conservative party’s strongest suit, but there is a glaring hypocrisy in the fact that the Government are signposting people to jobcentres as they slash services up and down the United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has just spoken about consistency. Does he agree that, when the Government announced these closures, they said that the changes would offer a more efficient service and deliver good value for the taxpayer? If we are being consistent, does he agree that that is the exact same argument that the SNP Scottish Government and the Scottish Police Authority are using for their plans to close 58 police stations across Scotland?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Funny enough, no, I do not. On consistency—I am not sure whether there are any jobcentres closing in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but I know that none is closing in the Minister’s constituency—where the closures are going to happen, we need evidence of whether they will truly deliver better value for money and a better service, both of which we would all be in favour of. We need to see the evidence that will lead us to that conclusion, including the quality impact assessments and the number of disabled people using each and every service. This service is not comparable with police stations, which are not there to serve the public in the same way. I am happy to have a debate any time on police stations in Scotland, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am sure that you would not want me to deviate too far from the jobcentre closure title that we see on the annunciator.

Let me draw my remarks to a close. The Government managed an incredible achievement when they announced the closure plans. They managed to unite—not just in Glasgow, but right across Scotland—the Scottish National party, the Scottish Labour party, the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church in Scotland, all the trade unions and people of other parties and of no party against this very plan. We could see that it was ill-thought out, that decisions had been taken not because of the evidence that was before the Government but in spite of the evidence, and they went to great pains not to share much of that or include people in the decisions that were being made about them. I do not know how well versed the Minister is in Scottish politics, but to cause that level of unity is some feat.

When the Minister gets to his feet, I want him to tell us a bit more about the thinking behind this plan. I want to hear about the evidence and the equality impact assessments. I want to hear how the Government intend to review each closure over the next 12 months, as they start to happen right now, to make sure that people are well served and, as the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) points out, that value for money is served. There must be value for money not just for the taxpayer, but for the people using the service. In some cases, people are doing round trips of up to 8 miles just to get to their local jobcentre. What about value for money for them and the impact that it has on them? When they go to claim their benefits, more and more of that money is used just to get to the jobcentre, when they used to be able to use a local service.

Will the Minister guarantee that when people are late for appointments, as a result of the closures, they will not be sanctioned? I am sure that he agrees that that would be completely wrong, though, like other Members,
I have my doubts about that. I want to hear what the Minister intends to do to measure the impact particularly on disabled people as the closure programme gets into full swing. I want to hear about the options for reviewing the system should it be found that the evidence tells us that, in fact, the decision that has been taken has proven to be the wrong one. I understand that this comes on the back of the whole Telereal Trillium contract and the option to get out after 20 years and all the rest of it, but this has to be about more than spreadsheets and contracts. There are some desperately vulnerable people who rely on these services, some desperately vulnerable people who are let down by these decisions and some desperately vulnerable people who need to be better served by this Government.

9.24 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for having the foresight not only to secure an Adjournment debate, but to secure an Adjournment debate that allows us to detain the Minister for a certain amount of time and to rake him over the coals about this deeply flawed decision. If the Minister thinks that he is getting out of here before 10 o’clock tonight, he has another thing coming.

I commend the Minister for his promotion to this post. He will be aware that I, my colleagues on the SNP Benches, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and other cross-party politicians from the city of Glasgow have written to him commending him and congratulating him on his new post, and inviting him to Glasgow. Now, I have not checked my mailbag this evening to see whether we have yet had a response to that letter. I am sure that his response will be there this evening to see whether we have yet had a response to that letter. I am sure that his response will be there when I toddle over to the mail room tonight; he will be telling me that he is coming to visit the city of Glasgow in the next couple of weeks.

The main issue I want to address is the disproportionate impact of jobcentre closures on the east end of Glasgow. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has, in her time in this Parliament, very passionately outlined the case for retaining Bridgeton jobcentre, the doors of which closed on Friday last week. My own constituency of Glasgow East will see the closure of Easterhouse and Parkhead jobcentres over the next two weeks, with everybody being relocated to Shettleston. I will come back to that point in a moment.

Since being elected to this House in June last year, I have been clear that Ministers sit in their ivory towers in Whitehall, making decisions by spreadsheet and Google Maps. They decide what they are going to do in communities in Glasgow and in Scotland without having the foggiest idea about those communities. A visit to the Easterhouse Housing and Regeneration Alliance in December reaffirmed that for me. The Minister will have heard me mention the alliance in questions this morning. It is a coalition of independent housing associations that has been operating for as long as I have been alive. These associations know their tenants and their local communities. Every single director, staff member and board member of the alliance was absolutely clear that these closures will be deeply damaging for some of the most vulnerable people in the city of Glasgow.

If the Minister will not listen to the Easterhouse Housing and Regeneration Alliance, he could listen to the citizens advice bureaux in our city. There are fantastic citizens advice bureaux: in Easterhouse, led by Joan McClure; in Bridgeton, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central, led by Frank Mosson; and in Parkhead, I am sure that it is only a coincidence that the only jobcentre that the Government plan to keep open in the east end of Glasgow is not located next to a citizens advice bureau. When people are sanctioned or treated unfairly at the jobcentre in the east end of Glasgow, they can currently go to their citizens advice bureau to receive support. It is deeply damaging that we are going to remove that support.

After I was elected and met the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who is now the Education Secretary, I was struck that there is this idea that this campaign is party political or that it is a campaign against the Tories. If the Minister wants to believe that, that is absolutely fine. He can take it from me that, as an SNP politician, I do not have a huge amount of love for the Tories. But if he will not listen to me, will he at least listen to the three Tory councillors in the east end of Glasgow—Councillors Thomas Kerr, Phillip Charles and Robert Connelly, who is the councillor for Calton—who have all added their voice to the campaign to save our local jobcentres? If the Minister leaves this debate tonight thinking that this is some sort of Labour and SNP campaign against the Tories, he is deeply mistaken. This is a campaign to protect our jobcentres and some of the most vulnerable people in our city.

I want our jobcentres to be kept open for three reasons: digital exclusion, transport and the deep-rooted issues of the gangland culture and territorialism that, sadly, still exist in our communities. On a cross-party basis, we politicians all have to solve that. Fantastic research has been undertaken by the likes of Citizens Advice and the Church of Scotland about the real problems associated with the total exclusion of people. Something like half of my constituents have never touched a computer. Some people are able to use the internet on their smartphones, but that is not the way to do a 90-minute universal credit application. If the Minister wants to come to Glasgow and find a library that is not open on Saturday, he will be quite shocked to find that that is not actually the case.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very powerful intervention. That is reaffirmed by the fact that I do a surgery in Baillieston library and Parkhead library, and as soon as I arrive at 10 o’clock there is already a queue of people waiting to use the computers. What the Government will do by removing the computer access at jobcentres will be deeply damaging.

David Linden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very powerful intervention. That is reaffirmed by the fact that I do a surgery in Baillieston library and Parkhead library, and as soon as I arrive at 10 o’clock there is already a queue of people waiting to use the computers. What the Government will do by removing the computer access at jobcentres will be deeply damaging.
[David Linden]

The Minister will be aware, no doubt, of his predecessor answering a slew of written questions from me about the number of wi-fi connections and computer log-ons at Easterhouse jobcentre—the very jobcentre he wants to close.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My researcher counted my hon. Friend’s written questions and there were over 100. He mentions the invitation to the Minister to come to Glasgow. So far, no Minister has bothered to come to any of the jobcentres they want to close or to meet any of the people affected. Could I add to what my hon. Friend has said and implore the Minister to take time in his diary soon to come to Glasgow for such a meeting?

David Linden: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who refers to the number of written questions that I have tabled. I am rivalled only by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in my love for written questions.

My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the fact that Ministers from the Department for Work and Pensions have not bothered to visit the city of Glasgow. In fact, one of the other written questions that I asked of the UK Government was, when was the last time that a Minister visited the city of Glasgow. I was rather shocked when in response to one of those written questions I asked of the UK Government was, when was the last time that a Minister visited the city of Glasgow. I was rather shocked when in response to one of those written questions I was informed that a Minister had indeed visited a jobcentre—in Midlothian. I do not know what the geographical knowledge of Her Majesty’s Government is like, but can I impart a bit of wisdom to them? Midlothian is not exactly Easterhouse. It is not Castlemilk; it is not even Moray. If the Minister is serious about being someone who is focused on the entire United Kingdom, then he ought to come to visit the city.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): If the Minister does come to Glasgow, I would like to invite him to walk from one jobcentre that is closed to the next and see what these people are facing. It will take him over an hour. It takes half an hour on the bus, on average, to get to the jobcentres that are closing down. He will be more than welcome to come to Glasgow and do the walk.

David Linden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Even as an Albion Rovers fan, he is very quick off the mark, because he has worked out my very next point, which is on transport. He shares a constituency boundary with me. One part of that boundary is around Gartloch and Gartcosh. I do not know whether the Minister would be able to point to where Gartloch is on a map, but the reality is that, if someone has to walk from Gartloch to Shettleston on a cold January or February day, it is going to take them a rather long time.

The third issue that I want to touch on is the gangland culture and territorialism that exists in Glasgow. I am glad to say that, since the time I was growing up—nothing to do with me, I must add—a lot of that has been tackled, and we do not have quite the same problems that we did. I give the Minister the example the community of Wellhouse, which is separated from Easthall by a road. They are two communities in the Greater Easterhouse Partnership area. They are very, very small communities but they have their own community centre and housing association. That is because at one point young guys could not walk across that road without the fear of getting involved in all sorts of incidents.

If the Minister will not listen to me on the concerns about territorialism and the gangland culture, then he should listen to Commander Stevie Haslett, who heads up Glasgow East police. I was quite surprised to find out that the Department had not bothered to consult him about this either. The Minister will be aware, of course, because I am sure that he has done his homework, that Shettleston jobcentre was piloted as being one of the under-25 jobcentres that everybody in the whole of the east end of Glasgow would come to. This was a number of years ago. There was all sorts of trouble because people from different communities were coming together and clashing. That put the security staff and the jobcentre staff at immense risk as well.

My final point is about the jobcentre that the Government want to merge absolutely everything into—Shettleston, which would be some sort of UK super-jobcentre following the merger of Bridgeton, Easterhouse and Parkhead. I was quite surprised when I found out only a couple of weeks ago about the number of car parking spaces at Shettleston jobcentre. This is particularly about the issue of all the new staff who will be transitioned to that jobcentre. I say to the Minister that, if I find out in the next couple of weeks that Shettleston Road has been turned into a car park, I am going to be very unhappy.

The Evening Times, a local newspaper in Glasgow, has been resolutely united in campaigning to save our jobcentres. If the Minister will not listen to me as an SNP politician, and if he will not even listen to the Tory councillors in Glasgow, he should listen to the newspaper that is for Glasgow.

9.34 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I do not want to detain the House too long, but I want to pick up on a couple of points.

My local jobcentre in Bridgeton closed on Friday. That jobcentre was well used and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) pointed out, it was round the corner from the Bridgeton citizens advice bureau. I spoke to the manager of Bridgeton citizens advice bureau, Frank Mosson, a week last Friday, after my surgery had finished. It was after 2 o’clock on Friday afternoon, and that was the first opportunity he had that day, since arriving at about half-past 8 in the morning, to go and get some lunch, but the soup had finished in the shop and there was nothing left for lunch. He had been sitting there all day working through case after case—complex cases—caused by the UK Government.

People rely on the citizens advice bureau in Bridgeton and other ones around the city to get the advice that they very much need and depend on. The jobcentre is being moved away from that local hub and the local support network. The credit union, the library and the housing association are nearby. All those things are right where people need them, but it is being moved out of the community and people are being sent nearly 3 miles away, on two bus journeys, or a 50-minute walk on a good day, if they are healthy and it is not tipping down outside.
Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is making a valid and salient point. When we fought the case for the Ballynahinch social security office, one factor we used was that people in Ballynahinch would have to travel out of the area, so people on benefits who already had minimal money coming into the house would have to find anything from £5 to £10 just to go and sign on. That is wrong.

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. We are fighting the fight in Glasgow about bus fare rises in the city as well, which is making it more challenging for people to get about.

While spending time outside the front of the Bridgeston jobcentre, I spoke to a woman who was on her way in. She was in bits. She was crying and upset. She had come from her house, which was just along the street, and she was in fear of what she would find when she went into the jobcentre, because they were hassling her and sending her letters. She had already been through a lot. She had lost her daughter. She is a WASPI woman, so she should not even have had to look for work in the first place, but this Government are sending this poor woman who had worked her whole life out to work. She was in bits, so we comforted her as best we could. She went through that experience and was understandably even more upset by the time she left. It would have been very hard for her not only to leave the house and go to the jobcentre that was just around the corner, but to get herself up, get on the bus and find her way all the way up to Shettleston and then make the journey back again. That is a challenging journey.

It is also a challenging journey for people who have caring responsibilities, for people who have kids to drop off at nursery and pick up from nursery, or drop off at school and pick up from school, and for people who are tending to elderly relatives who are poorly, which is a very common occurrence for my constituents. The burden of that falls upon women, which has not been picked up in the Government’s lack of an equality impact assessment.

All those things mount up on the pressures of life that my constituents are feeling every single day. This Government are not trying to get them into work. This Government are making it harder for them to even get out of the house in the morning. They are making it really challenging for people to cope. I am fearful that people will just fall out of the system; they will think it is too hard, fall back on their friends and fall into debt, drink, drugs, gambling and all the other social ills that we need to see removed from our people in Glasgow, so that they can progress in their lives. This Government are making it harder for them to cope.

The impact on jobcentre staff has not been mentioned. One of the first things I heard as a candidate in Glasgow was about the pressure on bus fare rises. As my hon. Friend reminds me of a particular case of a constituent in Carmyle. She recently told me that, for her to get to Shettleston jobcentre from the village of Carmyle, which is fairly isolated from the rest of my constituency, she will be required to leave three hours early. How difficult would that be if her appointment was at 9 o’clock in the morning?

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. The limitations of public transport make it difficult for people to get where they need to be at a specific time. In the early stages of this change, I want a guarantee from the Minister that not one single one—not one—of my constituents who arrives late, due to the decision of this Government to close their jobcentre, will be sanctioned. I will be keeping a very close eye on this Government and on this Minister to make sure that none of my constituents ends up being sanctioned because of the decisions his Government have made.

9.41 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am grateful to you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker. I do not now have the opportunity to welcome Mr Deputy Speaker back to the Chair, but this would have been my first opportunity to do so.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) raised the issue of the funding for Police Scotland. I tried to say to him from a sedentary position that he is very welcome to support our call for the £150 million of VAT that the Scottish police are owed. This also gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to his predecessor, Angus Robertson, who announced at the weekend that...
he is standing down as deputy leader of the SNP. He has gone before his time, but we will no doubt see him again in some shape or form.

Maryhill jobcentre in my constituency has already been closed and, just as we predicted, the impacts are already being felt. We have already heard about a number of constituency cases from various Members. At my surgery on Friday, I spoke to the family of a constituent who is being made to claim employment and support allowance. There is some doubt about whether he is receiving what he should, and I hope that the Minister or one of his counterparts will at some point reply to my letter of 13 December about that. This constituent has autism and found it difficult enough to travel to Maryhill in the first place, but it is now even more complicated to get to the Springburn jobcentre. These are exactly the kind of difficulties and challenges that were predicted, and exactly what is panning out.

As we have heard in other speeches, it is important to say that the closure of an individual jobcentre cannot be seen in isolation from the broader range of reforms and indeed—this is what an awful lot of these Conservatives are like—from the broader erosion of the role of the state. The closures compound the impact of the pernicious welfare cuts and the new regime that has been imposed so cackhandedly—we hear universal credit and other issues raised in this Chamber day in, day out—and the situation is also compounded by issues such as bank closures. The Royal Bank of Scotland, of which we are a considerable shareholder, is disappearing from high streets.

We are always told that a post office or citizens advice bureau can stand in for these services, but they are undergoing their own reform processes. We are slowly seeing an erosion of the presence of the state on the high street and in the hearts of communities. That might suit the Conservative Government, but it does not suit SNP Members. It certainly does not suit our constituents, especially the poorest and most vulnerable who rely on these services. We are told that it is great that all these different services are somehow taking over yet, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) mentioned, all these buildings are owned by Telereal Trillium. Well, that is great, because have we not seen what a great success Carillion, Capita and all the rest of these outsourcing companies have turned out to be?

David Linden: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the buildings. Does he not think it ironic that the UK Government have told us that the entire process is about saving money when only last week we approved spending billions on this royal palace we sit in?

Patrick Grady: Precisely; I think that point speaks for itself. Many of us have been for meetings with the Minister or his predecessors in Caxton House, which is owned and operated by Telereal Trillium. Why does the DWP not want to dispose of that asset, turn it into flats that could make a profit for the taxpayer, and ship all its staff and ministerial offices out to Canary Wharf, which would be considerably cheaper?

That question is legitimate, because there has been no guarantee that these closures are the end. If the Minister answers one question from me at the Dispatch Box, it should be this: what guarantee can he give that this is in fact the end, or will other jobcentres in Glasgow be under threat in a future round? Ministers have repeatedly said, “Well, Glasgow has more jobcentres per head of population,” but has anyone stopped to ask why that might be? Is it a legacy of the impact on the economy of the decades of misrule by the Conservatives that has required people to go to jobcentres? Is it to do with the geography and the nature of the city, which are some of the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East touched on? We are still seeking a whole range of reassurances from the Minister. What it boils down to is looking at the welfare system and the entire reform regime, and starting again from scratch.

9.46 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing the debate. This is a critical issue for all Members who represent the city of Glasgow and the Greater Glasgow region, and all areas of Scotland that are affected by the jobcentre closure programme.

I represent the constituency of Glasgow North East. It is adjacent to the constituencies of the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Glasgow East (David Linden), but we are all affected by this jobcentre rationalisation—the closures. Although the jobcentres are not physically located in my constituency, their catchment areas massively overlap it. In the last month, I have already seen the closure of the Maryhill and Possilpark jobcentre, which is to be merged into Springburn. The next tranche of closures will see Parkhead, Bridgeton and Easterhouse jobcentres merged into Shettleston.

That will be a major issue in my constituency, because unemployment there is twice the national average. The argument has been, “Well, there’s over-representation of jobcentres’ footprints in Glasgow,” but that is because historically there has been a higher than average unemployment rate in Glasgow. We also have to look at the historical development of that unemployment rate, which is particularly intractable. It is not the sort of transient unemployment rate that we see with economic cycles; it is a structural rate of unemployment, particularly among those with long-term addiction or IT literacy issues, or people affected by massive exclusion from society. This is just another measure that will push these people to the margins of society.

I have heard the Minister’s DWP colleagues saying that the Department’s objective is to minimise harm and improve general happiness in society. How will this programme deliver that outcome? On any rational assessment, it will serve only to visit further despair, dissatisfaction and problems on the lives of people who are already blighted by a number of structural problems.

Hon. Members have raised this in the House before, but the issue is clear. The geography of Glasgow, particularly in the east and north-east of the city, is very fragmented. Historically, the built environment has been particularly fragmented. Believe it or not, but 80% of the built environment from prior to the second world war
was demolished. We have been subject to huge dislocation, with the development of motorways and the fragmentation of the area, so there is no major town centre that people can visit to access jobcentres. I encourage the Minister to observe the nature of Glasgow’s public transport system, as its privatisation and fragmentation makes things even more complex and difficult.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech in support of the very good speeches that have been made. We have heard about the fear that many people will deny themselves the support to which they are entitled because of the closures. There is evidence from the DWP’s own figures on employment and support allowance and jobseeker’s allowance that people have fallen off the system but have not yet found work. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that that may well end up happening in Glasgow?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point—I absolutely agree. Plenty of people come to my constituency office with their concerns, but the thing that worries me, as a new Member of Parliament, is the people who do not turn up. What keeps me awake at night is thinking about the people sitting in a flat somewhere in the north and east of Glasgow. What does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that that may well end up happening in Glasgow?

Hugh Gaffney: On the point about geography, travel and all the rest, jobcentres have closed and there has been a high number of sanctions, but there has been no leeway and no reprieve, and nobody has looked at these cases again. As we heard earlier, people are learning how to dodge the gangland and how to get to the jobcentre—how to walk there and what the shortcuts are. They can avoid the gangland and how to get to the jobcentre—how to walk there and what the shortcuts are. They can walk over an hour to get there; they are getting sanctioned, how to walk there and what the shortcuts are. They can walk over an hour to get there; they are getting sanctioned, and near to where the citizens advice bureau has recently closed, and it has recently closed on Saracen Street in Possilpark, Milton or Springburn who are sick to the back teeth and worried out of their wits about what they are going to do—how they are going to heat their house or how they are going to feed their family. They are not necessarily made aware of the opportunity that an MP can provide them with.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I absolutely agree. Plenty of people come to my constituency office with their concerns, but the thing that worries me, as a new Member of Parliament, is the people who do not turn up. What keeps me awake at night is thinking about the people sitting in a flat somewhere in Possilpark, Milton or Springburn who are sick to the back teeth and worried out of their wits about what they are going to do—how they are going to heat their house or how they are going to feed their family. They are not necessarily made aware of the opportunity that an MP can provide them with.

Mr Sweeney: I speak for many members of DWP staff in these jobcentres—including members of my own family—and members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents them, and those workers are viscerally against this rationalisation programme. Although they do their best to help people, they are stuck in a Kafkaesque nightmare. Rigid decision-making processes mean that they have to deliver services that they would rather not deliver, but they are forced by policy to do so on pain of disciplinary action. Not only that, but the capacity to help people is severely limited by the huge demand for services in the ever-more depleted number of jobcentres. Staff are physically unable to provide the level of service and interface that they might otherwise offer, such as close coaching in making a universal credit application online. Those things are simply not available.

The alternative is to access Citizens Advice. We have heard about the closure of citizens advice bureaux, and about the dislocation between Citizens Advice and jobcentres. That will only add to the complexity that people face. The Minister has not taken that major issue into consideration.

I think that we are all here in a spirit of making constructive efforts to mitigate the problems faced by our constituents, and I would hope that the Minister approaches the debate in the same spirit. To give a good example of that, I was looking, as a new Member of Parliament, at where to locate my constituency office. I have picked a location on Saracen Street in Possilpark, which is right next to Maryhill Road, where the jobcentre has recently closed, and near to where the citizens advice bureau has recently closed on Saracen Street. I am occupying a building that is only one fifth occupied, but it is currently paid for by Glasgow City Council, Jobs & Business Glasgow and Skills Development Scotland. Why on earth has the Minister not engaged with those agencies to say, “Look, we have a cost-neutral option for providing a jobcentre service in that building”? That could actually be done with the same overhead as would be involved in rationalising provision into a smaller footprint. That is a ready-made opportunity I have observed in the last few months as a Member of Parliament, having looked at these things on the ground.

Why does the Minister not engage with that opportunity, or look at opportunities with housing associations, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned, or other agencies in Glasgow that could offer the possibility of providing the same service footprint within buildings that are already paid for by the public sector? That would be a cost-neutral option. There are options out there to mitigate this. I urge the Minister to take a fresh approach and look at these ideal opportunities to maintain the footprint of the service across Glasgow. It is out there for the taking, so I urge the Minister to do it.

There is a major issue in Glasgow North East and across the adjacent Glasgow constituencies. We have a structural unemployment issue. Universal credit will hit
my constituency later this year, and I can see the demand for jobcentres only increasing. The IT exclusion faced by my constituents is disproportionately higher than in other parts of the UK, with Citizens Advice estimating that 39% of people have never accessed a computer or do not have access to a computer. Library services are increasingly constrained, as is the ability to offer such services to constituents, and the footprint of jobcentres is reducing.

We see the clear outcome of that situation: pushing people who are already marginalised—the people we need to coach into becoming participants in our society and back into being productive members of it—further to the margins of society. That is simply unacceptable. We are all here in the spirit of trying to engage our citizens, and to make them productive and feel that they are engaged and involved in our society. I am sure that we all agree on that at least, but by penalising them and pushing them further away, how on earth are we going to mitigate the problem?

I urge the Minister to approach this debate in the spirit in which we have engaged with it. We have offered meaningful and proactive options to mitigate the jobcentre rationalisation in Glasgow and the Greater Glasgow region. I hope that he will engage with those points and that we can reach to a successful outcome that will at least make the lives of my constituents, and those of other Members who have contributed to the debate, better in the long run.

9.56 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this important debate, and I thank all Members for the kindness that they have shown by inviting me to their constituencies. I have never felt quite so loved by Opposition Members as I do now.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Wait till you come.

Alok Sharma: That is what worries me.

Employment in the United Kingdom is at a record level. In the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, the claimant count has dropped by 50% since 2010. That drop has been replicated across Glasgow city, where there has been a fall of 11,000 in the number of claimants since 2010 to just 13,500 today. In Scotland as a whole, unemployment has fallen by 107,000 since 2010, and I know that all hon. Members will welcome those figures.

Neil Gray: The Minister appears to be saying that a reason for closing these jobcentres is that unemployment is down, and therefore the usage of jobcentres may be down. However, the increased conditionality that is attached to universal credit will increase the need for services and the requirement for people to visit jobcentres. Will he not reflect on that and understand why my colleagues are so keen for the centres to be kept open?

Alok Sharma: Because of the timing of the debate, I have plenty of time to respond to a whole range of issues that have been raised, and I will try to do so throughout my speech.

As I was saying, as the unemployment rate has fallen, the use of jobcentres has also dropped. Right now, across the whole country, there is a 30% under-utilisation of the Jobcentre Plus estate. It is therefore absolutely right that we reconfigure the estate after a 20-year period and make jobcentres fit for the 21st century as not just places where people go to “sign on”, but places they regard as somewhere that will genuinely help them on the road to employment.

Hon. Members have made this point, but let me repeat it. In March 2018, the contract covering the majority of the DWP’s current estate of more than 900 sites comes to an end. This presents a significant opportunity to re-evaluate what we need from our estate. The estate that we required at the start of the contract 20 years ago is different from what we need now. We want an estate that enables us to create more modern, digitally enabled and engaging environments that fit the ethos of universal credit and reflect the falling claimant count.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It is not really modernising it if it is no longer there, so why were we not offered a debate that could have been constructive, reflecting what the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said about co-locating with other services that are provided, instead of a high-handed closure programme on which the public would not even be consulted?

Alok Sharma: I was coming to co-location. Our proposals seek to reduce the floor space we occupy in Glasgow while retaining sites and locations that are accessible to all residents. Of course, we explored options for co-location in sites that we are retaining, but we were not able to identify suitable locations in Glasgow.

10 pm

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

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Amanda Milling.]

Alok Sharma: In Glasgow, where this is particularly relevant, we started with 16 jobcentres that, on average, were only 40% utilised—small, half-empty offices that made it challenging to create a welcoming and positive environment. Back in 2010, with nearly 25,000 claimants, this may have been suitable, but it clearly no longer is. This dated estate across the country comes at a significant cost. Our changes will lead to savings to the taxpayer in the order of £135 million a year over the next 10 years. This money can be reinvested in delivering services for claimants, which I am sure hon. Members agree is a good thing.

Colleagues have mentioned the consultation and what methods were used. We did contact claimants, and jobcentre staff did speak to claimants throughout the process, informing them of the change and supporting them through it. Additionally, there was a discussion about what method was used to work out travel priorities. We got input from local DWP colleagues, who know the local transport available, so the idea that we did not speak to anyone on the ground is unfair.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I do not doubt the Minister spoke to DWP people on the ground; I spoke to them—they told me they googled the transport options.
That is how they worked this stuff out. On co-location, he did not bother to inform Members of Parliament of the decision; we had to read about it in the press. I understand that there was no dialogue with the city council about co-location at the time either, and the Scottish Government were not even consulted—they, too, had to read about it in the press. I am afraid that that does not stack up.

**Alok Sharma:** I think I have made the point about co-location. We are having an estate that is fit for the 21st century. Where a new jobcentre was over 3 miles and 20 minutes away by public transport, online public consultation was held, as hon. Members will know, and we operated on evidence, and we listened and took action as a result. For example, we are introducing a new employability suite at Atlantic Quay and, as hon. Members know, we decided to retain the jobcentre in Castlemilk because of the feedback we received. I hope that hon. Members will therefore feel that we have listened on that point.

As we deliver these changes, this local approach is continuing with stakeholders and through partnership events, and we are working with claimants to find the best solutions for them. So far, we have moved out of 70 sites across the country with success, and these moves are being well received both by claimants and staff, as well as our partners. There was a discussion about how staff and claimants were reacting to the move. The feedback from claimants on the move from Maryhill to Springburn is that the move has been extremely positive, and they welcome access to more facilities. One claimant said:

“I never expected it to be as good as this”.

Furthermore, 23 claimants have transferred to Partick because it is easier for their own journey. I agree it is vital that staff are looked after, but staff have told us that they are happier being part of a bigger team and office, that it allows them to provide an evolving and improved service based on customer needs, that the teams have come together seamlessly and that the team culture, which is incredibly important in any organisation, is developing to maximise benefits to claimants. The idea that this is having a detrimental effect on claimants and staff does not hold true.

**Hugh Gaffney:** I think that this is sarcasm; we call it Glasgow banter. The Minister says the staff are happy, but that is not the feedback that we are getting. I am also concerned about disabled people who have had to travel for an extra half hour to the locations that the Minister is talking about. It costs £4.50 to use the local bus service, and many of those same people are going to food banks.

**Alok Sharma:** I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman feels that there is sarcasm in what I am saying. That is certainly not my intent, and I do not think it is the intent of the DWP staff who have sent us feedback. I can give the hon. Gentleman a list of the things that staff and claimants have said about the moves involving Broxburn and Anniesland. Perhaps things are not quite as some Members feel that they are.

**Mr Sweeney:** Will the Minister give way?

**Alok Sharma:** No. I want to continue.

Claimants moving to Springburn have reported how much better the facilities are, and how welcoming the environment is. Claimants have also said that they have appreciated the individual tailored support. For instance, during the recently completed move of Anniesland to Drumchapel, some claimants who preferred to move to Partick instead were easily accommodated. The impact on staff is also being well managed. The vast majority of staff affected are moving to other locations. A very small number will leave the department, but the vast majority have accepted voluntary redundancy.

**David Linden:** I do not want to test the Minister’s patience, but when I saw that red folder with all the little tabs on it, I rather hoped that he would not just read from a civil service briefing. Members representing constituencies across the city of Glasgow have come here tonight and made very sincere speeches about some of the profound difficulties that are being experienced. The Minister is now the best part of 10 minutes into his speech, and he has not touched on the territorialism, the transport or the digital exclusion. May I ask him, in the time that remains, to address the points that we have raised? It is all well and good for him to reel off place names like Atlantic Quay, but I do not think he would know where Atlantic Quay was in relation to Gartloch. The best thing he could do is agree right now to come to the city of Glasgow and listen and respond to local people—not DWP bigwigs, but local people in citizens advice bureaux and police stations, and those who will be affected.

**Alok Sharma:** I do not think that the people who are working incredibly hard in these jobcentres would appreciate being referred to as bigwigs. Since becoming the Minister in this particular role, I have been to a number of jobcentres, not in Scotland but in England, and I can tell the House that those people are extremely motivated to help the people whom they are serving and helping to get into work. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) that we should pay tribute to them rather than suggesting that they are either joking with us or doing something worse.

Let me make clear that in the Glasgow Jobcentre Plus network, no redundancies are expected. The overall rationalisation of the estate is definitely not a staff reduction exercise. Indeed, the number of jobcentre staff will be higher at the end of this process than at the start, with an additional 5,000 work coaches across the country. After the rationalisations there will still be 10 jobcentres in Glasgow, which—as we heard earlier—is more per head of population than in nearly all other cities in the UK. Those 10 jobcentres will be welcoming, positive places, offering training sessions, with employers helping people to get back into work. They will create a sense of partnership between work coaches, claimants and other organisations. For staff, they will offer greater progression and development opportunities. They will enable staff to do the job that they cherish, which is helping people to move into independence and lifelong careers.

A number of other points were raised, and, as I have enough time, I will address them. As part of the consultation, some of which was online, we talked to members of staff and trade unions. A point was raised about equality impacts, and I know the hon. Member for Glasgow South raised this with the former Secretary of State during the July debate. The then Secretary of State said about the equality impact assessment that the
Government had fulfilled our statutory duties, as we always do. Throughout the redesign of our estate, the Department has been mindful of its duties under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and the impact of its plans on its colleagues and customers. Equality analysis carried out in respect of individual sites has not been published; that is not the policy, but the DWP will respond to freedom of information requests for equality analysis reports in the normal course of business.

A point was made about travel costs. The reimbursement of travel costs is available to claimants when they are required to attend the jobcentre for appointments other than mandatory fortnightly signing appointments. Additionally, jobseekers who have been claiming universal credit or jobseeker’s allowance for more than 13 weeks can apply for a Jobcentre Plus travel discount card.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) raised a point about having written to me; I have indeed written back to him and I hope he will receive that letter very shortly. A number of colleagues have invited me to visit their constituencies. I committed in DWP orals earlier today to come to Scotland, and said I would have a discussion with the hon. Gentleman about potentially coming to his constituency, but as part of my job I go around the country—across England, Scotland and elsewhere—to make sure I am hearing at first hand the experiences of people working in these centres, the claimants and also employers in those areas.

There was a discussion about sanctions, and I want to make it clear that a decision maker takes all the claimant’s individual circumstances into account before making a decision, and there has to be very good evidence. Claimants have the opportunity to come back and set out their case. This discretion is available and I hope it will be used by decision makers in the case of sanctions.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Does the Minister have any statistics on users of these jobcentres who have been sanctioned as a result of the amalgamation?

Alok Sharma: I have no figures in front of me now, but I undertake to write to the hon. Gentleman if these figures are available within the system.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned gangs. That is an important point. As part of our consultation, we engaged with Community Safety Glasgow and the Glasgow City Council strategic community partnership group, and they were not aware of any gang-related issues pertaining to potential jobcentre closures.

David Linden: As someone involved in the local community, I would have thought that if we want to ask people on the frontline about crime, we might ask the police. Did the Minister speak to local police officers?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have moved to this post in the last few weeks, but I understand that a dialogue takes place with Police Scotland.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of people who cannot access online services and find it hard to get to a jobcentre. Face-to-face support with work coaches is available at jobcentres and continues to be a core part of the service we deliver. People can also interact face to face, by email or telephone or by post.

I have a point of correction to make. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) suggested that Caxton House was owned by Telereal Trillium. It is not: there is an underlying lease.

We have had a wide-ranging debate and I have listened to colleagues, and I completely understand that they put forward the view of their constituents and the people they know locally. I have set out what we have heard through our dialogue with people working in jobcentres and with claimants who have transferred to other jobcentres. I will come to Scotland and I will meet and talk to a range of individuals there.

We have had a long debate, and I should like to conclude by saying that this is obviously a major change for the Department, as well as for our claimants and staff. However, retaining our current estate would miss the opportunity to improve value for taxpayers’ money and to create an estate that will meet the needs of DWP claimants now and in the future. These changes are the result of careful analysis and planning. I appreciate hon. Members’ concerns about the closures, but the rationale for these changes and the benefits that they will deliver for claimants and our staff are clear.

Question put and agreed to.

10.15 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 6 February 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Middle Level Bill

Motion made, That the Bill, as amended, be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Tuesday 20 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Grenfell Tower: Mental Health

1. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the mental health needs of survivors and the wider community affected by the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to pay tribute to the NHS staff who continue to work tirelessly to support the victims of the fire and their families. So far, more than 4,000 contacts have been made. Over 400 adults are currently in treatment and 96 have completed their treatment.

Emma Dent Coad: We have heard the Minister’s words and a litany of numbers. I have two further questions. First, is she considering long-term funding for mental health services around Grenfell, which will be needed, and need to be planned for, for possibly up to five years? Secondly, is she addressing the severe shortage of acute beds for those suffering mental health crises, which was mentioned earlier, particularly as there is an entire ward under lock and key at the Gordon Hospital due to lack of staff funding and a huge need for acute beds there?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is quite right to press me on these issues. Clearly, there is going to be ongoing trauma, and we need to pay attention to that and make sure that there are adequate resources. I can assure her that this is very high on the list of priorities for the ministerial group. We have committed £23.9 million of national Government funds to address survivors’ needs, with additional expenditure on wider support. The autumn Budget committed a further £28 million to help support victims. I can also assure her that I am in regular contact with Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust to make sure that we are doing our bit to address this need.

Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Trust

2. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of trends in the time taken between referral and treatment for patients at hospitals in Northern Lincolnshire and Goole in the past 12 months.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): In the past 12 months, the average waiting time for patients to start consultant-led treatment at hospitals in northern Lincolnshire and Goole was about nine weeks. We recognise that some trusts face particular challenges with their waiting lists due to rising demand. That is why a package of support, including a system-wide improvement board, has been established within the trust.

Melanie Onn: The statistics that the Minister has given are very interesting. The Library has said that there is an average wait of 32 weeks—far longer than the nine weeks that he mentioned—and that it is six weeks longer in 2017 than it was in 2016. This is happening on his watch. What is he going to do? My constituents do not accept that it is good enough.

Stephen Barclay: I think the hon. Lady prepared her follow-up before hearing the answer. There is an improvement board established within the trust, chaired by NHS Improvement, that is tasked with reducing waiting times and ensuring that the standard is improved. Currently, the average time waited is 11 weeks for out-patients and seven weeks for in-patients.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Will the Minister give an assurance that the support that NHS Improvement is giving to the trust will continue? He will know that this is the second time that the trust has been in special measures, and clearly we need continuing support. Will he also assure us that he will visit the trust—a promise that was made by his predecessor?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to point out the need to give support to this trust. That is why a wider package of £1.6 billion of funding has been given to the NHS to improve accident and emergency and elective care performance. Alongside that, we have specific work through NHS Improvement to address some of the particular issues that he alluded to in his trust.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) rose—

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We might hear from the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) later, but I say to him in all friendly courtesy that while Kingswood no doubt has a great deal to be said for it, as does Congleton, both have one thing in common, and that is that they are a very long way from northern Lincolnshire.
Health and Social Care Services

3. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to integrate local health and social care services.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Caroline Dinenage): The fact that the Department has been renamed the Department of Health and Social Care reflects both their interdependence and our commitment to achieve co-ordinated care tailored to individual needs. The better care fund is a national integration programme that helps the NHS and local government to deliver better, more joined-up services.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer and welcome her to her place. The proposal to build a community health centre in Thornbury and Frenchay is an essential part of joining up health and social care in South Gloucestershire. Will the Minister join me in highlighting the importance of Thornbury health centre and in pressing South Gloucestershire clinical commissioning group to make progress with the project as quickly as possible, after years of unnecessary delays?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. He is right to do so, and proposals such as those for Thornbury health centre are crucial for ensuring that health and social care are truly integrated and centred around each individual in the community. I advised that South Gloucestershire CCG remains committed to progressing those plans as soon as possible and that the local NHS expects to be able to provide an update on plans next month.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the situation surrounding pain infusion treatment for patients in Hull and East Riding. Many of the 86 patients who lose that treatment will require increasing levels of social care. Consultants have even written letters to the CCG to say that if that treatment is removed, there is an increased risk of mortality for those patients. Will the Minister meet me urgently to discuss that and write to the CCG to ask it to urgently review its decision in the light of the evidence from consultants?

Caroline Dinenage: Of course I am aware of the situation concerning pain infusion treatment for patients in Hull and East Riding. Many of the 86 patients who lose that treatment will require increasing levels of social care. Consultants have even written letters to the CCG to say that if that treatment is removed, there is an increased risk of mortality for those patients. Will the Minister meet me urgently to discuss that and write to the CCG to ask it to urgently review its decision in the light of the evidence from consultants?

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the integration of health and social care is so important to the future success of the NHS that everything needs to be done to speed up the programme to integrate them better? Will she join me in encouraging a speedier approach to that method in Surrey, Sussex and Kent?

Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The better care fund is already having a fantastic impact in the area. We are developing metrics for assessing progress on integration by local area, particularly at the interface of health and social care. We need to proceed with this as rapidly as possible, and I am sure that with his backing, that will happen in his local area.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): It is of course very important that we see integration of the two services, but the fact remains that there is just not enough money. Over a year ago, one of the Minister’s predecessors praised my authority in Halton for the work it was doing in this area, but Halton is now on the brink in terms of the money it has and its ability to deliver its statutory duties. There is simply not enough money, and the Government keep trying to avoid that.

Caroline Dinenage: We have provided £2 billion of extra funding over the next three years to help councils commission high-quality services, in addition to giving councils access to up to £9.25 billion of dedicated social care funding by 2019-20.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Minister look at the benefits of independent living schemes such as Priory View, pioneered by Central Bedfordshire Council, which bring reduced hospital admissions and reduced demands on social care through greater socialisation and more use of exercise classes?

Caroline Dinenage: Independent living schemes can keep people living healthier, more independent lives for much longer and provide the comradeship and camaraderie that keep people active and healthier. My hon. Friend is right to raise their importance, and the Government very much support them.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): With reference to the integration of health and social care, the Minister may be aware that I have two outstanding respite and rehab homes in Eastbourne called Milton Grange and Firwood House. They are both under threat of closure by the county council, which says that central Government are not giving it enough money. Those homes serve a crucial purpose in supporting the local hospital. Will the Minister agree to meet me and representatives from the county council to work out a way to find the funds to keep both those vital homes open?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to stand up for the good-quality respite in his local area. The Care Act 2014 requires local authorities to shape local markets and ensure that they give a sustainable, high-quality local offer. I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss that further.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister to her place. One model of integration that has aroused considerable concern is the so-called accountable care organisation model. Many are concerned that that means greater private sector involvement, and given legitimate worries about Carillion going bust, Capita not being able to support GPs and Virgin suing the NHS, those concerns are well founded. Can the Minister rule out any private sector involvement in ACOs? Will she also delay laying the relevant regulations to establish an ACO until after the two judicial reviews and the NHS England consultation?
Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this. NHS England is consulting on that at the moment, and I can confirm that no regulations will be laid until that consultation has been completed.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for offering us that clarification. May I therefore ask her about funding? The integration of health and social care needs more funding, yet the NHS is going through the biggest financial squeeze in its history and social care has been cut by billions since 2010. A few moments ago, the Minister said that the funding is adequate, but if the funding is adequate across health and social care, why are delayed discharges of care up 50%, and why did NHS England say on Friday that for the rest of this year the A&E target has in effect been abandoned?

Caroline Dinenage: We recognise that there are pressures on our social care as the population ages. In the short term, we have of course made the extra £2 billion of funding available to local authorities; in the medium term, we need to make sure that best practice is observed across all local authorities and NHS trusts; and in the long term, we will be coming forward with a Green Paper on social care later this year.

Routes into Nursing

4. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps he is taking to broaden routes into nursing.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The NHS needs more nurses, which is why we are making big changes for new entries into the profession, including the new nurse associate role and new nurse degree apprenticeships.

Bim Afolami: I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State values the degree apprenticeship as a way to provide further routes into nursing, but will he consider working with the Treasury and across the Government to increase the funding that educational establishments receive from the Institute for Apprenticeships for nursing courses, to further incentivise universities and colleges to offer more places on those courses?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question. It will strengthen my hand with the Department for Education, which decides what levels of funding are made available from the Institute for Apprenticeships. It has actually given us the highest level of funding, at £27,000, but we never say no to more.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): But will the Secretary of State admit that he made a basic error by scrapping nurse bursaries, which has led to a 23% fall in the number of people applying to nurse courses? Why does he not look at that if he wants to widen the entrance into nursing?

Mr Hunt: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady was listening to the answer I just gave, but the truth is—

Ms Eagle: I always listen to you.

Mr Hunt: I am most grateful. That is a very rare compliment, so I shall savour it. I would gently say to her that the point about nurse degree apprenticeships is that it is possible to transition into nursing from being a healthcare assistant without any fees being paid at all. That is why it is a huge and highly significant change.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) is sporting what appears to me to be a very fetching suffragette rosette, it is perhaps timely to record that in the great success our national health service has been under successive Governments, I think I am right in saying, as things stand, that well over 70% of the people who make it great are women.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Following the recent inquiry by the Select Committee on Health into the nursing workforce, we absolutely welcome the new routes into nursing, including the new role of nursing associate. However, one of the issues highlighted strongly was the need to retain our existing nursing workforce as well as to recruit into it. Will the Secretary of State comment on that?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks very wisely—we do need to be better at retaining our existing workforce. I think that is why the Treasury has given me extra latitude in negotiations on the pay rise—those discussions are currently happening—but we also need to be much better at flexible working and at recognising the challenges people have in their ordinary working lives.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Unlike in Scotland, where student nurses receive free tuition and a nursing bursary of over £6,500 a year, nurses in England now face debts of £50,000 on graduation. Owing to that, training applications in England have dropped by a third since 2015, and the new nursing apprenticeship attracted only 30 trainees against a target of 1,000. Will the Secretary of State not accept that he got it wrong, and reinstate the nursing bursary?

Mr Hunt: I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman say that, because we have published a draft of a workforce strategy in this country, but I notice that Audit Scotland says that in Scotland there is a lack of a long-term strategic plan for the workforce. I gently say to him that there are workforce pressures across the United Kingdom. We have a plan to dramatically increase the number of nurses that we employ in the NHS, and I am sure many people in Scotland would like to see the same there.

Martyn Day: The Secretary of State has claimed that the removal of the bursary would fund 10,000 extra training places, but the first 5,000 will start only this autumn and the nurses will qualify only in 2021. With more than 36,000 nursing vacancies in England, more nurses leaving than joining and a 90% drop in EU nurses coming to the UK because of Brexit, exactly who does he expect to care for patients in the meantime?

Mr Hunt: As we discussed earlier, we are broadening the routes into nursing from just traditional higher education courses, including nurse apprenticeships and people being able to train on the job over four years in a hospital. We hope that a whole group of healthcare assistants who currently find it difficult to get into nursing can become nurses. I think that would be very welcome in Scotland as well.
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Will the Secretary of State update the House on progress made in reducing the cost of agency nurses so that the money can be reinvested in full-time nursing?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. It is one of the great successes of NHS Improvement, which should be celebrated, that it has brought down the amount spent on agency nursing by £1 billion in the last couple of years. That is a huge achievement. Every penny of that goes back into frontline care.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Government cut the number of nurse training places in 2010, and when they scrapped bursaries applications from mature students suffered particularly. What is the point of blaming trusts for hiring agency staff when the Government simply do not train enough nurses to fill the vacancies?

Mr Hunt: Perhaps I should set the record straight for the hon. Lady. We have 52,000 nurses in training—more than was ever the case under the last Labour Government, who were planning to cut nurse training places by 6%. We are planning to increase them by 25%. That shows our commitment to nursing.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Yesterday, the Royal College of Nursing reported on the total failure of Government policies to increase the nursing workforce. As we have just heard, the Government hoped to recruit 1,000 trainees to the nursing apprenticeship, but ended up with just 30. This year, the number applying to university to study nursing has so far fallen by a staggering 33%. We have a workforce crisis exacerbated by badly thought out policies, so is it not time that the Secretary of State admitted that scrapping the bursary was a mistake?

Mr Hunt: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but that is not the first time that he has presented a somewhat incomplete picture of what is actually happening. In the last five years, we have 15,700 more nurses, and the reason for those vacancies and for the pressure is that, as he knows very well, under the last Labour Government we had Mid Staffs, which was a crisis of short staffing that this Government are putting right. That is why we want to recruit those extra nurses.

Children and Young People: Mental Health

5. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve mental health provision for children and young people. [903775]

8. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve mental health provision for children and young people. [903780]

13. Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve mental health provision for children and young people. [903785]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This week is Children’s Mental Health Week, and still too many children and young people wait too long for their mental health provision in the NHS. That is why, by the end of next year, we will have invested an extra £1.4 billion, meaning that 70,000 extra children and young people are seen every year.

Michelle Donelan: A constituent’s 14-year-old son suffers severe obsessive compulsive disorder, resulting in self-harm. Treatment options have failed and his doctor recommends an intensive residential programme, but as Ministers are aware, places are very limited. He has been waiting seven weeks and counting, with 24-hour parental support and supervision. What more can be done to ensure that that boy and other adolescents who are in desperate need of help get that help before it is too late?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, and I understand that in that particular case clinicians are meeting this week to resolve those issues. She is right: we need to expand the number of beds available for children and young people. They are at a record level—1,440, and that went up by another 81 last year—but more needs to be done, which is why we published our children and young people’s mental health Green Paper.

Edward Argar: I have been approached by a number of my constituents in Leicestershire who are concerned about the wait between a referral to child and adolescent mental health services and the allocation of a named caseworker and formal treatment. Will my right hon. Friend enlarge on how the steps that he is taking, which he has set out, will help to reduce such waits in Leicestershire and across the country?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. The simple truth is that it is a tragedy for every child who has to wait too long to access mental health care, because half of all mental health conditions become established before the age of 14. If we do not nip them in the bud, they can get a lot worse. What are we doing? We are setting up a whole new service inside schools to spot such problems earlier and we are going to introduce a waiting time target for CAMHS appointments.

Kirstene Hair: In 2016-17, 65% of young people in England with eating disorders started urgent treatment within one week of referral. What has been done to ensure that the target of 95% by 2020 will be reached? Does the Secretary of State share my belief that waiting time targets are a vital tool for improving eating disorder treatment and should be in place in all parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with that. I join my hon. Friend in supporting the introduction of waiting time targets in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom. How are we doing so far? In terms of the need for urgent treatment for eating disorders, we are hitting 79%, so we are on our way to the 95% target and we want to get there as soon as we can.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I listened very carefully to what the Secretary of State said about the additional funding that is supposed to be reaching the frontline, but the Young Person’s Advisory Service, which is the main service for young people’s mental health in Liverpool, has seen a £757,000 cut—a
Mr Hunt: I did not; I said the opposite. I said that we need to do a lot more and I told the House what we are doing. If the hon. Lady looks at what is happening in her own clinical commissioning group, she will see that the proportion that is spent on mental health has gone up from 12.3% to 13%. She will see that this Government have done a huge amount on mental health. In 13 years, Labour did not have any waiting time targets for mental health and did not introduce parity of esteem—a whole range of things that are now happening and that she should support.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): Will the Government commission more extensive research into the causes of mental ill health among children and young people, both pre and post-natal, with a view to preventing as much ill health as possible?

Mr Hunt: We are absolutely going to do that. We have a big programme of expansion in perinatal health support, because there is a lot of evidence that pressures on mothers around the time of birth transmit to their children and can leave lasting damage.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Specialist mental health crisis care for young people in south Cumbria is available only between the hours of 9 and 5 from Monday to Friday. Does the Secretary of State agree that in the light of the Care Quality Commission’s recent damning report of the partnership trust, that is not acceptable? Will he join me in asking the Morecambe Bay CCG to ensure that there is out-of-hours and weekend care for all people?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to look into that issue. The hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), did a huge amount to set up crisis care provision around the country. We need to build on that for the simple reason that, if we are to have parity of esteem, people need to be able to get help in a mental health crisis, just as they are if something goes wrong with their physical health.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as well as improving the treatment of adolescent ill health, everything possible needs to be done to prevent crisis from occurring in the first place? Does he agree that we need more research into why we are seeing a surge in Cheltenham and elsewhere in the world, so that clinicians can best tailor their response?

Mr Hunt: This is something that my hon. Friend has thought a lot about. A particular area of concern is the growth in mental health problems in young women between the ages of 18 and 24. We are looking carefully at whether that relates to social media use, which is an additional pressure that many of us did not face when we were that age. I thank him for his campaigning on this issue.

19. [903791] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The figures show that, on average, children and young people have to visit their GP three times before a referral is made for a specialist mental health assessment. Sometimes, they then have to wait six months for treatment. In Lewisham, the CAMHS budget is being cut, which is likely to result in even longer waiting times for treatment. The right hon. Gentleman said that these waiting times are a tragedy, but how bad do things have to get before the Government take action?

Mr Hunt: With respect, we are taking action. Last year, spending on mental health went up by £575 million and four out of five CCGs increased their mental health spend by more than their overall spend. This year, all CCGs will do that. That will apply in Lewisham, as it will everywhere else in the country.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Under plans announced by NHS England, child victims of sexual assault in Stoke-on-Trent would have to travel as far as Birmingham to receive the vital support that they need. Will the Secretary of State agree to look urgently into the proposals to remove child sexual assault referral services from the city?

Mr Hunt: I will happily do so.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Research by the Children’s Commissioner revealed that the spend on children and young people’s mental health services varied by CCG from 0.2% to 9%, resulting in services in some areas being described as “shockingly poor”. Can the Secretary of State therefore explain the reason for the variation, and will he commit today to matching Labour’s pledge to increase the proportion of the mental health budget spend on CAMHS services?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to shine a light on that variation, and that is why this Government have introduced Ofsted ratings for all CCGs—to make sure that we understand. It is not just in children and young people’s mental health, but in all mental health where we see that variation. Specifically when it comes to children and young people’s mental health, she will be pleased to know that last year overall spending went up by 20%, and the Green Paper that we published announced an additional £300 million in investment.

Children’s Health


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): This Government want to see all children and young people get the best start in life. We are implementing a wide range of policies to improve child health, including the most ambitious childhood obesity plan in the world, transformation of children’s mental health and maternity services, improving immunisation rates and tackling child sexual abuse.

Gavin Newlands: The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health recently praised NHS Scotland’s innovations to improve children’s health. The Scottish
initiative Childsmile, which is now 10 years old, has greatly improved children’s dental health, reducing fillings by 24% and cutting annual dental treatment by £5 million. It is good that the UK Government have finally set up trial sites, but with multiple dental extractions under general anaesthetic up by 11%, why is this initiative not being rolled out to all children in England?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that, and we are always keen to respond to any representations made on this very important issue. We are also very keen to learn from the other nations about this area, because it is clear that the more we can do with early intervention in childhood, the better we protect people’s long-term health. I will look more specifically into that.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a children’s doctor, children’s health is very important to me, and the case of children’s doctor, Dr Bawa-Garba, worries me and doctors up and down the country. In NHS practice, I have seen the adverse effect on reflective practice and the impact that it has on staff morale. Ultimately, that will impact on patient safety. I know that the Secretary of State shares my concerns, and I ask him to tell the House what he is going to do about it.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be addressing that in a little while. The whole issue of reflective learning is important. We should not, through this case, prevent people from being honest about the experiences that they have had.

20. [903793] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Energy drinks packed with caffeine have been connected to problems with children’s health. Tesco, Asda and Aldi have banned the sale of these drinks to under-16s, so will the Government do the same?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are becoming increasingly conscious of drinks with additional unnatural stimulants and their impact on people’s health generally, but obviously that becomes more acute with children’s health, so we will look more closely at it. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted the initiatives that have been taken by individual retailers, because it is up to them to implement good practice.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to achieve strong health and good mental health for children is at the very earliest stages and through forming a strong attachment between that child and their parent in the first 1,001 days from conception? If so, why is there not more in the mental health Green Paper about perinatal mental health?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The Green Paper very much focuses on what we are doing in schools, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right. He highlights the earliest of early intervention, and one reason why we are investing so much more in perinatal mental health is to ensure that the bonds between mother and baby are as strong as they can possibly be.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) and the Minister’s answer, may I revisit the issue of energy drinks? She might know that a 500 ml can of energy drink contains 12 teaspoons of sugar and the same amount of caffeine as a double espresso, yet energy drinks are being sold for as little as 25p to children as young as 10, and around one in three young people say they regularly consume them. Given the health risks associated with energy drinks, will she tell me more about what steps she and her Department are taking to reduce energy drink sales to and consumption by children?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady will know that action against sugar is very much part of the childhood obesity plan that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), is taking forward, but there is a lot more we can do to address the concerns about caffeine, which I know is high on his “to do” list. We will no doubt have more exchanges on this subject in due course.

Maternity Transformation Programme

7. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What progress his Department has made on implementing the maternity transformation programme.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Our ambition was to halve the number of maternal deaths, neonatal deaths, neonatal injuries and stillbirths by 2030, but because of the progress we have made with our maternity safety programme, we have brought that forward to 2025.

Alison Thewliss: I am glad to hear that progress is being made. The World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative’s 2016 report highlighted several gaps in access to breastfeeding support, including deficiencies in clinical training and a lack of integration between the NHS and voluntary sector services. What can be done through the maternity transformation programme to ensure that women can access, and health professionals can provide, the best-quality infant feeding advice right across the country?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that area. It is one of six high-impact areas we are focusing on throughout the country. We are making progress, but we know we could do a lot better.

NHS Trusts: VAT Status

9. Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the VAT status of NHS trusts.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): There are no plans to hold discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the VAT status of NHS trusts.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for that reply, although I suggest it ought to be reconsidered. NHS trusts desperate to avoid financial difficulties appear to have found a
new magic money tree: setting up wholly owned subsidiaries to avoid paying substantial amounts of tax to the Treasury. Rather than encouraging this tax dodging and further fragmenting the NHS, why do the Secretary of State and his friend the Chancellor not either ban this practice or agree to let them all have the VAT exemptions?

Stephen Barclay: The Department wrote to all NHS and foundation trusts in September 2017 to remind them that tax avoidance schemes should not be entered into in any circumstances, but the hon. Lady makes a slightly strange point. She seems to be arguing that NHS hospitals are, in essence, paying too much tax to the Treasury, rather than having that money within the NHS. These subsidiaries are 100% owned by trusts themselves.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Government have already legislated for but not implemented a proposal to introduce a £95,000 limit on exit payments for public servants in the NHS. Would it not be sensible, in the meantime, to charge NHS trusts VAT on any exit payments in excess of £95,000 to deter this waste of public resources?

Stephen Barclay: I admire how the VAT element of the original question was brought into a discussion of exit payments. As my hon. Friend will be well aware, I visited the issue of exit payments frequently as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and I am happy to discuss it further with him.

National Food Crime Unit

10. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): If he will increase funding for the Food Standards Agency’s national food crime unit.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Caroline Dinenage): The Food Standards Agency’s national food crime unit is crucial to protecting consumers from serious criminal activity that impacts on the safety of their food and drink. I understand that the FSA is exploring options for the unit’s future funding, and a decision is expected in late spring.

Neil Parish: The FSA is answerable to the Department of Health and Social Care for food safety, but there are a lot of assurance schemes that do not really answer to anybody and which the FSA needs to be able to bring together. That is where the crime unit could do a really good job, so anything the Minister can do to get that money and get the crime unit up and running would be very good.

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee for his advice. I know that he is keen and astute on this subject. Ensuring that food businesses meet their safety responsibilities is, of course, one of the FSA’s most important roles. It is developing a new regulatory model and actively engaging with third-party assurance scheme owners to determine how information and data can be shared and more effectively used by regulators.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I send a brief message of congratulation to the Secretary of State for his rapid response to President Trump’s remarks about the values of the NHS?

As chair of the Westminster Commission on Autism, let me now ask the Secretary of State a serious question. We are about to produce a report on the fake medicine that is sold to families with an autistic child. When the report is published, in the next few days, will the Secretary of State act very quickly to stop this dreadful trade?

Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure that that is altogether related to the main question.

Mr Sheerman: It is related to the Food Standards Agency.

Mr Speaker: Possibly. Anyway, it was a worthy effort, and I will give the hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt. Let us now hear from the Minister.

Caroline Dinenage: As the hon. Gentleman was so very charming to the Secretary of State, we will of course look into the issue.

Hospitals in Special Measures

11. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What recent progress he has made on improving the performance of hospitals in special measures.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): It is five years today since the landmark publication of the Francis report on the Mid Staffordshire Foundation NHS Trust. Since then the NHS has made a huge number of changes, not the least being that 34 trusts have gone into special measures and 19 have come out. I particularly congratulate the West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust on coming out of special measures in January and securing a “good” score for its caring: that was a fantastic achievement by its staff.

Julian Sturdy: Given that York’s local health service is in special measures, the additional funds in the Budget to deal with winter health pressures were very welcome. I am pleased to say that York NHS has already received a tranche of those funds, but the remainder of its share has not been released, although discussions with NHS Improvement are ongoing. Will the Secretary of State undertake to look into the situation, as a matter of urgency?

Mr Hunt: I will happily do so.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the importance of King’s College Hospital to my constituents. In 2009, it was rated “excellent” and one of the top hospitals in the country; now it is missing its A&E waiting time targets and a key cancer treatment target, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of cancelled operations, and it is in special measures. The Government must take some responsibility for that. They must not wash their hands of it. Will they step up to the plate and help King’s by, for instance, giving it the resources that it needs?

Mr Hunt: Let me reassure the right hon. Lady that we do not wash our hands of any trusts that go into special measures. The point of the special
measures regime is to highlight where Government intervention is necessary. I know the right hon. and learned Lady will agree that a huge amount of very fine treatment happens at King’s every single day, but it is having profound issues in relation to the management of its finances and some of its waiting times, which is why we are doing everything we can to support it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With a high delayed-discharge rate of 10%, Kettering General Hospital, which is in special measures, has 60 patients on any one day who have completed their treatment and await their transfer into the community. Northamptonshire County Council has been given millions of pounds, via the better care fund, but it is simply not up to the job. What can be done in those circumstances?

Mr Hunt: I am well aware of the pressures at Kettering. It is a very busy hospital, and it has undergone a number of changes of management. However, I can reassure my hon. Friend that a big improvement package is there to support it and that we want to take it out of special measures as soon as possible.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The previous chair of King’s College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust resigned because he had concluded that the funding provided for King’s had placed the trust in an impossible position. The current interim chair has said that the proportion of GDP spent on health and social care needs to rise to match that in other European countries if our NHS is to be sustainable. When will the Secretary of State heed the warning cries and commit the funding that King’s and, more widely, our NHS need in order to deliver care to our constituents?

Mr Hunt: We spend 9.9% of our GDP on health. The European Union spends 15%, and the richer EU countries spend 9.6%—slightly less than us, on average. We are able to spend more because this Government put the economy back on its feet.

Pharmacy Services

12. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What plans he has to expand the services provided by pharmacies to assist GPs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): It is good to be back.

As I have repeatedly said at the Dispatch Box, pharmacies are a vital frontline service for our NHS, with over 1.2 million health-related visits every day. Community pharmacies have again stepped up during this winter period, and I thank them for their hard work. They have vaccinated more than 1 million people against seasonal flu since October. The Government are committed to ensuring that pharmacies and pharmacists are further embedded in the wider health service.

Mrs Latham: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will he come to Derby to meet a constituent who has pharmacies that are working very hard to keep patients out of hospital, therefore saving the NHS money through their innovative ideas?

Steve Brine: Yes, I will do that. I think we have a provisional date in the diary in early March. We continue to promote the Pharmacy First scheme. Next month, we will launch the £2 million Stay Well pharmacy campaign to continue to promote the idea of community pharmacy as the first port of call for many minor health concerns. I am out and about visiting pharmacies—I was at one last week—and I will be very pleased to come to see my hon. Friend.

21. [903795] Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that a disproportionate number of GPs are currently heading towards retirement. Therefore, support for primary care services is vital. What practical steps can be taken to increase the use of pharmacies and to seek alternatives to GP services more generally?

Steve Brine: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are a record number of training places. We know that one of the main reasons why GPs leave general practice is retirement, which is why we have put in place comprehensive measures to ensure that we meet our commitment to deliver an extra 5,000 GPs in the NHS by 2020. GP career plus, the GP retention scheme and the national GP induction and refresher scheme will all help to get valuable experienced GPs back into our NHS, doing the valuable work our constituents so benefit from.

GP Services

14. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the capacity and availability of GP services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): We recognise the acute shortages in general practice, which is why we remain, as I said in my previous answer, committed to delivering the additional 5,000 doctors in general practice by 2020. Millions of patients have already benefited from being able to access evening and weekend GP appointments. We expect everyone in England to have access to this by March 2019.

Huw Merriman: I am fortunate to work very closely with the GPs in my constituency. It would be appear that, for a variety of reasons, younger GPs are not as likely to buy into the partnership model as their predecessors. Does the Minister agree that we need a mixed model of both private partnership contractor and direct NHS state provision if we are to get GPs to the places where the public need them?

Steve Brine: My hon. Friend works very closely with the GPs and commissioning groups in his constituency and they value him greatly as a local MP. We back the partnership model. As the Secretary of State said last month at the Royal College of General Practitioners, we believe in its many benefits as the cornerstone of primary care. That is why we are embarking on a new piece of work to explore other models with the British Medical Association and the RCGP, which have kindly agreed to work with us on this, and to look at the partnership model in the context of primary care at scale.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Dr Williams, you wanted to speak a moment ago; have you abandoned the idea?

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Very well.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): NHS figures continue to show an alarming decline in the number of family doctors working across the north-east, which is why I am supporting the University of Sunderland bid to establish a new medical school. Does the Minister accept that prioritising training places in areas of greatest need is the best long-term solution to the crisis facing general practice?

Steve Brine: There are record numbers in training, and I take note of the hon. Lady’s bid for the training school. One reason the Department and my brief have placed such importance on recruiting new GPs into the NHS in England and on making sure that people can stay working in the NHS in England is that we see general practice, rightly, as the cornerstone of the health service.

Topical Questions

T1. [903796] Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities. And you wear it well, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the right hon. Lady is referring to my age, a proposition on which I think the House would have to divide, or the rosette.

Mr Speaker: [Interruption.] Yes, I thought she meant the rosette.

Mr Jeremy Hunt: On the day that we mark the 100th anniversary of giving a voice to women, I want to update the House on concerns in the medical profession that we may not be giving a voice to doctors and other clinicians in the way that freedom to be able to learn from mistakes. The House will know that, as a Government Minister, I cannot comment on a court ruling, but it is fair to say that the recent Dr Bawa-Garba case has caused huge concern, so today I can announce that I have asked Professor Sir Norman Williams, former president of the Royal College of Surgeons and my senior clinical adviser, to conduct a rapid review into the application of gross negligence manslaughter in healthcare.

Working with senior lawyers, Sir Norman will review how we ensure the vital role of reflective learning, openness and transparency is protected so that mistakes are learned from and not covered up, how we ensure that there is clarity about where the line is drawn between gross negligence manslaughter and ordinary human error in medical practice so that doctors and other health professionals know where they stand in respect of criminal liability or professional misconduct, and any lessons that need to be learned by the General Medical Council and other professional regulators. I will engage the devolved Administrations, the Justice Secretary and the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care in this vital review, which will report to me before the end of April 2018.

Anna Soubry: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer—or rather, for that statement—and also for the robust tweets that he makes on that and many other issues. Would he be amenable to the idea of following on Twitter the Oliver King Foundation? On the foundation’s advice, I have written to all the schools in Broxtowe urging them to install defibrillators. This is an important project. What assistance is the Department of Health giving to such an admirable charity and such an excellent project?

Mr Hunt: It is a fantastic charity. The boy concerned would have been 19 very shortly. It is a very sad story. I thank my right hon. Friend for her campaigning on this issue. We do indeed need to ensure that we have atrial fibrillators everywhere necessary to prevent these tragedies.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I welcome the review that the Health and Social Care Secretaries have just announced. I also welcome the addition of social care to his role and the Government’s belated realisation that social care should be a Cabinet-level role, as Labour recognised with its shadow Cabinet in 2010. Yesterday, the Alzheimer’s Society reported that care homes were turning away people with advanced dementia—or even evicting them, sadly—because care providers do not get enough money from local authorities to cover the cost of their care. Will the Health and Social Care Secretary now be arguing with Treasury colleagues for the funding that is so badly needed to ensure that people with dementia are not evicted from care homes due to a lack of funding?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady always speaks powerfully about the social care system. One of the key parts of the social care Green Paper that we are currently working through is on market stabilisation. We have seen a number of care homes go under, although the number of beds overall has remained broadly stable, but our particular concern is, as she rightly points out, people in the advanced stages of dementia who might not be able to get the care that they want. This is a key focus of our work.

T7. [903802] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I have had concerns highlighted to me over the national cancer patient experience survey in the light of the introduction of a new national opt-out model. Can the Minister confirm that the survey will continue to deliver the same high-quality data annually and can he tell me when a final decision on its format is likely to be made?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I have listened carefully to cancer charities, clinicians and patients on the importance of the cancer patient experience survey. I have been clear that, whatever form the CPES takes as a result of the changes to how confidential data is shared, we want the survey to continue with a methodology as close to that of the current survey as possible.

T2. [903797] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Last week at PMQs, the Prime Minister made an inaccurate statement about the emergency health services in Wales. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority concluded that the Prime Minister’s comparison was not valid,
Comparisons on the performance of our NHS are important, so will Government Ministers check their partisan figures in future?

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): It is interesting, looking at the comparisons, to see that the NHS in Wales appears to have changed a number of them, to make it more difficult to compare performance between England and Wales. The more scrutiny there is of the performance in Wales—where clinicians say that the best performance often equates to the worst performance in England—the more we will see the need for serious changes in the way in which the NHS delivers its services in Wales.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): In Sutton, we have hugely exciting plans for a London cancer hub, working with the Royal Marsden Hospital and the Institute of Cancer Research, on a single campus to provide a global centre for cancer innovation that will in turn provide a huge boost for our local economy, including 13,000 new jobs. Will the Minister join me in Sutton to see the opportunity at first hand? Will he also tell us how such a project can help to deliver on our Government’s life sciences strategy?

Steve Brine: I am keen to visit my hon. Friend in Sutton, so let us fix a date as soon as we can. Cancer survival rates are at an all-time high, but I like the idea of a one-stop shop, and the hub that he talks about could be very exciting.

T3. [903798] Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The delivery of sustainability and transformation plans is too dependent on the NHS estates strategy, as discussed in the Naylor review, and there is great concern that our NHS assets will be sold off quickly, cheaply and without transparency to make up for Government underfunding. Will the Minister agree to pause the process to accommodate the urgent need for parliamentary scrutiny?

Stephen Barclay: The King’s Fund has said that STPs offer the best hope for the NHS and its partners to sustain and transform the delivery of healthcare, so the King’s Fund endorses this recommendation. As the right hon. Lady will know, we announced an additional £325 million of capital funding in the spring Budget to invest in local areas, and in the autumn Budget we committed an additional £10 billion package of capital investment over this Parliament.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Last week, our former colleague Tessa, now Baroness, Jowell gave an inspiring speech about her battle with brain cancer. At this first Health questions after that speech, I am sure that colleagues will join me in paying tribute to her work and will agree that she spoke with courage, grace and the desire to make her suffering prevent others from having to go through the same. Will the Secretary of State assure me that last week’s report from the brain cancer research taskforce, which I set up as a Minister, will be taken seriously in the Department and that everything will be done to ensure that brain cancer, which has been something of a Cinderella for years, receives the support and funding that it deserves so that Tessa’s words were not in vain?

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this job on this subject. The Secretary of State was in the other place to listen to Baroness Jowell’s speech, and I read it and watched it back. It was a moving and brave piece of work. We take this matter seriously. My colleague Lord O’Shaughnessy has the report, which we are going through line by line, and he and I will jointly chair a roundtable on the subject in the next few weeks.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that any accountable care organisations that he establishes will not be able to use commercial confidentiality excuses to evade scrutiny under freedom of information legislation?

Mr Hunt: Public money is public money, and Members have a right to know how it is being spent, so we will absolutely ensure that those contracts are signed in a fair way.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As the Secretary of State carries out his social care funding review, I urge him to look carefully at whether we should look again at implementing the Dilnot commission’s proposals. Given that we legislated for them, they are the only way that we are going to tackle the issue with the sufficient urgency.

Mr Hunt: At the heart of the Dilnot proposals was the idea of risk pooling—that there is a randomness in the illnesses that affect us in the later years of our life that we would want, as a society, to do something about. I will confirm what the Prime Minister said in the election campaign: we will consult on a cap on social care costs.

T4. [903799] Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I am shocked that my local hospital, Southport and Formby, has unused bed and theatre capacity despite the huge winter crisis and the pressures on the NHS locally. In that same trust last night, the Virgin-run walk-in centre had a computer glitch and told people, “Either go to A&E or come back tomorrow.” Has the Department made any assessment of the number of beds and theatre hours that could have been sourced to relieve winter pressures and save lives?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady highlights an important point about the variance in performance between trusts and how we look at some of the lessons from, for example, Lords Carter’s work on efficiency, rotas and how to maximise the value of funding. I am happy to consider her specific point, but she is right that how we manage the patient pathway, in particular the 43% of hospital beds occupied by 5% of patients, is a key challenge.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): For the first time ever in Devon and Plymouth, GP practices are struggling to recruit new doctors and new partners in particular and are spending a fortune on locums as a result. The Government have a plan to fix the situation by 2020, but what more can be done in the meantime to ensure that my constituents can access primary care services?

Mr Hunt: There are two things. First, we have succeeded in increasing the number of medical school graduates who go into general practice—a record 3,157 this year.
Secondly—I know this from my conversations with GPs in my hon. Friend’s constituency—we are doing what we can to reinvigorate the partnership model. Since meeting those GPs, I have agreed with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA that we will carry out a formal review of how the partnership model needs to evolve in the modern NHS.

T5. [903800] Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be wholly unacceptable if, as a consequence of creating accountable care organisations, private companies gained control of strategic decisions on local health services?

Mr Hunt: I point the hon. Gentleman to what the King’s Fund says, which is that accountable care organisations and integrated care systems make a “massive difference” in care to patients. The King’s Fund is not a pro-Government organisation; it regularly holds the Government to account at election time and throughout the year. Not just the King’s Fund but Polly Toynbee and many other people are saying that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is very positive that Corby clinical commissioning group has announced that core urgent care services will be protected in Corby, along with the announced new GP access and new primary care facilities, but will the Minister join me in keeping a close eye on the CCG as it designs the new access arrangements? People need to be able to access those urgent care services at the right place, at the right time and without delay.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the funding going into Corby, and it is a tribute to his campaigning as a constituency MP that there is such progress on that measure. I am happy to look at the specific issue. It is important that the CCG continues to consult both Members of Parliament and the public as it takes that work forward.

T6. [903801] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): GP services are in crisis. Practice after practice is closing, and more GPs leave the service every day. When will the Secretary of State finally listen to the chair of the BMA’s GP committee, who says that current GP funding is “nowhere near enough”?

Mr Hunt: We have been listening to the Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA, which is why last year funding for GPs went up by £314 million and why it will be going up by £2.4 billion over the five-year period, which is a 14% real-terms increase.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There really is a magnificent array of rosettes on both sides of the Chamber, which today—today only—I will allow to influence me.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This is a very proud day to be a woman in this House. In mid and south Essex there are plans for a hyper-acute stroke unit at Basildon Hospital. Will the Secretary of State or one of the Ministers confirm that that will be an improvement of services for my constituents in Chelmsford, and not a downgrade?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to confirm my hon. Friend’s observation. It is absolutely about improving services. This proposal for a new hyper-acute stroke unit in Basildon will ensure there are specialist nurses and doctors available to manage patients at all times, which very much draws on the lessons from London, where we consolidated stroke services and where health outcomes were improved and lives were saved.

T8. [903803] Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Valerie and Colin Hindmarch in my constituency were prescribed Primodos at eight-weeks pregnant. Their child, Colin, would have been 50 on 12 February. However, he died at five weeks old with multiple congenital abnormalities. Most of Valerie’s medical records are missing. When will the Secretary of State grant a judge-led public inquiry to get justice for this couple and all the other survivors? Crucially, will he acknowledge that the victims’ trust and confidence can only come through this judge-led public inquiry?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): The hon. Lady will know that we are currently implementing the findings of the expert working group, and we are continuing our discussions with the all-party group to see how much further we can go in answering people’s questions and in responding to these moving cases, one of which she has just explained to the House. Obviously I would be happy to have further discussions with any hon. Member who wants to discuss it with me further.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): In Shropshire, we have had four years of confusion on the future of our two hospitals. Will the Secretary of State tell the people of Shropshire whether there is Government funding for the proposed reconfiguration of the county’s hospitals?

Stephen Barclay: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we announced further funding in the Budget and the autumn statement. On the specifics of Telford, which she has raised on a number of occasions, I am very happy to have further discussions with her.

T9. [903805] Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In my constituency, Shildon medical centre and half of the Richardson Community Hospital are empty, yet patient services are being cut because the rents charged by NHS Property Services are too high. When will the Secretary of State sort out this waste of resources?

Stephen Barclay: I am not aware of the specific case the hon. Lady highlights, but I am happy to look at it and to understand why she feels the rents are disproportionately high. This relates to the point I made earlier in response to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), which was about the variance in the system and how we ensure that we obtain best value for money. The reality of the debate on health is that the Labour party simply sees it in terms of how much is put in, whereas Conservative Members recognise that we need to both invest more in the NHS and make sure we get the best outcomes. That is the key dividing line between the parties.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): For six years, the people of Redditch have endured a painful consultation on their hospital, the Alex, which has dragged on and on. As a result, they have lost maternity and children’s
emergency services, even though nobody wanted that when they were consulted. People have taken the pain, but when will they get the gain? When will they see the urgent care centre? When will the £29 million be spent on the Alex?

Stephen Barclay: There are good plans in place for getting Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust and the Alex, specifically, out of special measures. A package of support is in place to enable the trust to improve its quality of care. Delivery of the acute service redesign plan is a key driver to sustaining services in the medium term and £29.6 million of STP funding has been agreed to support that.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): At the weekend, NHS England, as my colleagues have pointed out, gave up on the key A&E waiting time target. Does the Minister agree that it is very important that when people go to A&E they do not have to wait longer than four hours, as more than 2.5 million did last year? Whose responsibility is this delivery failure?

Mr Hunt: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but he is saying something that is a big exaggeration. What the NHS has committed to is that by the end of the year coming up more than half of the trusts in the country will meet the A&E target and that we will go back to meeting it across the whole country in the following year. So we are absolutely committed to this target. We recognise there are real pressures, which is why it is going to take time to get back to it, but we will get there.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on securing the £10 billion capital commitment in the Budget at the end of the last year to spend on the NHS. May I take advantage of my position on these Benches to urge him for the next allocation of STP funding to adopt the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and ensure that the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust gets the Future Fit funding it needs?

Stephen Barclay: May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he did in the Department and the high esteem in which he was held by those working in the NHS? On Shrewsbury and Telford, I very much appreciate the importance of the reconfiguration of the trust. We expect a decision shortly on that, although I am not in a position to announce it today.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware of the huge disruption at the Manchester hospitals this week because of problems with water supplies and a big water leak. He might also be aware that Emmeline Pankhurst’s home is on the site of the Manchester hospitals. What conversations has he had with United Utilities and other water companies to ensure that we have safe, constant supplies of water to our hospitals, so that these disruptions do not happen?

Mr Hunt: I know that NHS Improvement is aware of that situation and that important conversations are going on to improve the resilience of all our hospitals, including those in Manchester. However, I am happy to write to the hon. Lady on the issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will call the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) if his question is shorter than his tie.

Tim Loughton: Lipoedema affects 10% of women in this country, many without a diagnosis, so why are an increasing number of my constituents saying they cannot get any therapeutic interventions funded by the CCG? Will the Minister meet a delegation of those people and other hon. Members similarly affected?

Steve Brine: Yes, of course I will meet my short-tied hon. Friend with the delegation he requests.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are well over time, but I do not want the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to feel isolated or excluded. Let us hear it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Child suicide calls to Childline are at a record high among girls—it is at 68%. Despite that, the NHS spends only 11% of its budget on mental health issues. Will the Minister indicate what he is going to do to prevent child suicides?

Mr Hunt: We are very focused on reducing all suicides. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have a plan to reduce suicide rates by 10%, and last week we announced a plan to reduce in-patient suicides to zero, which is a big aspiration to which the NHS in England is certainly committed. We are very committed to this agenda.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, colleagues.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think this appertains to the exchanges we have just had and relates to a ministerial answer. If the Secretary of State would be kind enough to wait a moment to hear it, we would be grateful.

Mr Speaker: Several hon. Members rose and there was no promise to meet. My office called the Secretary of State, previously agreed by email to meet me and said that he would answer my question today, if I was called to speak, yet a different Minister answered my question with withdrawal of such treatment would increase the risk of mortality. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), had previously agreed by email to meet me and said that he would answer my question today, if I was called to speak, yet a different Minister answered my question and there was no promise to meet. My office called the Department of Health and Social Care and was told that my case was labelled as “no further action”. What steps are available to me, Mr Speaker, to ensure that the Minister sticks to his word and agrees to meet me?

Mr Speaker: I think that the explanation of the situation is innocent and that I can probably reassure the hon. Lady. She came in on a question that was being answered by another Minister. On the whole, it is deprecated if Ministers play musical chairs in answer to the same question, even when supplementarys come.
It tends to be expected that one Minister will deal with, to put it bluntly or in the vernacular, the whole caboodle. I think that was why the hon. Lady lost out. However, I just asked the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is a very agreeable fellow, whether he stood by his commitment to meet, and he gave a nod of assent. He is very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the matter. They may or may not end up agreeing, but of one thing she can rest assured: there is no conspiracy to exclude her. I hope that the hon. Lady will now go about her business with an additional glint in her eye and spring in her step, confident in the knowledge that she shall shortly meet the hon. Member for Winchester.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Urgent Question: To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government what are the implications for public service delivery in Northamptonshire of the issuance by Northamptonshire County Council of a section 114 notice.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I thank my hon. Friend for his question on a topic that he and his Northamptonshire parliamentary colleagues have consistently raised on behalf of their constituents.

As Members will be aware, on Friday 2 February, Northamptonshire County Council’s finance director issued a section 114 notice to stop new spending and put in place a process for the council to meet within a specified time to consider the financial situation. It is important to note that a section 114 notice does not automatically mean that existing services will stop. Northamptonshire’s finance director has confirmed that statutory services to safeguard vulnerable people will continue to be delivered and that council staff will continue to be paid.

Local authorities have a legal duty to balance their budget, and section 114 notices are part of the accountability framework that guards against irresponsible financial management. It is for the council to decide what steps it needs to take to balance its budget. I understand that the full council will meet on 22 February to consider the situation.

Local government is, of course, independent of central Government, but, that said, the Government have been aware of concerns about Northamptonshire County Council’s finances and governance for some time, which was why the Secretary of State appointed an inspector to undertake an independent best-value inspection on 9 January. That independent inspection is due to report on 16 March, and as the Secretary of State made clear in the written ministerial statement of 9 January, it would be inappropriate for the Government to comment while the inspection is under way, specifically to avoid prejudicing its outcome. The Government will address the wider issue of funding for local government in tomorrow’s debate on the local government finance settlement.

Issuing a section 114 notice is a serious step. I understand that this development will be causing some concern in my hon. Friend’s constituency and across the county.

There are undoubtedly huge pressures on the social care budget, which are exacerbated by Northamptonshire’s fast-growing elderly population. The Government’s fairer funding review is welcome, but will, I am afraid, come too late for Northamptonshire County Council. This whole situation has been exacerbated by poor leadership by the cabinet at the county council, in which all seven Northamptonshire MPs now have no confidence. We echo the concerns of September’s peer review by the Local Government Association, which concluded that financial information is not presented clearly and transparently and that there is not a sensible budget going forward.

What happens if the county council cannot set a legal budget at its meeting later this month? What will happen to services—statutory or otherwise—to do with adult social services, children’s services, schools and highways? The Government have sent in a best-value inspector, which is good, and he is due to report by 16 March. Can—or will—the Secretary of State request of him an urgent interim assessment with some preliminary findings, because I believe that the Government need to be informed?

What is the total debt of the county council? I understand that it owes more than £700 million. Does the section 114 notice have the implication that lending institutions might foreclose on their lending to the authority? Can the Minister assure me that Northamptonshire’s bad situation with delayed discharges from our two local hospitals will not be made worse by this section 114 notice? We have a 10% delayed discharge rate. On any one day, 100 people are waiting in the two hospitals. They have completed their treatment, but because Northamptonshire County Council is not getting them into care homes quickly enough, they are not leaving the hospitals. May I urge the inspector to look at the opaque accountancy in the local government shared services model at the county council, which is where a lot of the problems may lie?

Will the Government prevent the county council from selling its new, very recently opened Angel Square offices? While that could bring in £50 million, it could leave a 25-year rental liability for any successor authorities. Will the Minister make sure that the transfer of the fire service out of the county council to the police commissioner is not held up by the financial crisis at the county council? I do not want the fire service to go down with the local authority.

It is clear that Northamptonshire County Council is in a huge mess. We look to the Government inspector to report quickly, and, in the view of all seven Northamptonshire MPs, the sooner that Lords Commissioners are sent in to sort out this mess, the better.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. I know that this is something that he is thinking about deeply on behalf of his constituents. Let me take in turn the points that he raised. With regard to the fire service, he will hopefully be aware that the Home Office is considering that application and will make its decision in due course. On his points about the financial situation, I have to say that there are a range of issues that were highlighted in both the independent audit reports and the LGA peer review, which, as he rightly pointed out, cited both culture and governance issues at the council.
On the process from here, Ministers do not have direct contact with the inspector—he is rightly independent—so it is not possible to direct him to report earlier. I would point out that the 16 March deadline means that this inspection will conclude in much less time than was allowed for the Tower Hamlets and Rotherham inspections, which, hopefully, should give my hon. Friend some comfort regarding a rapid resolution.

Finally, if the council meeting is not successful, the finance director has the option of issuing a further section 114 notice. However, it is important to note that he, as the statutory official, has the flexibility today and in the future to authorise any payments that he sees fit and for which there is a sensible case, including, as he has guaranteed, to safeguard vulnerable people. At the point at which the council is ready to make formal representations to my Department for anything that it might require, we stand ready to engage with it.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent question. I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box; it is just a pity that it is not the Secretary of State.

There have been deeply troubling reports for a number of months that Northamptonshire County Council has been failing in its duty to the people of Northamptonshire and to the public sector workers who provide valuable services to local people. As has been mentioned, the Local Government Association conducted a financial peer review back in September. That report had three key findings. First, it found that time was “running out for Northamptonshire County Council”. Secondly, it stated that the council was “heading towards major financial problems”, and, thirdly, it said:

“There was a sense that the scale of the financial challenge for the Council was just too great for it to overcome itself and that the government would have to bail it out.”

Since then, we have had more reports that the council was failing in its duty to the people of Northamptonshire, and residents will now pay the price for its negligence.

The failure of this Tory-run council is the result of a perfect storm of chronic underfunding and catastrophic Tory mismanagement, yet when a Government have taken £5.8 billion out of local government finance, when everyone is saying that social care is on its knees and when children’s services need another £2 billion, not only does the Secretary of State not turn up to reply to an urgent question, but he sticks his head in the sand and fails to give local government the money it needs to provide safe, decent, quality services. This situation shows, yet again, that we cannot push the cost of local government on to council tax payers, because that just does not raise enough money locally. The Secretary of State knows that, the Minister knows that, the Treasury knows that and the local government sector knows that, so when will Ministers stand up to the Chancellor and demand the money that local government needs?

The Local Government Chronicle suggests that at least 10 other local authorities are preparing to issue section 114 notices. The sector will look very closely at how the Minister treats Northamptonshire, so what contingency arrangements does he have in place should other authorities fall over the cliff edge? What guarantees can he give from the Dispatch Box that services in Northamptonshire and across the country will be protected by his Department? Will he join Sally Keeble, Gareth Eales and Beth Miller—Labour’s candidates in Northamptonshire—in calling for the appointment of commissioners to fix this mess?

It was announced last night on Twitter that the Secretary of State was in the process of politically fixing the financial mess he has made for his Tory Back-Bench friends. Two years ago, the transitional grant scheme gave out an additional £3 million of funding, but 80% of that went to Conservative-controlled councils, 70% of which were county councils. By contrast, metropolitan districts got only an extra 2%, despite being the hardest hit. In the light of that, we will be watching the Minister and his Department very carefully, because all councils are financially stretched and all councils deserve fairness.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming me—albeit lukewarmly—to the Dispatch Box. He talks about the Secretary of State, but it is this Secretary of State who has taken action with regard to Northamptonshire. It was this Secretary of State who, in response to the negative opinions of the external auditors and the LGA peer review, decided to commission an independent inspection at the end of last year. That is exactly what responsible government looks like, and the Secretary of State should be commended for taking swift action.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to prejudge the outcome of the inspection, but it would be absolutely inappropriate and unfair to the council for me to do so. When the Government receive the results of the independent inspection, we will of course carefully consider its findings, but it would be wrong to draw conclusions about those findings today, as he suggests we do.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned finances. We will, of course, be discussing finances tomorrow. This Government have backed local authorities with an historic four-year funding deal that provided more than £200 billion and a real-terms increase in spending for next year and the year after. Everything is always about money for the Labour party, but the hon. Gentleman would do well to listen to the words of the chief executive officer of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, who said:

“ Whilst Northamptonshire has had a difficult context within which to balance its budget…other councils in a similar situation have successfully managed their budgets”. 

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) pointed out, the issue is one of governance and culture. Those are the points that were highlighted and that the inspector will be considering.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on securing this very important urgent question. As he said, all seven Northamptonshire MPs have lost confidence in the leadership of the county council. There is no question that this is about money; it is about the governance of the county council. Its cabinet has to go, and it has to go now. The vast bulk of county councillors of all political parties on Northamptonshire County Council are impeccable, but there has been a clique running that cabinet, and that is the cause of the problem. If there had been a committee system, this could not have happened. I am not saying that a cabinet system does
not work elsewhere, but we need to ensure that Northamptonshire County Council has a committee system in future. Does the Minister agree?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes some intelligent points, and I know that he has represented his constituents well on this issue. I am sure he will understand that I cannot comment on the particular governance arrangements that should be in place at Northamptonshire, but he is right to highlight that governance is important to the conduct of the authority. I am sure that the independent inspector will consider that during his deliberations.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Yesterday, the Communities and Local Government Committee was looking at business rates and local government finance, and we heard from witnesses from the LGA, CIPFA and the County Councils Network. When we asked whether any other councils were in a similar position to Northamptonshire, the answer we got was not this year, but that many councils are on a cliff edge. With the coming pressures on not just adult social care but children's services, some councils could fall over that edge next year without additional resources. These comments were made by Conservatives as well as Labour representatives. Is the Minister aware of other councils that will be in this position next year? If so, what action is he going to take to prevent them from getting into that position?

Rishi Sunak: My Department is in constant dialogue with individual councils and the LGA. It funds the LGA with £21 million to conduct peer reviews, so that we can build up a detailed picture of what is happening across local authorities. When there are issues in which we need to be involved, we will of course be involved. We will keep the situation under review.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association and an author of other LGA peer reviews. As a former leader of Derbyshire County Council, I believe that local mismanagement has led to this situation, but I also believe that there are Northamptonshire and sector-wide fairer funding issues to be addressed. Prominent among the funding problems is the huge and growing cost of adult care. Will the Minister consider establishing a royal commission on health and social care, as well as making changes to the funding formula?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the importance of social care. It was in response to the pressure on social care budgets that this Government announced in last year’s spring Budget £2 billion of new funding for social care. We will be discussing that more broadly tomorrow. My hon. Friend is also right to highlight the importance of fair funding. The fair funding consultation opened in December, and I urge all councils to make submissions to the consultation, so that we can start to put in place a new funding formula for local government and ensure that it captures all the cost drivers that councils think are relevant.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I was in Northampton yesterday for an event celebrating 100 years since some women first got the vote. The Conservative county council’s appalling mismanagement of services and finances has left local residents deeply concerned. They want and deserve answers. So what specific guarantees can the Minister give that local services will be protected, particularly for children in need, the elderly, and vulnerable adults?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is right to highlight constituents’ concerns. Of course they are concerned about what they are seeing. That is why I am glad to be able to reassure them that the statutory financial officer at Northamptonshire County Council has said that he will maintain all funding for statutory safeguarding of vulnerable children and adults, and that he has the flexibility to take any steps and approve any payment that he sees fit to deliver exactly that objective.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As ever, I could not have put it better than my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), not least because all seven Northamptonshire MPs were told by cabinet members before Christmas that Northamptonshire County Council would be able to balance its books. May I press my hon. Friend again on the point about the inspector being invited to make an interim recommendation? That would be very welcome because it would help to give some much-needed reassurance to my constituents.

Rishi Sunak: I appreciate where my hon. Friend is coming from, but I have to remind him that the inspector is independent of the Government and does not communicate directly with Ministers during this process. He has been asked to report back by 16 March, which is a considerably shorter timeframe than previous inspections, and he has the option to report back as soon as he feels that he has been able to complete his work properly and objectively.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is of course completely untrue that councils are independent. Most council funding comes from central Government, as we all know. Has the Minister considered the potential merit of creating new council tax bands, especially on high-value properties, as that would make council tax fairer and create extra revenue? Again, however, this is not a decision that councils can take unilaterally—it has to be taken by central Government.

Rishi Sunak: That is not something I am actively considering, having only been in the job for a couple of weeks. On the hon. Lady’s broader point about council tax, the Government have increased the council tax referendum limit by 1% for the forthcoming years to allow councils to raise additional funds should they see fit.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Northamptonshire has very close links with Oxfordshire at a whole number of different local government levels. Can the Minister reassure me that this crisis in Northamptonshire will not affect the deals that Northamptonshire has with Oxfordshire and the people of Oxfordshire?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend, as a former councillor himself, will be very familiar with these issues. Obviously, the details of individual contracts will be a matter for
the individual officer concerned, but nothing in the inspection process itself should change any of those contracts as of today.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister boasts of a settlement given to local government. Northamptonshire’s accounts show that in the next five years it will owe £240 million to private finance initiative schemes, of which £77 million is interest alone, paid to shareholders. Does he therefore agree that it is time for a windfall tax on the excessive profits of these companies, so that we can put the money where it is needed—in our public services, not in the pockets of these legal loan sharks?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talks about funding for Northamptonshire. Let me tell the House the numbers. Northamptonshire will be receiving a £30 million increase in core spending power for the forthcoming year. That represents an over-3% increase in its total budget, comparing favourably with the national average of 1.5%. On top of that, Northamptonshire will have access to its business rates retention, which on its current trajectory will include another £4 million of additional resources available.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2010, there have been multiple requests from Liverpool’s leader and MPs inviting Ministers to come and look at our local authority finances. We have even sent train tickets to a previous Secretary of State that have gone to waste. Will the Minister now accept the request and come to see for himself the severe financial strain that Liverpool is experiencing, along with many other councils across the country?

Mr Speaker: In particular, Northamptonshire.

Rishi Sunak: I would be delighted to visit Liverpool on the hon. Lady’s invitation. I was just being briefed by my officials on the good work that her council is doing on the troubled families programme, particularly with vulnerable children. I would be delighted to accept her invitation and meet people in Liverpool in due course.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Northamptonshire County Council has completely failed its citizens and its staff. Northamptonshire MPs have consistently voted for huge cuts to local government funding, and Ministers have refused to listen when Labour Members described the impacts of rising demand for services and even deeper cuts to our councils. When will the Minister listen and respond to the budget crisis facing all councils, including my own City of Nottingham Council?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady asks “When?” The answer is tomorrow, when we will be debating the local government finance settlement, where councils will see a real-terms increase in their core spending power this year. As I have said, Northamptonshire itself will be receiving at least a 3% increase in its core spending power next year.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister did not answer the question from the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). How many local authorities is he talking to that have concerns about their funding next year?

Rishi Sunak: It would be wholly inappropriate for me to give a running commentary on councils that we might have a conversation with. As I told the Chair of the Select Committee, my Department consistently monitors all councils and is in dialogue with all of them—as well as the LGAs’ peer review process, which we fund—to ensure that we have a good, consistent picture across local government of what is happening on the ground.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): On 19 December, I extracted a commitment from the Secretary of State, who is not in his place, that the transition grant was finished. As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said, that grant overwhelmingly went to better-off communities and those with Conservative administrations. Can the Minister assure me that in the light of the calls overnight, following the section 114 notice, for the transition grant to be reinstated, it will not be reinstated?

Rishi Sunak: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the written statement will be laid later today. We will be debating these issues tomorrow, and he will have the answers to all his questions then.
Women’s Suffrage Centenary

1.6 pm

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Amber Rudd): I ask you, Mr Speaker, and right hon. and hon. Members to look up—to look up and remember that before 1834, women could only watch proceedings in this House through a ventilation shaft right in the middle of the ceiling.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Not this ceiling!

Amber Rudd: Thank you. It is so useful to be corrected by helpful gentlemen here.

After this palace was rebuilt because of the great fire of 1834, things improved, but not much. There was now a Ladies Gallery above the Speaker’s Chair, but it was high up and there was a row of heavy grilles covering the glass. That was deliberate: it was there to stop the MPs from seeing the women because it was thought that they might distract them. In the Ladies Gallery, you could not see properly, you could not hear properly, and it was hot and uncomfortable. Leading suffragist Millicent Fawcett described the Ladies Gallery as “a grand place for getting headaches” and said that it was like wearing a giant pair of spectacles that were not designed properly because it was so difficult to see through the grilles. The grilles were both a physical and metaphorical symbol of women’s absolute exclusion from Parliament in the 19th century, so it was no surprise that they became a target during the suffragette movement, with women tying themselves to them in protest.

All around Parliament, we can see the marks of the long and arduous struggle for women to win the right to vote and to be heard in Parliament. There is the plate in the crypt chapel that marks the place where suffragette Emily Wilding Davison hid on census night; there is the damaged statue of Viscount Falkland—damaged because a suffragette handcuffed herself to it and was forcibly removed; and the hated grilles are still preserved in Central Lobby.

The fight for women to have a voice and a vote was long and hard, both inside and outside Parliament. Suffragettes were brutally force-fed with tubes: a process so painful that it could cause lifelong injuries and make even the prison wardens cry in horror. Those who dared march in favour of women’s rights were pelted with rotten vegetables, dead rats, rocks and cowpats. Even the prison wardens cry in horror. Those who dared march in favour of women’s rights were pelted with rotten vegetables, dead rats, rocks and cowpats.

But the struggle was worth it, because on this day 100 years ago an important law was passed that changed the UK forever. On this day a century ago, the Representation of the People Act was passed in Parliament, allowing some women—those over the age of 30, with property—to vote for the very first time. In fact, it was the Home Secretary at the time, Sir George Cavendish, who was the main sponsor of the Representation of the People Bill, which became the famous 1918 Act. It was also the Home Secretary who moved the crucial clause, clause 4, on franchises for women.

Although women did not get full voting rights until 1928, when a Conservative Government passed the Equal Franchise Act, what happened in 1918 was a major step in the right direction. That February vote paved the way for women to make huge strides forward in politics and in many other spheres of life. That is why it is so important that the determination of the women who fought for our democratic rights is never forgotten.

To help do that, the Government are celebrating this milestone with a special £5 million fund. In November, we announced that £1.2 million of that money is going directly to seven centenary cities and towns in England with a strong suffrage history. Bolton, Bristol, Leeds, Leicester, London, Manchester and Nottingham will use that money to strengthen the reach and legacy of the centenary and help inspire a new generation with this story. Leicester unveiled the statue of its local suffragette hero, Alice Hawkins, on Sunday.

In December, we opened the small grant scheme so that local groups could bid for money to pay for local events to celebrate the anniversary. Today, I am pleased to announce that the large grant scheme is now open, so that local community groups can bid for even bigger projects worth up to £125,000. The rest of the £5 million fund will be used to pay for activities to raise awareness of the importance of democracy for young people, as well as to erect a statue of leading suffragist Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square. Money will also go to projects specifically designed to increase the number of women in political office, including piloting a programme to inspire young women with opportunities to be leaders in their communities.

The centenary is also a great opportunity to take stock and celebrate all that we have achieved as women. I am proud to be part of the most diverse House of Commons in British history. We have our second female Prime Minister. A third of those attending Cabinet are women, and we have the highest ever number of female MPs. Outside politics, we have seen so much progress since 1918. More women are in a more diverse range of jobs than ever before and are increasingly at the top of their fields.

But let us not fool ourselves that true equality is a done deal. It is something we must all continue to work for. We know that women still face barriers. The gender pay gap and sexual harassment must be addressed. Women are still more likely to take on the bulk of childcare responsibilities. Only 4% of chief executives of FTSE companies are women, and I am certain that we are more likely to be sitting next to a man than a woman on these Benches—perhaps not during this statement, but generally.

Those of us who have our place here face vile sexist abuse. We have seen a concerted effort both online and offline to destroy the confidence of women who want to be involved in political life. Just last week, we learnt that the Labour leader of Haringey Council had quit over what she called “bullying” and “sexism” by supporters of Jeremy Corbyn. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) receives endless horrible abuse. In fact, she has disgracefully received over half of all the online abuse sent to female politicians. As she has said, it is the sheer volume of hatred that makes it so debilitating, so corrosive and so upsetting. In my constituency of Hastings and Rye, I am often asked by people who come up to me, “How can you bear it—the hate?” I bear it, like other women in this Chamber do, because I know that female voices matter in politics and in life.
But we should not have to bear it. We need to call this sort of behaviour out and make it clear that enough is enough. I know, like the suffragettes and suffragists did, that this House is for everybody, and I hope we can welcome even more women here in the future. I commend this statement to the House.

1.14 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I would like to thank the Minister for sight of her statement. Unfortunately, I have not really had time to read it as it was given to me so late—not very sisterly, but never mind.

I was hoping that the Minister was going to make an announcement today that the Government were going to issue an official apology to the women of the suffragette movement or maybe a pardon for those who were wrongly imprisoned and sexually assaulted in their battle to get women the vote. Instead, all we have is another announcement—how utterly disappointing.

The Minister is right: 2018 marks the landmark centenary of when some women received the right to vote. That was also the day when men, wanting to cement their authority and majority, decided to give working-class men the vote, so the men in my office are also celebrating today. Working-class women, socialists, trade unionists and black, Asian and minority ethnic women were still denied a voice.

Labour is the party of equality, with a proud record of advancing women’s rights. We are so proud of our achievements and ashamed of the Tory party’s determination to undo and remove safeguards for women. [HON. MEMBERS: “What?”] Let me explain. Section 40 of the Equality Act 2010 had a safeguard for women and employees who might be sexually harassed or abused by third parties, as we saw in the Presidents Club, but unfortunately the coalition Government removed that section in 2013. I hope the Government will reinstate it. Almost every piece of legislation that has improved the lives of women has been introduced by a Labour Government.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): That is not true.

Dawn Butler: I am afraid it is true. I do not want to get into, “Our one’s bigger than your one,” but Labour has more female MPs than all the political parties put together. This Government talk about their commitment to equality, but in reality, the only thing they are committed to is making announcements without action.

It is true that the entire process of the grants has been shambolic. The Government announced a women’s centenary fund. They took nine months to officially launch it and gave women’s groups just four days to submit an online application for funding if they wanted to be in time to celebrate today’s date. The Government talk about their commitment to equality, but as I said, they are just making another announcement.

This was supposed to be a momentous opportunity for the country to come together and celebrate the achievements made over the last 100 years of some women gaining the vote, but instead, the Government have outsourced yet another contract that has fallen woefully short of achieving its intended purpose. Labour will be pressing the Government for answers on the allocation of these funds. I am glad that the Minister gave some details today about where the funds have gone, but only 4% of them have been allocated.

This year must be the year that women’s voices are fully heard in politics. This year, the Labour party will be celebrating the centenary for the whole year. I am really pleased that the House authorities have named the exhibition in the Houses of Parliament after me—“New Dawn”—so my name will live forever in this place.

I urge—[Interruption.] I urge the Minister and all the Members heckling me from a sedentary position to take a moment on this day and in this year, marking the centenary and the 10 years until all women received the right to vote, to take a moment to think about the Government’s policies and the damage they are doing to women, with 86% of the cuts falling on the shoulders of women. Please take a moment to think about the structural barriers and the privilege that we have to undo. Please take that moment in this year.

Amber Rudd: May I start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for the work that has been done throughout Parliament on the Vote 100 celebrations?

I know that this is something that involves everybody, and I must say I am slightly disappointed at the tone of the hon. Lady’s approach. I think it is great to see so many women active in Parliament, and I wish she could perhaps be a little bit more celebratory about that today. In fact, this Government are committed to making sure that we deliver for women, such as the highest level of employment for women and the tax cuts to the personal allowance, which have been so helpful to women.

Instead of making a great list, I just want to challenge the hon. Lady on one element of my statement that she did not engage with, but which I think was the most important element: what are we going to do about stopping the hate towards women? If we want more women to enter politics—we want more women councillors, more women MPs—we must take action to stop the level of hate coming at women. A lot of it comes from Momentum. We have seen that—[Interruption.] I am not saying that it only comes to Conservatives. I say to the hon. Lady that I know it comes to Labour MPs as much as it does to Conservative MPs. Momentum is not selective in who it abuses.

It is incredibly important that we all call this out. If we listened to Claire Kober’s comments over the weekend, she was explicit about where the abuse had come from and about the sexism that had come to her. It is incredibly important that we work together on this to make sure that it does not happen. Today, let us look ahead to this year of celebrations and to all the work we can do to encourage more women to come forward and not be put off by the hate directed to them.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a privilege to have served in this House for nearly 26 years now. Every day, as I take my seat on this Bench, I look across at the memorial to Jo Cox on the other side of the Chamber, and I remember that there is a huge capacity in this House to work cross-party and to bring about positive change, which we all want to do. I am therefore very pleased that the Minister has come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement on such an auspicious day, particularly to pay tribute to the people who gave us the equal suffrage that we now enjoy.

As we take stock, however, we must not forget that women are still under-represented in this place and in other fields—such as science and engineering, and the
top levels of business—and that women still do not get equal pay for equal work. Much of the stereotyping of male and female roles begins in the classroom. What message will my right hon. Friend send to teachers today to ensure real equality of opportunity and aspiration for all our students in the future, irrespective of gender?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. She is herself such an inspiration for many women coming into Parliament, who can see her extraordinary achievements. In answer to her question, a pack is going to be made available for teachers in schools to build on the celebrations that we are having here and to make girls in schools aware of the changes that have taken place over the 100 years.

I also say to teachers in schools that I know they want what we want, which is more equality of opportunity for girls as they go into the workplace. One thing we need to be better at is encouraging more girls to go into STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths. At the moment, only 30% of STEM subjects at A-level are taken by women. We need to do better at that and encourage them to get more involved in STEM subjects, so that they have more opportunities in adult life.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am very proud to be able to respond to the statement on behalf of my party, the Scottish National party, following in the footsteps of inspirational women such as Winnie Ewing, Margo MacDonald and our own First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon. She has shown her commitment with a 50:50 gender-balanced Cabinet, and she has today made a commitment to encourage more women to come in behind us, as women in politics, with a £500,000 fund to encourage women into public life at all levels in Scotland, where they are so desperately needed.

In this House that man built, suffragists and suffragettes gave us our place. We have a voice, but we do not yet have equality. A woman called Carolyn in Glasgow reflected on Twitter today:

“No right will persist if it is not protected.”

We have a duty to protect the rights of women in the work we do.

I do not wish to be party political, but I would be doing a disservice to suffragettes who stood up for their causes, which were about more than just winning the vote for women, if I did not say that we still have a Government who pursue policies such as the rape clause and social security cuts that hit women’s budgets—85% of the cuts have come out of women’s pockets—and that we have yet to see justice for the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaigners. We also have yet to see the work on the Istanbul convention begun by my colleague Eilidh Whiteford, the first SNP woman to get legislation passed in this place, brought fully into force.

Across the country today and in this building, children are learning about the work of the suffragettes, and primary 4/5 of St Albert’s Primary School are learning why women fought to get their rights. May I ask the Minister to encourage other schools right across the country to take up opportunities to learn more about that battle, including by going to organisations such as the Glasgow women’s library and the Mitchell library in Glasgow, which holds the mugshots of suffragettes arrested and jailed in Glasgow? Today, the suffragette flag is flying over the former Calton jail in Edinburgh, where women were held and force-fed.

We reflect today on how far we have come, yet we also reflect on how far we have to travel. I see many people in the suffragette colours, which are purple for dignity, white for purity and green for hope—and I am wearing green for hope.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. We share a view about wanting to make sure that the history of the suffrage movement is well understood. The new generation of girls needs to understand why it was so hard-fought and why it is therefore so important for them to participate in the vote.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the legislation we are bringing forward to do more to protect women. I gently say to her that the Government are very focused on making sure that we continue to do so both in the positive—making sure that we have a better approach to the gender pay gap—and in protecting women. That is why we are bringing forward this year a domestic abuse Bill, which will address the issue of the Istanbul convention.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is right that we celebrate today, and most of us would want to recognise what we have achieved working together, often cross-party, to improve the lot of women in this country. I particularly want to pay tribute to all the people who have served on the Women and Equalities Committee for the incredible work we have done together to try to improve things for women in our country.

It is our role in the Commons to scrutinise laws and to make sure that we have a healthy democracy. Allowing women the right to stand for election to this place and giving them the vote gave us a healthier democracy 100 years ago, and we need to make sure we build on that in the future to have more women in this place and ensure a healthier democracy in years to come.

My right hon. Friend was right not to forget the abuse and intimidation that the suffragettes endured from their opposition 100 years ago. It is the sort of abuse that too many women who stand for public office still have to endure today. What can my right hon. Friend tell us about the work the Government will be doing to tackle the online abuse that is so clearly putting women off standing for election and, in doing so, to make sure that in the future we can have a 50:50 Parliament that properly represents this country?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend, who has done so much herself to promote the cause of equality in Parliament as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I share her view that we need to do more to stop the online abuse that is really damaging the self-confidence of so many women and reducing the likelihood that they will get involved in politics.

One of the things we have announced is that we have asked the Law Commission to look at the legislation to ensure that what we constantly say here is actually the case—namely, that things that are illegal offline are also illegal online. Is that being taken forward, and is the legislation in place to deliver on that? We are going to make sure that that is the case, and if necessary we will come back to the Chamber with proposals.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Thirty-five years, three months and nine days after the Peckham by-election, which sent her to this place, I call Harriet Harman.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I commend the right hon. Lady for her assertion that although as women, inside and outside the House, we have made tremendous progress, we still have so much further to go?

May I also say that I fully support the Government's move to ask the Law Commission to consider the case for making it an offence to threaten and abuse parliamentary candidates? This is about misogynists seeking to silence women who dare to speak out—it is particularly virulent against younger women and black women. Voters have the right to choose whoever they want, man or woman, to represent them, and once that representative is elected to Parliament it is their right and duty to be able to get on with the job without being subjected to intimidation, threats or violence. This is about our democracy, so I hope Members in all parts of the House will give it their full support.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments, and I am full of admiration for the work that she did in government to promote the role and the importance of women's working lives. That goes absolutely to the core of the argument for wanting more women MPs and more women in government, because only then do we get government's application to and attention on the improvements that need to take place. I thank her for her support in this area and I completely share her view—this is an attack on women; it is a sexist attack. We have seen an escalation of it over the past few years. It is not good enough for people to say, as some do, "You're in politics. You must accept it." That is an amazing place to be able to speak up for your community, and we want a Parliament that is hugely diverse.

Does my right hon. Friend agree not only that we should pay huge tribute to wonderful organisations such as the Girl Guides, which play their role in inspiring a brand new generation of girls to get involved, but that there is work to be done, which we all need to do, in inspiring men and boys to become part of a campaign on gender equality in the next 100 years, when perhaps they did not play as much of a role during the past 100 years?

Amber Rudd: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I share her approach to encouraging young women to get involved. They should indeed go for it. And yes, third-party organisations such as the Girl Guides and the Scouts play an important role in giving women the confidence to be able to find their own voices. Of course, men play an important part as well in helping us change the law and helping change attitudes, so that the sort of abuse that women have received, often from men, becomes culturally unacceptable. We need their help for that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Today, the Home Affairs Committee will take evidence from the Fawcett Society on how we tackle misogyny and hate crime today. Does the right hon. Lady agree that, given that we all stand on the shoulders of our mothers, our grandmothers and our great-grandmothers who fought for so many women to have their voices heard, the best tribute that we can pay to all those women who fought for us is to fight ourselves for women's equality for our daughters and for our granddaughters in future, and to make sure that our sons and grandsons count themselves as feminists, too?

Amber Rudd: I agree wholeheartedly with the right hon. Lady. We must not sit back on our laurels and think that it has all been achieved. We need to keep on making the point and ensure, as she rightly says, that the next generation understands that and that equality matters to men as much as it matters to women.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her statement and answer her call that we should join the fight to secure women's rights? May I ask her to do one small thing? I draw her attention to early-day motion 866, which has been signed by many right hon. and hon. Members, not least men from this side of the House. It asks the Government to implement section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which would require political parties to publish the gender balance of their candidate lists. It might not be very conducive for this party to publish its lists, but that would encourage us to select more women as candidates to take their role in public life.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. He, of course, has played an important role in encouraging women to get involved in Parliament. We are always grateful for the additional support of men, which is such an important part of this. I will take a careful look at what he suggests.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): A hundred years on from the first women winning the chance to vote, power in our society is still predominantly and disproportionately in the hands of men. We are a long way from equal power. Government and legislation have an important role to play, but there is also a wider task for all of us to unpick the sexism and the gendered assumptions that are woven right through our culture. Does the Minister agree that the best way to honour the spirit of the suffragettes is for everyone, regardless of gender, to take action in their everyday life to promote gender equality?

Amber Rudd: I wholly agree with the hon. Lady. It is interesting where one can see sexism, which can surprise one. I sometimes go to meetings and find that there are not any women there. All of us should have a responsibility for calling that out and saying to people who might be hosting a meeting or chairing an event, "That's not good enough. Where are the women?" Of course, that gives one an opportunity to step up and take a role, but most importantly, it makes sure that there are fewer all-male events. We need to call it out wherever we see it.
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): My young constituent Grace Tucker, aged 6, is in the Gallery today. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must all take responsibility for bringing on and inspiring the next generation?

Amber Rudd: I certainly do. We need to ensure that all girls and young women realise that they, too, have the opportunity to sit here and represent their constituency. What an honour it is when we get that opportunity.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I join the Minister in calling out controlling and misogynistic language—trying to shout women down in public life? We must learn the lesson that the suffragettes taught all of us: it is deeds, not words, that we are here to give. Will she join those of us calling out the Sierra Leonean politicians using female genital mutilation as an election pledge and standing with the women whose voices can no longer be heard, such as Michelle Samaraweera, whose rapist and murderer still sits free in India despite the Government asking for his extradition eight years ago? Madeleine Albright told us that there was a special place in hell for women who do not help other women. Let us use our platform to speak for women who cannot yet speak out and show the difference it makes.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point, and I completely share her view. This Government, with cross-party support, have done much to ensure that we address female genital mutilation in this country and that, where we think girls are being taken abroad, the Border Force is trained to make sure that it looks after this issue. But there is no room to stop on that sort of action and I share your view. The idea of using female genital mutilation as an election pledge is just disgusting and disgraceful.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I add my support to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) in urging the Minister to look at section 106 of the Equality Act? When the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) was taking the Act through the House, she drafted that clause in a cross-party manner; I worked with her when I was the shadow Minister. There is nothing in the clause that we should be afraid of. We have seen from the BBC that transparency and publishing information help to make change, and although we have made progress on this side of the House, we know we can go further. I urge my right hon. Friend to look seriously at the request made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for the point, which he makes so eloquently. I also congratulate him on his new role as co-chair of Women2Win. I know he will play an important part in ensuring that we get more women into Parliament. As I have said, I will certainly take a look at the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin).

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is right that the main carer for elderly people—often it is our parents—tends to be a woman, just as it does for children. One thing that we hope to achieve culturally, rather than through legislation, is to share that responsibility more equally. Certainly she is right that the Government need to give considerable support to the women who do so much of the caring.

Stella Creasy: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for her remarks, but can she give us confidence that we will get the police force and the Crown Prosecution Service to work more effectively to protect us and all those who follow us in politics from attacks? I have received personal attacks that have not been followed up, whereas colleagues have found police forces in other parts of the country more effective.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point, and I completely share her view.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Emily Davison was a child of Northumberland and is buried in Morpeth, 6 miles from where I live. The town is in full bunting celebration this week to remember her and her bravery in stepping out, because she felt she had no other way to be heard, to try to reach the King on Epsom racecourse, where she lost her life.

The challenge is that bravery is still required to stand as a female politician. Too many people say to me, “Gosh, you’re very brave to be in politics.” I do not feel brave. Mostly, I feel very loud and noisy: I have stuff to say, I want to say it and I have this extraordinary place in which to share my beliefs. Can the Home Secretary give us confidence that we will get the police force and the Crown Prosecution Service to work more effectively to protect us and all those who follow us in politics from attacks? I have received personal attacks that have not been followed up, whereas colleagues have found police forces in other parts of the country more effective.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I hope it is taken as a central theme of the message I am putting out today that we will do more to ensure that women who participate in elections are protected. The Law Commission is reviewing whether there is a parity of approach to offline and online offences, as we believe should be the case. If an additional piece of law is needed to ensure that electoral candidates get additional protection, we will put one in place. I will review what my hon. Friend has said to see if there is any additional help I can give her.
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Even in this Brexit-free week, the Government have chosen to bring forward Bills about smart meters and space technology, while the gender-based violence legislation has been postponed time and again. A century ago, Parliament managed to cope with a world war and the women’s suffrage legislation at one and the same time. When will the Government stop procrastinating and deliver on their duty to improve women’s lives?

Amber Rudd: I do not recognise the hon. Lady’s criticism. We are bringing forward a domestic abuse Bill this year and will embark on a consultation shortly. We want to engage, as I have been doing, with stakeholders and Members of Parliament, including Opposition Members, to ensure that we include what really matters to them. Protecting women and their lives is central to what we do.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My youngest daughter recently asked her father, “Daddy, can men become Members of Parliament too?” but I suspect that she is a little bit unusual. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must use the opportunity of the centenary to encourage more women to stand for election and to overcome their fears of being in the public eye, because of the good they could do as an MP or a local councillor? In almost any elected role, one has the opportunity to give people a voice and make lives better.

Amber Rudd: I reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that as part of the celebrations this year, we are focused on encouraging more young women to get involved in politics and, potentially, to become Members of Parliament. The Cabinet Office has an education pack that it will be putting out to schools. As I said in my statement, we are also commissioning organisations to engage across the country with young women to make them aware of the opportunities they have to represent their constituency in this place.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): There is nobody more partisan than I am, but today is no time to be partisan. It is a time to be proud that we are all lucky enough to be in this place on such an auspicious day, when we welcome and celebrate 100 years of women’s enfranchisement. When I first came here, there were only 60 women MPs and today we celebrate comprising nearly a third of all Members, but it is still not enough.

While we do not have the representation we want here, there is also an issue outside this place for the women who form 51% of the population: enforcement of the laws to protect them is very bad, particularly in the employment sphere. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to say how we can improve the enforcement of employment law to ensure that all women in every workplace up and down this country are properly protected?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising not only women in Parliament, which is central to what we are discussing today, but the additional subject of women outside Parliament and ensuring that they have the access to top jobs and the full opportunities that men have. The Taylor review contained many recommendations, the vast majority of which we are taking forward. We now have a director of labour market enforcement to co-ordinate the different groups and ensure that there is no abuse of the labour market. We will always take working lives very seriously to ensure that there is no breach of the legislation.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that Sussex is leading the way in having great women in politics, with our wonderful Home Secretary, our first female Muslim Minister who spoke at the Dispatch Box a few weeks ago, a female chief executive officer of East Sussex County Council, a female leader of West Sussex County Council and Katy Bourne, the Sussex police and crime commissioner. Does she agree that to replicate that success across the country, we need to work together across the parties not just to celebrate our achievements so far, but to make sure that we are doing more for women in politics?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for her comments. She is an extraordinary woman in her own right. Not only is she a Member of Parliament; she is one of those wonderful Macmillan night nurses that we all know so well. She is an extraordinary role model and I hope that her presence here will encourage other women to come forward.

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to see that the constituent of the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), the six-year-old Grace Tucker, has very sensibly promoted herself from the third row to the front row. That, I think, will be widely welcomed.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Just over 20 years ago when I was first elected to this place, I was only the 209th woman ever to be elected to the House of Commons. We have 208 women in this Parliament, so that is an advance, but we do not have 325. We have more to do. In that regard, will the Home Secretary commend the efforts of our trade unions, which spend their time enabling women to organise, improve their confidence and take part in public life, in a way that makes them much more likely to go on to seek to represent others in their communities in our councils and in this place?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I will. Any route that helps women to get involved is incredibly important. One does not have to agree with another woman to admire how she engages and succeeds in her role. I think, in particular, of Frances O’Grady.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Chelmsford was the birthplace of Anne Knight, who wrote the first ever pamphlet on women’s suffrage. I wonder what she would think of how easy it is today to publish our views online. I think that she would congratulate everyone who has spoken today about the need to be more careful about what we say on social media and online.

I am incredibly proud to be here after 100 years of women having the vote. The Government have designated this year the year of engineering, and next year is the 100th birthday of the Women’s Engineering Society. Do the Home Secretary and all the women here agree that the fusion of all those anniversaries presents an excellent opportunity to encourage more women into engineering, as well as politics, and for everyone to step up to that challenge?
Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to make sure that more women get involved in engineering as part of widening their opportunities. While she is thinking of additional landmark anniversaries or celebrations, I point out that today is Safer Internet Day, which is a reminder of how important it is for positive things to be published and circulated online, and of how we have to be so vigilant to make sure that we are not put off coming into Parliament by the online negativity that sometimes takes place.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am delighted that we are celebrating 100 years since some women first got the vote, but now is the time to go further and ensure that all votes count equally by introducing a fairer voting system. It is not an accident that every democracy with more than 40% women legislators uses some form of proportional representation. Does the Home Secretary agree that a fitting tribute to the suffragettes would be to replace our archaic and undemocratic electoral system with one that ensures that every vote genuinely counts equally?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady, but I cannot share her view. We had a referendum on that not so long ago, and my view is that the public have had enough of referendums for now.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I make the very simple point that with one third of women and one third of men not voting at general elections, and two thirds of women and two thirds of men—perhaps more—not voting in local elections, the best and easiest way to celebrate the centenary of women’s suffrage is for everyone to go out and vote whenever an election is called.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically logical point. We can all do more to champion the cause of voting when it comes around, and like most Members of Parliament, I am out there, up and down the streets in my constituency, encouraging people to do so.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is my belief that every one of us women MPs was encouraged by other women who wanted us to make this place look and feel more like the world we live in. I was particularly encouraged by my grandmother, Florence Parker, a stalwart of the Co-operative Women’s Guild, who campaigned so hard for women’s suffrage. I thank the Home Secretary for mentioning Bristol’s role in the suffrage campaign. Will she join me in congratulating the Co-operative Women’s Guild on its role in achieving women’s suffrage?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in adding my congratulations to the Co-operative Women’s Guild.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): One hundred years on from gaining the vote, too many girls and women still have to struggle too hard to reach their potential and for equality. What the change showed 100 years ago is that sometimes the law is required for real equality. Will the Minister follow the example of Iceland and make it illegal to pay men more than women?
to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for her help in getting my Bill, which is now the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014, through to protect women. We men are behind everything that you have said.

Mr Speaker: I was not intending to draw attention to the fact that the hon. Gentleman was three quarters of an hour late, but unfortunately, he has done so for me.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. He brought forward that Bill on gender equality internationally. It was a very important Bill internationally for helping women, and he is right: we need men to participate to ensure that we not only protect women’s rights, but make progress with them.

Mr Speaker: An exceptional occasion can allow for exceptional measures.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the many calls to encourage more women to enter politics. Until we have council chambers and a Parliament that truly reflect the rich diversity of British society, including gender balance, we will be doing a disservice to the next generation. Will the Home Secretary join me in commending the excellent work of the Labour Women’s Network and the Fabian Women’s Network, whose sisterly support, training and mentoring schemes have led, and are leading, to many women entering public life?

Amber Rudd: It is interesting that we have cross-party initiatives to encourage women and also ones in our own parties. We have Women2Win and, as the hon. Lady said, Labour has the Labour Women’s Network. Of course, I commend them and encourage them; we need more women on both sides.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With no working Northern Ireland Assembly, we have no outlet for celebrations for this great event. Would the Minister undertake to contact the permanent secretary in the celebrations for this great event. Would the Minister work with the Vote 100 campaign and the House authorities, through you, Mr Speaker, to ensure that that enduring inequality in this place is finally ended?

Amber Rudd: Yes. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is delightful to hear that he took his daughter around to see the great opportunity and stature of this place. I hope it gave her some inspiration. He has put his finger on it. It is all about ensuring equality for women, but there is still so much to do and I hope that he will support some of our plans this year.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement about encouraging more women into Parliament and I am immensely proud to be here today representing my home seat 100 years after women first got the vote. Does she agree that sitting well beyond 10 pm, as we did numerous times in December, is hardly family friendly and hardly encourages women to enter Parliament? Does she further agree that a lot more still needs to be done, including introducing baby leave, as proposed by my right hon.

soon. That is why we are taking action on the gender pay gap and insisting that companies report by April this year. In my conversations with companies that are putting reporting in place, it is clear that they are surprised at the revelation of a gender pay gap and they are then proposing action. In one example, after a company discovered that many more men than women were in higher-paid jobs, it put in place training programmes. Those concrete actions will help to eradicate the gender pay gap.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement about the grant programme to celebrate women’s suffrage. Will she confirm that the programme will celebrate the sacrifices of the suffragettes and the work of the thousands of women and men across the country who campaigned painstakingly for decades for women to be given the vote? Will she also confirm that the scheme will look not only backwards to celebrate but forward at the work that still needs to be done and which many Members have mentioned today?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that this funding and these projects must be about looking forward. We want to celebrate the past and the achievements to date, but we also want to keep up the pressure and the change and to work with the new generation to ensure that they have the opportunities to come forward. The purpose of these grants is to encourage local organisations to bid, so that they can make such proposals. I hope that organisations from Brentford and Isleworth will do just that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Today is a very important day. It is right that we celebrate. I think particularly of my daughter and of what society her generation will inherit—will theirs finally be the generation that sees equality across all areas of public life? To assist with that, when my daughter and other young women visit Parliament, I want them to see more female role models immortalised in this place. I think particularly of Winnie Ewing and my late friend Margo MacDonald. Will the Minister work with the Vote 100 campaign and the House authorities, through you, Mr Speaker, to ensure that that enduring inequality in this place is finally ended?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to my attention. I will certainly take up his proposal and ensure that there is an appropriate celebration this year in Northern Ireland as well.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I welcome the funding that Nottingham has received for its centenary city celebrations. People may learn not only about Edith Annie Lees and Helen Watts, but about the Nottingham suffragettes who burned down the men-only Nottingham boat club in 1913—there is obviously a bit of an east midlands theme. They may be astonished that the club did not accept women into membership for another 57 years. As the Home Secretary acknowledged, it is some 48 years since the House passed the Equal Pay Act, and yet women still face a gender pay gap of more than 18%. When does she think that we will eliminate it?

Amber Rudd: Gosh, it has been an interesting day of stories, what with boat clubs and golf clubs and the militant march of women. I hope that that will happen
and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), to make this place more welcoming and open to future female MPs?

Amber Rudd: I agree in principle with the hon. Lady. This House has come a long way, as Members who have been here a lot longer than me would point out. There are occasionally longer sittings, but I think that they are pretty unpopular with many Members of Parliament. I urge the Chief Whip and shadow Chief Whip to engage in more constructive discussions. It takes both parties to agree not to sit past 10 pm.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): We obviously need more women to be elected to this House, but may I draw the Minister’s attention to local government? In the not-too-distant past, only males were elected to some local councils. When young female councillors are elected, the problem is not so much the abuse they might get during the election process, but the treatment they receive from council officers: they are spoken down to, mainly by male officers; told they do not know what they are doing when they are elected; often are not offered appropriate training; and often either leave office early or do not seek re-election—all because of the treatment they receive inside local government.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Council election is often the first step women take before becoming a parliamentary candidate. The number of women in local government is shockingly low. We all need to do more to ensure that we find women in our constituencies willing to stand for local government.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am proud to be Croydon’s first female MP and I have been learning this week about the suffragette Dorinda Neligan, who, as well as being arrested outside this place, was the first headteacher of an all-girls school in Croydon, despite complaints about strong-minded women encouraging girls to be dissatisfied with life at home. I am proud to be surrounded by many strong-minded women today. What can the Government do to promote more strong women in our school curriculum, from English literature to history, where we remain woefully under-represented?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has highlighted the issue of girls in schools and the need to be vigilant to make sure that there is no sexism at that level. Women who have written great works or are great historians need to be ably represented in school. I suggest that her question is more specifically for the Department for Education, but I will certainly have a word with the Secretary of State to ensure that that is the case.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she join me in paying tribute to the group of women in Durham who this year are not only helping to organise the Durham miners’ gala but are reinstating the women’s gala on 30 June to celebrate 100 years of women’s suffrage?

Amber Rudd: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in commending those women and welcoming their participation. Participation in public life can start with some small civic act and lead, as it did for many women here, to becoming a councillor and then a Member of Parliament. That first stage of activism in civic life is so important in encouraging women eventually into Parliament.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Chesterfield is very proud today of Winifred Jones, a suffragette who was jailed twice during the suffragette struggle. I am sure that Winifred would be delighted to know that Chesterfield Borough Council now has a woman leader and a woman deputy leader and that the chair, the secretary and the treasurer of Chesterfield Labour party are all women. The Minister is absolutely right that this is no time for partisanship, so it was disappointing that she reflected purely on the misogynistic abuse from the left. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) faced appalling abuse from people on the right. Would it not be best today to recognise that across the political spectrum there are people who engage in misogynistic abuse and that we all have to work collectively to get rid of them from our political discourse?

Amber Rudd: I would be cautious about not calling out abuse where it happens. The hon. Gentleman is right up to a point—as I have said, there has been appalling abuse of Labour Members as well. If, however, we tiptoe politically too much around the cause—I refer him to Claire Kober’s comments last weekend—we do not help women who themselves would like us to call it out.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am proud to stand here as Burnley’s MP on this historic day and to reflect on the work and achievements of the suffragettes and suffragists. Does the Minister agree that a fitting tribute to their work would be at the very least to guarantee the safety of all women in our communities? As we stand here today, women who are victims of domestic violence are taking the brave step of leaving and seeking refuge, but only too often they find that their refuge is full or sometimes closed down—the likely fate of the refuge in my constituency. I understand that the Government intend to review domestic violence legislation, but I fear that for many women that will be too late. Will the Minister join me in saving these important facilities and doing our bit to stand up for women?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s view that those refugees provide essential support for women who are victims of domestic abuse and I am proud that we have more beds available now than we had in 2010. She is right that we are conducting a review. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is doing that review, but I will work closely with it to ensure that there is no reduction in the number of beds available. That will be a central part of our domestic abuse Bill, which will be coming forward later this year.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): This is an amazing day for all of us women who have been elected to Parliament. I am the 201st woman to be elected.
I think today reminds us that so often when we study history, women’s participation in it, and contribution to it, is not celebrated or talked about. This is about ordinary people, ordinary women, doing extraordinary things. Does the Home Secretary agree that it would be a wonderful contribution to this centenary year if we asked all MPs to provide a story about the women in their constituencies or areas who did something for the suffrage movement? It could be kept in the House to be used by the education service, so that there will be no reason for future generations of boys and girls not to understand the contribution that women made.

Amber Rudd: I think that that is an excellent idea. I have a very good story from Hastings, which I am longing to put in that book.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to recognise all the women who are currently serving in this place and the other place and those who have gone before us? We may not always agree politically, or see eye to eye, but I absolutely recognise the courage that many have shown to get here.

I agree with the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) that it is important for the police and the criminal justice agencies to understand that, when female MPs—or, indeed, male MPs—come forward with stories of abuse, whether it be online or otherwise, they must be taken seriously. We do not necessarily want to be making those police reports. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my own recent experience with the Home Secretary.

Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), I think it extremely important—I have raised this point with the Prime Minister—that we recognise that abuse comes from all sides of the political spectrum. I acknowledge that it comes from my own party, which makes me incredibly ashamed, and I would never condone it. However, I have been subject to some significant abuse from the right. I think that the more we make this a party-political issue, the more we are prevented from making progress.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has made a characteristically important point. On the issue of abuse, I do not really share her view. Speaking honestly, I do not think that this is about being party-political. The fact is that plenty of Labour MPs have come to talk to me about the abuse that they have received from Momentum. It is not just we who receive such abuse. It is fine if some members of the Labour party do not want to call it out, but I think it is fair that we call it out because I do not think it is helpful to ignore it. We can talk about “all sides” and, of course, horrific abuse also comes from the right, although it does not, I think, come from members of the Conservative party. So I think there is a difference and I do not think it is helpful to ignore it.

As for the reporting of domestic abuse or any violence against women, the position has improved. Far more reporting is taking place and it is largely true that the police engage with it in a completely different way from the way in which they engaged with it 20 years ago. I think we should all welcome that, although, as in so many other instances in which there has been progress in respect of the protection of women and women’s rights, there is always more to do.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Let me wish everyone a happy feminist Christmas, which is what today feels like. I started the morning at 8.45 with everyone dressed in their Sunday best, and it genuinely feels like a happy moment in this place to celebrate something genuinely happy.

Following what the Home Secretary has just said about abuse, I have a suggestion for her that would make Labour women very happy. If she is hearing the concerns of Labour women, she could say today that she will do the following, and it will make Labour women very happy. When I see metro mayors and police and crime commissioners, I do not notice that any of them looks particularly like me. There is a huge problem with the representation of women in that regard. There is a very simple thing that the Government could agree to do today: they could agree to allow all-women shortlists to be used and agree to add a provision to the Equality Act 2010, so that they could be used for those positions. At present, it is illegal for the Labour party to use all-women shortlists. If the Home Secretary would like to do Labour women a solid, that is the one that we would ask for today.

Amber Rudd: I hate to let down the hon. Lady, who is such an extraordinary champion for women. All Conservative Members are full of admiration for the work that she does. However, she clearly has not noticed the Sussex police and crime commissioner, Katy Bourne, who does a fantastic job and is particularly focused on protecting women. That reminds us how important it is to have women in those senior roles.

And Vera Baird.

And Vera Baird as well— I thank hon. Members for the reminder. There is more that all of us can do to encourage women to put themselves forward for roles such as police and crime commissioner and mayor.
Points of Order

2.14 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Minister for Immigration told the House that the immigration White Paper would be published “in the coming months”. This morning, in the media, the Home Secretary could only say that it was likely to be published before Brexit day in March 2019. Given the apparent discrepancy, Mr Speaker, do you agree that it would be helpful to have some clarity from the Home Secretary? Have you had any indication from her that, in the absence of an immigration White Paper, she will at least make a statement to the House setting out all the outstanding issues relating to the transition arrangements, the registration policy and the Government’s immigration objectives in the negotiations?

Mr Speaker: I have not, but it would. Let me recap, in case some colleagues have forgotten the earlier part of the right hon. Lady’s point of order. I have not received an indication that any such statement is planned, but it would be helpful to have a guide as to the likely sequence of events. There is no obligation for the Home Secretary to provide any such information now, or indeed from the Dispatch Box at any time, but, knowing this place as I have come to know it, it is perfectly obvious that if such clarification is not provided, it will not be beyond the wit and ingenuity of colleagues to raise this matter continually on the Floor of the House in circumstances that require the presence of a Minister. The sooner it is clarified, the better.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for her point of order, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to respond. The right hon. Lady has written me a substantial letter, which I received yesterday, and I look forward to replying to it with the clarification that she seeks.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) rose—

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will call the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government first. I have the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) in mind; he need not worry.

Andrew Gwynne: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is further to my point of order on 24 January, following which I wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ask whether the serious allegations set out in The MJ—otherwise known as The Municipal Journal—were true. Those allegations were that the Secretary of State had knowingly misled the House on figures published in the provisional local government settlement and had knowingly misled right hon. and hon. Members in the answers that he had given to their respective questions.

Yesterday I received a letter from the Secretary of State confirming that he and the Department knew “the overall scale of the error” but nevertheless “published the provisional settlement on 19th December on the basis of” those “statistics”. At no stage in the proceedings did the Secretary of State advise the House that those data were incorrect, and many local authorities based their 2018 budget settings on the figures that he gave in his statement of 19 December, believing them to be correct. That is now creating a damaging lack of trust in the Ministry across local government.

More seriously, however, the Secretary of State has not publicly apologised to the House, but both “Erskine May” and the ministerial code go further, stating that Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament—that is now the case—must offer their resignation to the Prime Minister. Has the Secretary of State indicated to you, Sir, that he plans to make a personal statement to the House on his conduct in relation to this matter?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman, to whom I am grateful for giving me an indication of his intention to raise his point of order, is no. I have received no such indication from the Secretary of State.

The hon. Gentleman is a notable eager beaver in the House. He is most assiduous in the discharge of his duties, and he obviously wanted to be here today to air his serious concern about this matter, invoking third-party support as he developed his argument. Let me say to him that I think that his opportunity for direct exchange will come ere long. Local government finance is to be debated in the Chamber tomorrow. It is a reasonable expectation of the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be in his place on the Treasury Bench, ready to speak from the Dispatch Box, and I have a hunch that the hon. Gentleman will be in his place, and very likely leaping up from it to interject on the Secretary of State in pursuit of satisfaction. The House will be agog to witness those exchanges.

Andy McDonald rose—

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis); as I often say, it would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage of our proceedings.

Andy McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, in his statement to the House, the Secretary of State for Transport was asked by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne): “How good is Lord Adonis’ s memory” in connection to the collapse of East Coast. The Secretary of State replied:

“I am not a doctor, but I know that there is no record whatever of any ban on National Express continuing to bid for franchises after 2009”.—[Official Report, 5 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1247.]

That was when it defaulted on east coast rail.
That is entirely incorrect. On 1 July 2009, Lord Adonis told Parliament that National Express was banned, as recorded in Hansard. He said:

"I would clearly be reasonable not to invite a company to bid for future franchises in circumstances where it had recently failed to deliver on a previous franchise. A company which had defaulted in the way that National Express now intends would not have pre-qualified for any previous franchises let by the department."


Lord Adonis has made it clear that the ban was based on advice from the Department.

The ministerial code says:

"Ministers must give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity."

Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, of whether the Secretary of State’s statement amounts to a breach of the ministerial code, and how an appropriate apology and correction might be secured from him?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whom I indulged fully as he developed his point of order. I say with respect to the latter part of his observations, in respect of an alleged breach of the ministerial code, that I am not its arbiter. It is not for the Chair to adjudicate upon whether a Minister has breached the ministerial code. Whether the hon. Gentleman likes it or not, that is in the hands of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister looks at such matters, or can ask other people to look at them on her behalf, but it is not a matter for the Chair.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter, and although it is not—simply as a matter of constitutional fact—a point of order for the Chair, he has none the less taken the opportunity to put his concerns on the record. It is up to the Government if they wish to respond to the matter he raises, because there is absolutely no doubt that Ministers will have heard what he had to say—it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench, and it either will have been heard, or will very soon be heard, by the particular Minister at whom his remarks were directed.

Clive Lewis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice pertaining to the powers and privileges of the House. You will recall the recent debate I led on the treatment of small and medium-sized businesses by the state owned bank the Royal Bank of Scotland, after which this House voted unanimously for a full inquiry. Since that debate, I have received a full and unredacted copy of the Financial Conduct Authority investigation into RBS, which the FCA has so far refused to release, including to the Treasury Committee. Having read the document, I believe it shows that RBS executives misled the Select Committee in their evidence and have a stated policy of misleading Members of this House. Far from being isolated incidents of poor governance, as they claimed to the Committee, the report explicitly states that their behaviour was “systemic and widespread”. In one shocking passage of the report, out of hundreds, the bank boasted that one family business was set to “lose their shirts” so that RBS could get a “chunky equity deal.” Furthermore, it is clear that the summary of the report the FCA has published is what I would politely describe as a sanitised version.

The chair of the FCA, Andrew Bailey, is giving evidence to the Select Committee tomorrow. First, in light of that, Mr Speaker, may I ask your permission to hand over the full unredacted report to both you and the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, whom I note is unable to be in the Chamber at the moment?

Secondly, Mr Speaker, may I ask you to confirm that parliamentary privilege will apply to any Member or the Select Committee should they choose to refer to the report in the House? Finally, might I ask your guidance on whether deliberately misleading a Select Committee of this House would constitute contempt of Parliament, and what recourse this House has when that occurs?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and his courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. It is not for me either to give or to deny the hon. Gentleman permission to hand over the report to the Chair of the Select Committee; the hon. Gentleman must, and I am sure will, take responsibility for his own actions. For my part, I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman, that I do not wish to receive a copy. That is for two very good reasons. First, I have a very full reading list, in so far as the hon. Gentleman has the remotest interest in my personal habits. Secondly, and more importantly, I do not wish to receive a copy of the report because however important its contents and however they may be a source of perturbation to many people, they are not a matter for the Chair. Should the Treasury Committee wish to procure this document, I am sure that it could take steps to do so. The hon. Gentleman would also be well advised to take legal advice if he plans wider disclosure of the document he has received.

I can confirm that the hon. Gentleman’s comments in this House are covered by privilege. That is, it has to be said, perhaps just as well, since he has already uttered them. Deliberately misleading a Select Committee of the House would constitute a contempt. The proper course of action for a Member wishing to complain of breach of privilege is to write to me. There have been a number of examples of this, so I can authoritatively tell the hon. Gentleman that that is the proper course open to him. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and that he will go about his business at least moderately satisfied.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have also seen the full report, which refers to an “intentional and co-ordinated strategy by management” and makes clear the responsibility of the RBS board for the mistreatment of small businesses. I have raised this matter through a series of parliamentary questions with Ministers, and I raised it in the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), but so far the Government have declined to give an opinion on the summary of the report. The full report goes significantly further, and as my hon. Friend said, there is a suggestion that Parliament might well have been misled about what the full report says. RBS is owned by the Government, and the Government should surely be expressing a view about what is in the report, so can you advise me, Mr Speaker, how to go about getting the Government to express an opinion on what is in the summary and what is in the full report and to explain the discrepancies between the two?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman invests me with powers that I do not possess: it is not for me to cajole or exhort, or still less to require a ministerial response on
this matter, because I simply do not have the locus to do so. What I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that if he desires a ministerial response, there are a number of routes open to him. He can continue his attempt at questioning—he can beetle along to the Table Office if he wishes to table further questions—and there are other mechanisms in the Chamber that he can try if the matter is potentially urgent. I do not know whether it is and I make no guarantee, but he knows what route is open to him if he thinks it could be. More particularly, on the strength of what I have heard, off the top of my head, I say to the hon. Gentleman that if the Select Committee has an interest in this matter, it is perfectly open to it to request a response from a Minister either through correspondence, or by inviting the relevant Minister to appear before the Committee. So the resources of civilisation—and even, indeed, of the House of Commons—have not yet been exhausted on this matter, and I think that should bring a smile to the face of the hon. Gentleman.

Domestic Properties
(Minimum Energy Performance)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.29 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to ensure that domestic properties have a minimum energy performance rating of C on an Energy Performance Certificate; and for connected purposes.

First, I join the five ladies in my family and all the residents of Southend West in celebrating the 100 years of votes for women.

The House will be well aware of the consequences of fuel poverty. As someone who comes from the east end of London, I well remember families not being able to pay the coalman to deliver coal to our properties. It is widely acknowledged that improved energy efficiency offers substantial health benefits. Indeed, there is a clear link between ill health and cold homes, where existing conditions such as respiratory illnesses or mental health issues are exacerbated. The Building Research Establishment recently estimated that the cost of cold and damp homes to the NHS was approximately £760 million a year. That is a substantial amount of money. Fuel poverty is responsible for many avoidable winter deaths and leaves some vulnerable people unable to heat their homes properly. It really is—dare I say it?—Dickensian that some elderly people are living their lives in the one room that they can afford to heat.

I have been fortunate to have successfully pioneered a handful of private Member’s Bills on to the statute book. The one that I am particularly proud of is the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000. It was—as the violins play—in the year 2000 that I was finally drawn No. 5 in the private Members’ Bill ballot. That was my 17th attempt. As so often happens when a Member is fortunate in the ballot, I was inundated with requests from an array of lobby groups. Finally, with about 10 minutes left to make my decision, I was approached by the wonderful Friends of the Earth, and I was very impressed. Friends of the Earth persuaded me to dedicate my Bill to tackling fuel poverty. The next year of my life was spent engaging in parliamentary warfare, in the nicest possible way, not so much with Opposition Members as with some Members on my own side. The widespread social issue of fuel poverty had, until then, not gained much parliamentary attention. The Bill that I was blessed to be able to pilot successfully through Parliament called on the Government not only to define the concept of fuel poverty but to recognise it as a distinct social problem. It aimed to eliminate fuel poverty entirely and called on the Government to devise a strategy for eradication by providing domestic insulation and other energy efficiency measures.

Good progress was made initially, and hundreds of thousands of people are estimated to have been taken out of fuel poverty as a result of that measure. Figures show that in 2015, 79% of homes in England had an energy performance certificate rating of band D or better, compared with only 39% in 2005. Sadly, however, in 2009 the then Government utilised a legal loophole to avoid delivering on the principal aim of the Act.
The phrase “as far as reasonably practicable”, which was initially inserted to avoid forcing entry, was interpreted by the High Court as meaning that the Government could abandon the commitment to ending fuel poverty. My new Bill, the Domestic Properties (Minimum Energy Performance) Bill, aims to plug that loophole exploited by the Government.

The Bill will have two primary dimensions. The first concerns those homes that are classified as fuel poor. Last year’s “Annual fuel poverty statistics report” states:

“A household is considered to be fuel poor if it has higher than typical energy costs and would be left with a disposable income below the poverty line if it spent the required money to meet those costs.”

The Bill will require the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to prepare a plan to bring all fuel-poor homes up to energy performance certificate band C by 2030. The Conservative party committed itself to bringing all fuel-poor homes up to EPC band C by 2030 in last year’s manifesto, which stated:

“We will improve the energy efficiency of existing homes, especially for the least well off, by committing to upgrading all fuel poor homes to EPC Band C by 2030.”

What impact will this have? As an illustration, upgrading a home’s energy efficiency from EPC band E to band D reduces energy costs by £380 a year on average. Moreover, the annual running cost of a band C-rated home is £270 lower than the average band D-rated home, and £650 less than the average band E-rated home.

The second dimension of my Bill concerns those homes not classified as fuel poor. In other words, it has £650 less than the average band E-rated home. £270 lower than the average band D-rated home, and the annual running cost of a band C-rated home is £650 less than the average band E-rated home.

The Bill will require the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to prepare a plan to bring all fuel-poor homes up to energy performance certificate band C by 2030. The Conservative party committed itself to bringing all fuel-poor homes up to EPC band C by 2030 in last year’s manifesto, which stated:

“We will improve the energy efficiency of existing homes, especially for the least well off, by committing to upgrading all fuel poor homes to EPC Band C by 2030.”

What impact will this have? As an illustration, upgrading a home’s energy efficiency from EPC band E to band D reduces energy costs by £380 a year on average. Moreover, the annual running cost of a band C-rated home is £270 lower than the average band D-rated home, and £650 less than the average band E-rated home.

The second dimension of my Bill concerns those homes not classified as fuel poor. In other words, it has £650 less than the average band E-rated home. £270 lower than the average band D-rated home, and the annual running cost of a band C-rated home is £650 less than the average band E-rated home.

The second dimension of my Bill concerns those homes not classified as fuel poor. In other words, it has £650 less than the average band E-rated home. £270 lower than the average band D-rated home, and the annual running cost of a band C-rated home is £650 less than the average band E-rated home.

I wish to deal with some concerns that one or two Members have raised with me. First, let me deal with the Bill’s impact on devolved powers. I can assure the House that my Bill will not infringe on the devolved powers granted to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I understand that Scotland and Wales have separate fuel poverty targets, but clause 1(5) will specifically prevent the Secretary of State from taking action without consultation with the devolved Administrations. It states:

“The Secretary of State must have the agreement of the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers and the relevant Northern Ireland department before taking actions relating to devolved matters in pursuance of the duties in subsections (1) and (2).”

Secondly, the House will be pleased to hear that, by using the method suggested in the Treasury Green Book, my Bill is revenue neutral, and I hope that that will counter any objections regarding its financial implications. I have also taken the liberty of placing a copy of a revenue-neutral balance sheet in the Library of the House for Members to examine if they so wish. Finally, this is also a Bill with logical caveats. It will require the Secretary of State to bring homes up to EPC band C standard only where

“it is practical, cost-effective and affordable.”

It would not therefore apply to someone living in an old and extremely large property such as—a stately home. The Bill is therefore a reasoned and logical approach to finally ending fuel poverty—the ambition that I originally had in the year 2000—and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Sir David Amess, Peter Aldous, Richard Benyon, Sir Graham Brady, Martyn Day, Sir Edward Davey, Mary Glindon, Carolyn Harris, James Heappey, Mr Bernard Jenkin, Dame Caroline Spelman and Daniel Zeichner present the Bill.

Sir David Amess accordingly presented the Bill. Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 161).

**SPACE INDUSTRY BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)**

Ordered.

That the Order of 15 January 2018 (Space Industry Bill [Lords] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.
2. (2) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.
3. (3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—(Joseph Johnson.)
Space Industry Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

**Potential impact of leaving the European Union on the United Kingdom's space industry**

'(1) The Secretary of State must carry out and publish an assessment of the potential impact that leaving the European Union will have on the United Kingdom's space industry.

(2) The assessment under subsection (1) must make reference to the following areas—

(a) the impact of the UK's exit from the EU on research and development and access to funding, including Horizon 2020;

(b) the free movement to the UK from the EU of those skilled in the space industry;

(c) the UK's participation in the Galileo and Copernicus programmes; and

(d) the impact of the UK leaving the Single Market on supply chains within the space industry.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a report of the assessment before Parliament within one year of this Act passing.

(4) If an assessment of the impact of leaving the European Union on the UK's space industry has already been undertaken, the Secretary of State must lay a report of this assessment before Parliament and publish it on the day on which this Act is passed.'—[Layla Moran.]

This new clause would ensure the Government prepares and publishes an impact assessment of the potential impact on the space industry as a result of the UK leaving the EU.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.41 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 2—**Potential impact of leaving the EU on the UK space industry** (No.2)—

'(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay before Parliament a report setting out a summary of any discussions between the UK Government and the European Union on the future relationship between the UK space industry and the European Union, following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must make reference to—

(a) options for future cooperation and partnership between the UK space industry and the European Union; and

(b) any new arrangements with, or proposed access to, EU space programmes, following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.'

This new clause would ensure that Parliament is kept up to date with negotiations between the UK and European Union in regards to the UK space industry, in order to provide clarity to the UK space industry.

Layla Moran: I rise to speak to new clause 1, which is in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends and would require the publication of an assessment of the impacts of leaving the EU on the space industry. I do not wish to take up too much of the House's time rehashing the arguments about the impact of Brexit on the space industry, as many such arguments were made on Second Reading, in Committee and in the other place, but I briefly want to place on the record the industry's continuing concerns, which should require the Government to publish an assessment of the sort set out in new clause 1. I will take each of the areas that I would like to see in such a report in turn, starting with research and development and Horizon 2020.

The Minister is a former Science Minister, so I do not need to explain to him the importance of certainty for scientists in the space industry. Sadly, however, we still do not have that certainty so many months later. The UK is a net beneficiary of EU space funding, contributing 12.5% of the total budget but winning contracts worth 14% of total spend. The British space industry needs a guarantee of continued access to research and development funding, expertise and facilities currently provided at EU level after the UK leaves the EU. Of course, the European Commission also provides space-related research funding through Horizon 2020, and the Government have said they will guarantee successful bids made by UK participants before exit. However, beyond that the sector has had only warm words, and it needs certainly beyond the next few years. The Government's science and innovation discussion paper states that the UK would "welcome discussion" on remaining a participant in certain EU science and innovation programmes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): If the guarantee is only for another two years, there will be a profound effect on research and development, particularly in universities. If there is no guarantee beyond that, there will be a great deal of uncertainty for both universities and the industry.

Layla Moran: The hon. Gentleman is right, and my constituency is affected by such uncertainty.

I repeat a point that I made during the passage of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill: we must remember that this is not just about funding. At a recent hearing of the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, witnesses were clear that the most valuable asset we have as a nation is our ability to attract human capital. To put it bluntly, the funding follows the brains. There is real consternation across the entire science industry that European scientists are actively looking to move, if they have not already, to more welcoming countries. Their lives are more than just their jobs; this is about where they live, love and participate in the community, so the tone of this debate matters hugely. It is therefore critical that we maintain freedom of movement for the world-class scientists, specialists and technicians who contribute to the space industry, so that we keep those brains and the funding here.

Patrick Wood, CEO of Surrey Satellite Technology Ltd, an existing supplier to Galileo, has said that "there are still a lot of unknowns" about whether UK space companies will be able to access high-quality staff post-Brexit, noting that UK space infrastructure companies "have a high percentage of staff that come from across Europe" partly due to a lack of UK applicants. Aerospace companies are heavily reliant on the rapid movement of workers between different sites. A favourite fact of mine is that Airbus moved employees 80,000 times between...
the EU and the UK in 2016. It even has its own jet shuttle between Toulouse and Broughton. Any additional border checks between the UK and the EU could therefore prove a significant burden.

On Galileo, the European Commission is demanding the right to cancel existing contracts with UK companies that are constructing the £10 billion Galileo satellite navigation system unless the UK negotiates a new security relationship with the EU. If no long-term agreement can be found, UK companies may only be able to retain their contracts by setting up EU subsidiaries. With them will go the tax take, the brains and the supporting jobs.

Finally, I turn to the crucial effect of leaving the single market on supply chains within the UK space industry. Last year, I asked the Minister, in his former role, a series of parliamentary questions about the impact on the UK space sector supply chain of leaving the single market, but sadly there was not much in the answers to give heart to the industry. It has just not received the answers that it needs. Stuart Martin, CEO of the Satellite Applications Catapult said that “Brexit represents a risk to the United Kingdom in sustaining its leadership position” among sectors such as satellite manufacturing and navigation services. He also stated that the UK needs to sustain its leadership role within the European Space Agency and maintain access to the single market. Before anyone says, “But we will stay in the European Space Agency,” yes we will, but we must not forget that a quarter of its funding comes from the EU.

It is clear that the industry needs certainty on all those issues. We have had warm words, but not enough action. The Government’s shambolic handling of impact assessments and sectoral analyses, as well as this week’s uncertainty over future customs arrangements, is not inspiring confidence among the space industry. There are few specific commitments or guarantees in the Bill, so it is not unreasonable for the Government to publish an assessment of the sort that new clause 1 would require, and I hope that the Minister will consider doing so.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I start by passing on the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who has been heavily involved in the Bill since the beginning. Unfortunately, she is extremely unwell this week and has uncharacteristically heeded her daughter’s advice by staying at home, but she is no doubt watching from her sickbed.

I rise to support new clauses 1 and 2, which attempt to ensure a proper assessment of the potential damage that an extreme Brexit could cause our space industry. During the passage of the Bill, we have had a glimpse of the opportunities ahead for the UK’s space industry, but this relates to the wider reaches of the EU. The EU funds space research through Horizon 2020, and we want to ensure that we remain a player beyond that point. Although the European Space Agency is separate from the EU, it does still receive significant funding from it, so we need to know whether the Government have made any assessment of the impact of Brexit on our space industries. Given the previous impact assessment fudge, the answer is probably, “Probably not, but if we have, we will not be publishing it anyway.” That is simply not good enough. The new clauses make it clear that the Government will make that assessment and will publish it. If they do not accept these amendments, the question must be: what do the Government have to hide?

The European Commission has made it clear where it wants to go on space, so do the Government intend to remain part of the strategy and programme it has outlined? If we are not an integral part of the European space programme, what will be the impact on our viability as a spaceport centre, compared with other spaceports located within the European family? How will we retain access to EU research and development projects, which are so important to our space industry? As has been mentioned, how will changes to freedom of movement affect this industry, an industry that exchanges talent across frontiers on a regular basis? Not all that talent will be at a salary threshold that allows easy access to the UK. Will we retain full access to programmes such as Galileo and Copernicus? Will we be marginalised in EU procurement decisions?

Those are all important questions for the Government to consider now, and they should be included in any impact assessment.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech that outlines the isolationist view that post-Brexit Britain is about to take. How does she square what the UK Government are saying about “global Britain” with the powerful points she has made this afternoon?

Carol Monaghan: We all want to see the space industry succeed, and we want to see it succeed on a global playing field, but we need to get this right. Requiring an impact assessment would make a big difference. We need to probe further on where our space industry will find itself in the increasingly likely event of a hard Brexit.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): New clause 2 would ensure that Parliament is kept up to date on negotiations between the UK and the European Union in regard to the UK space industry.

New clause 2 differs very slightly from new clause 1, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Both new clauses have the same aims. New clause 2 asks the Government to produce a summary of any discussions between the UK Government and the European Union to ensure that Parliament is kept up to date on the progress of the negotiations. Just as importantly, new clause 2 would also provide clarity to the UK’s space industry.

It goes without saying, or at least it should, that the Government must ensure we get the best possible deal with the EU to help support the UK space industry’s continued growth. That is the whole point of the Bill, and it is why the Labour party is broadly supportive of it. UKspace, the trade association of the UK space industry, claims: “The UK leaving the EU has created significant uncertainty which is already affecting the integrated supply chain, R&D collaboration and joint programmes with other EU countries.”

As colleagues have pointed out, the UK space industry makes a noteworthy contribution to our economy and employs close to 40,000 people. The industry is currently highly dependent on EU-led space programmes. As a
result, the Government must ensure the UK gets a deal that secures the long-term future and growth of our space industry to ensure that the Government’s ambition for the UK to be a leading player in the global space industry is not just talk and no action.

The Government provided a report to the Exiting the European Union Committee with a sectoral analysis of the UK space sector after our Opposition day debate on 1 November 2017—it is fair to say that we forced the issue. We welcome the Government publishing that document. However, the Opposition believe the document is not sufficient and that Parliament should be kept up to date with a further summary, which would also give the sector the additional clarity it asks for.

Any further uncertainty would hinder any potential growth in the UK space industry. New clause 2 is a reasonable and sensible amendment that would require the Government to publish a report setting out a summary within 12 months of Royal Assent, which is absolutely fair.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks about growth in the industry. We heard a lot about growth on Second Reading, and the Minister has acknowledged the need for skills. Leaving aside new clause 2, but relevant to it, is there a case for cross-departmental work on developing those skills, given the complexity of meeting the industry’s needs? Would the hon. Gentleman offer that as a possible compromise to the Minister?

Karl Turner: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I was about to say that I do not intend to divide the House on new clause 2, but I hope the Minister takes his point on board.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Like the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), the Government want the UK to make the most of the opportunities that lie ahead. We want the UK to be a go-to place for scientists, innovators and tech investors in the years ahead. We intend to secure the right outcomes for the UK research base, including our space community, as we exit the European Union.

As hon. Members will remember, the agreement that successfully concluded phase 1 of the exit negotiations in December 2017 made it clear that, as part of the financial settlement, the UK will remain part of Horizon 2020 until at least the end of this budget period in December 2020. As part of the new deep and special relationship with the EU, recognising our shared interest in maintaining and strengthening research collaboration, the UK will seek an agreement that promotes science and innovation, including on space, across Europe now and in the future. We would welcome a specific agreement to continue collaborating with our European partners on major science, space research and technology initiatives, and we will be approaching the upcoming negotiations on that basis.

New clause 1 would require the Government to undertake an assessment. As Members will remember, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union provided the relevant Select Committees with reports on many sectors, including the space sector, on 27 November 2017. The space sector report contained a description of the sector, the current EU regulatory regime, the existing frameworks for facilitating trade, including between countries, and the sector views on it. Ministers have a specific responsibility, which Parliament has previously endorsed, not to release information that would undermine our negotiating position, and I know Members present understand that position.

On new clause 2, the Government’s September partnership paper set out our intent with regard to discussing options for future co-operation and partnership with the EU through the EU space programme. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has given a clear undertaking to the House that he will keep the relevant Select Committees informed of progress in discussions with the EU Commission on EU exit matters. That commitment to openness needs to be balanced with the overriding national interest in preserving our negotiating position.

I recognise the interest of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) in how our future relationship with the EU will help support the continued strong growth in the space sector—it is an interest the Government share—but I hope he will appreciate that we cannot enter into commitments to inform Parliament about the EU exit negotiations on a sector-by-sector basis, through various bits of legislation. In the light of that, I ask the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon to withdraw new clause 1.

Layla Moran: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New clause 3

PUBLICATION OF REGULATIONS

‘(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay a report before Parliament setting out details of the regulations issued under this Act.

(2) The report in subsection (1) must include, but is not limited to, regulations that have effect for licences for—

(a) spaceports;

(b) launch operators;

(c) satellite operators; and

(d) range control operators.

(3) Before exercising their duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive and have regard to their views in respect of any proposed regulations.

(4) As well as consulting those in subsection (3) the Secretary of State must consult with—

(a) UKspace, and

(b) any other such persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.”.—[Carol Monaghan.]’

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish clear guidelines on the regulations issued under this Act.

Brought up, and read the First time.

3 pm

Carol Monaghan: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 4—Cap on licensees’ liability limit—

‘(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay a report before Parliament setting out plans for a cap on licensees’ liability.

(2) Before exercising their duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must carry out a consultation on what an appropriate maximum limit would be on the amount of a licensee’s liability, and lay a report before Parliament setting this out.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must provide for, but is not limited to—

(a) a maximum limit on the amount of a particular licensee’s liability for each launch undertaken by the operator;

(b) a maximum limit on the amount of licensees’ liability for each launch classification type;

(c) divisions of responsibility and the level of liability for parties’ spaceflight activities, including—

(i) the Spaceport;

(ii) the launch operator; and

(iii) the satellite operator.

(4) In subsection (3) “launch classification type” means the level of risk attached to each type of launch as determined by the regulator.

(5) Before exercising their duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive and have regard to their views in respect of any proposed regulations.

(6) As well as consulting those under subsection (5) the Secretary of State must consult with—

(a) UKspace, and

(b) any other such persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate."

This new clause would require the Government to consult on and set a mandatory cap on licensees’ liability for each individual launch, based on the classification type of each launch.

Amendment 4, in clause 9, page 8, line 24, at end insert—

‘(10) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, publish guidance about any regulations in relation to operator licences. Such guidance must be issued by the regulator (if the regulator is not the Secretary of State).

(11) The regulator must hold pre-licensing discussions with any potential operator before an operator licence can be issued to them.

(12) Discussions under subsection (11) must include, but are not limited to, providing potential operators with guidance on any regulations in relation to operator licences.’

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to publish guidance about any regulations issued in relation to operator licences, and to hold discussions with all potential operators before a licence can be issued to them, to ensure that the UK space industry is sufficiently aware of the regulatory framework.

Amendment 1, in clause 68, page 44, line 35, after “offences,” insert—

“(n) regulations under subsection (1) of this section”

This amendment would make regulations made under section 68(1) subject to the affirmative procedure.

Amendment 2, in schedule 6, page 61, line 2, after “authority” insert “and devolved administration”.

This amendment would make it a requirement that when an order is made to obtain rights over land, notices about the orders must be served to devolved administrations, where relevant.
In the longer term, this issue could affect where future developments take place in the space industry. Some countries do not require satellites to be built locally, whereas other jurisdictions require satellites that are being launched to be built in the local area or in the country of launch. If cube satellite businesses do not get a mandatory liability cap in this Bill, there is a danger that future investment will be affected and a real possibility that when those businesses are looking to expand, they will do so in a jurisdiction where liability is capped and insurance can be obtained.

Carol Monaghan: That is exactly how the liability works: the insurer covers up to whatever that liability is and the rest is picked up by Government. Once that is picked up by Government, we have to look at the revenue that is generated from that industry and the amount of growth and jobs created. If we look at proper regulations on our spaceports, liability or risk will be extremely low. Every other country that is launching has a liability cap. We cannot possibly compete unless we have that in place.

As I have said, I understand that the Minister has committed to looking at the issue of the cap and talking to industry leaders about this issue. As I have also said, I am not pressing today for a figure, but the indication that a cap will be in place will provide great reassurance for the UK space industry and will allow it to grow in the way in which we hope it will.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Committee, I heard the hon. Lady press the case for an unlimited liability cap. I also heard the Minister give an extraordinarily good and detailed explanation of the work that needed to go into the detailed preparation for such a cap. That is why it was decided in Committee not to put this measure in the Bill, by a vast majority, with cross-party support. It is not that we do not understand the need for this, but it needs to be set in the correct way.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution, but I think she is missing the point, which is that there must be a cap in place for these companies to get insurance. Without it, they cannot get insurance, and without insurance, they cannot launch. If the Government are considering this cap, why is it not in the Bill? Why does the Bill not contain a statement that a cap will be put in place? I am not asking for a figure and I certainly did not talk about unlimited liability; we talked about limited liability. Unless this is in place, we are stifling a serious growth industry. So I call on the Government to accept the new clause and to listen to the concerns of the space industry.

Mr John Hayes: I intend to speak briefly on this issue, having heard what the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said and having looked at these matters in my previous life, as it were. Liability is salient to this Bill. The Government have acknowledged that in what they have said and in the changes they have already made as a result of our consideration in Committee.

I pay tribute to the new Minister for the work he has done on this. It is right to say that he is continuing discussions with the industry. As he said, there is a fragility about the industry. That is not to say that it is not successful, growing or doing wonderful things, but when one innovates or is on the margins of innovation, as this industry is bound to be, given that it is pushing the frontiers ever further, of course one is in a risky business. To gain the necessary investment to make that innovation happen and to take on board those risks, one needs to create a framework of certainty, and the certainty is to some degree about liability.

If I may say so, though, there is a simpler way to deal with the hon. Lady’s points. As I said, I shall be brief. I notice that the Government have already made changes to clause 35(3), where the word “may” has been changed to “must”. They could make similar changes to clause 34(5). Were the Government obliged to make regulations to deal with liability, I think that would go a long way towards satisfying the hon. Lady. I have sufficient trust in the Minister and his Department to know that even with the word “may” in the provision, it is likely that, following the discussions that he and others are having with the industry, further regulations will be introduced for the very reasons the hon. Lady set out in a measured and moderate way.

It is vital that we create the investor confidence that will allow the industry to grow and, as I have said, push forward the frontiers of technology in what is necessarily a risky business. This can be a great success and the Bill takes us a long way towards enabling that success. To get the issue of liability right will be the icing on the cake, but as everyone who has ever dressed or consumed a cake knows, the icing is vital—it is what draws us in, encourages and seduces us to consume the cake. With that overture, I hope that the Minister can provide the reassurance that the industry and I seek and that on that basis the hon. Lady might see fit to withdraw her new clause, although that is a matter not for me but very much for her.

Layla Moran: I rise to speak briefly to amendments 1, 2 and 3. Amendment 1 deals with the catch-all powers in the Bill and, at your discretion, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall seek to press it to a vote. In the House of Lords, the Government agreed to remove the Henry VIII power from the Bill in response to concerns expressed by my Liberal Democrat colleagues in the other place and by Lord Judge, the former Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales. However, there is still a need to go further to tackle the Government’s power grab.

Several stakeholders have expressed concerns about the Bill’s skeletal nature. In particular, the House of Lords Constitution Committee said that some of the powers in the Bill were “very broad” and that the Bill would be “challenging for Parliament to scrutinise meaningfully” because so many of its powers were delegated to Ministers. That Committee also expressed concerns about a power in clause 68 that allows Ministers to make regulations but which might prevent people from being able to take the Government to court for judicial review because the Government could easily argue that their powers were within the Bill’s scope. The power permits the Government to make almost any law relating to “space activities…sub-orbital activities, and…associated activities…carried out in the United Kingdom.” That covers pretty much anything to do with the industry.
In response to the raising of such concerns in the other place, the Government suggested that there was no need for concern and, according to Baroness Sugg, that the powers were needed to “deal with any unanticipated circumstances.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 28 November 2017; Vol. 787, c. 613.]

I am afraid that that is not good enough. Liberal Democrats remain concerned that the scope of clause 68 is far too wide. We believe that, if the Government are not willing to remove the power or to limit its scope, it is only right and proper to increase parliamentary scrutiny of legislation passed under the power, which is why I shall seek to divide the House on amendment 1, which would require any new secondary legislation passed using clause 68 to be subject to the affirmative procedure.

Mr John Hayes: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, but she must know that a Bill of this type essentially establishes what I called earlier a framework of certainty. This is a highly innovative industry and technology changes very rapidly. To be prescriptive about what the future might look like would be a woeful error. There has to be a degree of flexibility in the Bill, which she risks limiting by being prescriptive at this stage.

Layla Moran: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I disagree that the amendment would prevent innovation. I think it would be absolutely fine. The affirmative procedure is employed in 13 other parts of the Bill. Parliamentary scrutiny should not just be waved away, as it has been in other Bills. All we are asking for is the affirmative procedure, which would allow Parliament to scrutinise regulations that little bit more.

3.15 pm

On amendments 2 and 3, it was noted in the other place that clauses 39 and 41 are essentially planning powers, so I question why they are going to be held in Westminster. It seems to me that the security powers should be shared between Westminster and the devolved Administrations. The Bill should enshrine a formal relationship between the UK and devolved Governments over the securing of launch sites, and there should be specific reference to the need of the UK Government to gain the consent of devolved Ministers, not least because as things currently stand information on the launch sites would be published in local papers, which would be the point at which civil servants in the devolved Administrations might find out.

The Government should go further and create a formalised process whereby the devolved Administrations could object to orders made under clauses 39 and 41. Amendments 2 and 3 would do just that by requiring notices of such orders to be sent to the devolved Administrations, where relevant, in addition to local authorities, so that they would be officially informed that an order had been served, rather than having to read about it or use some sort of grapevine to do their jobs well. I hope that the Minister will see that that would be a sensible step and accept the amendments.

Karl Turner: I rise to speak to amendment 4, which I tabled, as well as the remaining new clauses and amendments.

Amendment 4 would give clarity to the UK’s space industry. As it stands, the Bill makes no provision to ensure that the industry works with the Government to create the regulatory framework that it so badly needs. The amendment would increase the focus on making the UK commercially attractive for potential spaceflight operators. As with new clause 3, the amendment was tabled to press the Government to publish clear regulations for the UK space industry, which is one of the Bill’s key issues.

Under the amendment, the Secretary of State would have to publish guidance for any forthcoming regulations and hold regular discussions with any potential operator before a licence was issued. The UK’s space industry needs as much clarity as possible; we do not want further uncertainty that may hinder growth. If the Government do not get this right, they could quite possibly deter investment, recruitment and growth in the space sector. It will be interesting to hear the Minister’s views.

Labour Members generally support the aims of new clause 3, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). The Bill does not set out the criteria for awarding licences, and nor does it describe the procedures in any great detail, which is a problem. When I spoke to new clause 2, I alluded to the fact that Labour wants the UK space industry to grow in the coming years, but the Government need to get this legislation right and have had the opportunity to do so. The industry must be made aware of regulations. We agree that the Government should lay a report before Parliament setting out the proposed licensing regulations in detail. That is fair and reasonable.

On new clause 3(3), Labour tabled an amendment in Committee that would have ensured that if space activities were established in any of the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, their respective environmental agencies and bodies, and respective Governments, would be consulted before any decision was made to grant an operator licence in their jurisdictions. Unfortunately, our amendment was defeated, so I welcome new clause 3, which presses the issue a little further.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire also tabled new clause 4, which deals with the liability issue that came up time and again in Committee.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): There are 40,000 jobs in the UK space industry. Would it not deter investment if the Government did not implement a liability cap for the industry?

Karl Turner: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right to say that 40,000 jobs rely on such a measure. Colleagues on both sides of the House have made the point that investment may be deterred if that is not in place.

New clause 4 deals with this very important issue of liability. The issue has been raised at every stage of the Bill’s consideration, both here and in the other place. Labour broadly supports the Bill, as we have reiterated throughout its passage, because we want the industry to grow so that high-skilled, high-paid and secure work is created across the country. Labour previously tabled amendments to get a discussion going about a liability cap. My colleagues in the other place tabled an amendment that would have removed any cap on a licensee’s liability,
but that was merely a probing amendment with the intention of grabbing the Government’s attention so that they would seriously consider providing a definite liability cap in primary legislation. I am grateful to my colleagues in the other place for the work that they did. As I said in Committee, we were never opposed to a cap; we just wanted some clarity from the Government, as they must get this right. I think it fair to say that the Government have listened carefully to the points we made in Committee.

The UK space sector has made repeated representations to the Government that they should implement a cap for UK-licensed satellite launch operators. Britain’s space industry wants the Government to introduce a cap, I think at around £60 million. The Bill makes no mention of that, apart from the vague and lax use of the word “may”, which has now been amended to “must”. We are aware, however, that the Government stated previously—I think in Committee—that they opposed writing into legislation a mandatory cap on liability, as well as mandatory compensation from the Government, because that might breach state aid rules. I would be really grateful to the Minister if he clarified this particular point.

The industry has maintained throughout that it would not be able to secure insurance without a benchmark liability figure. The ambiguity from the Government on this issue could put off potential investment in the industry, as we have already heard, and harm the growth that the Bill sets out to achieve.

Requiring the Government to consult on and set a mandatory cap on a licensee’s liability for each launch individually, as well as basing it on the classification type of each launch, is reasonable and fair. We believe that the Government need to look again at this, and I see that the Minister is taking note of what is being said.

I will speak very briefly to Liberal Democrat amendments 1 to 3. Amendment 1 would make regulations made under clause 68 subject to the affirmative procedure. In the other place, Labour colleagues worked on a cross-party basis, it is fair to say, in an attempt to ensure that a number of the regulations under the Bill would be subject to the affirmative procedure. Labour also tabled a similar amendment in Committee. We are grateful to the Government for listening and taking on board the concerns raised in the other place, and the Bill now ensures that there is enhanced scrutiny of regulations under the affirmative procedure, which I am very glad to see.

Amendments 2 and 3 to schedule 6 are about ensuring that the devolved Administrations are notified when an order is made to obtain rights over land. In Committee, Labour tabled an amendment to ensure that, before any decisions or notices were made, there would be consultation with not only the relevant environment agencies of the devolved Administrations, but the devolved Administrations themselves. I pressed that amendment to a Division because I did not think that the Government went anything like far enough to ensure that the devolved Administrations would be involved in the overall process. Unfortunately, that amendment was defeated, but I hope that the Government have now fully appreciated its intent.

Joseph Johnson: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken to the measures tabled by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whiteford). In addition to new clause 3, she tabled new clause 4, which would introduce a mandatory requirement for the Government to lay a report before Parliament setting out their plans in relation to a cap on a licensee’s liabilities. The new clause would also mandate consultation with the devolved Administrations and UKspace, a trade association of the UK space industry. The Government have consistently listened to the industry’s concerns about liabilities, dating back to the early development of our policy by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), including with regard to the licensing of UK entities carrying out certain space activities and in the development of all the provisions in the Bill.

The Government are well aware that the main space launch nations, including France and the US, limit a launch operator’s liabilities in some form, which is why the Bill contains powers for certain liabilities to be capped in licence conditions by way of regulations. Having such powers enables the UK to compete on a level playing field and allows the Government to share the burden of liabilities with operators.

However, launch from the UK is a new activity, and we should cap a launch vehicle operator’s liability, and thereby confer contingent liability on the Government, only if there is clear evidence that that is necessary. It is therefore important that the Government are able first to gather such evidence. To do that, as has been highlighted in earlier stages of the passage of this Bill, we will undertake a call for evidence specifically on liability and insurance, and that will take place shortly after Royal Assent.

Alongside that, the UK Space Agency is already working on, and considering its approach towards, risk assessment, insurance and liability requirements for launch activities taking place from the UK. If, following that work and the call for evidence, a cap on the launch vehicle operator’s liability for launch activities taking place from the UK is deemed appropriate, a full consultation will take place, which will include the publication of Government proposals and draft regulations. As I have said, this will be an open and comprehensive consultation that will include the devolved Administrations. Any proposals outlined in such a consultation will be subject to compliance with relevant trading rules, whether they are EU state aid rules, or other rules applying after our exit from the European Union.

Mr John Hayes: It seems that the Minister has exceeded my expectations. The big billing that I gave him was entirely justified, because he has addressed exactly the point that was made earlier: we need to know precisely what the circumstances are as launch facilities are developed. The combination of a call for evidence and a potential consultation seems to go a very, very long way towards what those who asked for further work on liability wanted to achieve. I am delighted to hear what he has said in his brief contribution.

Joseph Johnson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support for the Government’s approach of gathering the evidence base in a call for evidence, and then, if necessary, holding a further consultation, particularly involving the devolved Administrations.
The current drafting of schedule 6 requires that notice of a proposal to make an order under clauses 39 or 41 must be published in local newspapers and served on the local authority. This gives a devolved Administration the opportunity to raise any concerns about a specific order. Should the devolved Administration be aggrieved by the making of an order, it will have the opportunity to apply to the High Court for the order to be quashed, as provided for by schedule 7.

I reiterate the fact that any orders made under clauses 39 and 41 will be compatible with existing planning legislation, which means that nothing in the Bill will restrict the ability of local planning authorities to take planning decisions. That is important because it means that, should Ministers in the devolved Administrations wish to call in any planning decision in relation to the development of a spaceport site, their right to do so will not be affected by any provision in the Bill.

On that basis, I ask the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, speaking on behalf of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, to withdraw new clause 3.

Carol Monaghan: I am happy to withdraw new clause 3, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

CAP ON LICENSEES’ LIABILITY LIMIT

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay a report before Parliament setting out plans for a cap on licensees' liability.

(2) Before exercising their duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must carry out a consultation on what an appropriate maximum limit would be on the amount of a licensee's liability, and lay a report before Parliament setting this out.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must provide for, but is not limited to—

(a) a maximum limit on the amount of a particular licensee’s liability for each launch undertaken by the operator;
(b) a maximum limit on the amount of licensees’ liability for each launch classification type;
(c) divisions of responsibility and the level of liability for parties’ spaceflight activities, including—
   (i) the Spaceport;
   (ii) the launch operator; and
   (iii) the satellite operator.

(4) In subsection (3) “launch classification type” means the level of risk attached to each type of launch as determined by the regulator.

(5) Before exercising their duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive and have regard to their views in respect of any proposed regulations.

(6) As well as consulting those under subsection (5) the Secretary of State must consult with—

(a) UKspace, and
(b) any other such persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.”

This new clause would require the Government to consult on and set a mandatory cap on licensees’ liability for each individual launch, based on the classification type of each launch. —[Carol Monaghan.]”

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.
### Division No. 114

**AYES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hobhouse, Wera</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosie, Stewart</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jardine, Christine</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb, rh Norman</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Chris</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyd, Stephen</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDonald, Stewart Malcolm</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDonough, Stuart C.</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monaghan, Carol</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moran, Layla</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newlands, Gavin</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheppard, Tommy</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephens, Chris</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swinson, Jo</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffey, Dr Thérèse</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa, Alberto</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts, Robert</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crabb, rh Stephen</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Chris</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, David T. C.</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David, Rh</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Philip</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinnaghe, Caroline</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djanogly, Mr Jonathan</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Docherty, Leo</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodds, rh Nigel</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donelan, Michelle</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double, Steve</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowson, Myfan</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doyle-Price, Jackie</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drax, Richard</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duddridge, James</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duguid, David</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan, rh Sir Alan</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan, Mr Philip</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellis, Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elphicke, Charlie</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eustice, George</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evennett, rh David</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricant, Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandes, Suella</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford, John</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, rh Dr Liam</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frazer, Lucy</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, George</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freer, Mike</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricant, Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandes, Suella</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford, John</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, rh Dr Liam</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frazer, Lucy</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, George</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freer, Mike</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricant, Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandes, Suella</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford, John</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, rh Dr Liam</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frazer, Lucy</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, George</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freer, Mike</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricant, Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandes, Suella</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford, John</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, rh Dr Liam</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frazer, Lucy</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, George</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freer, Mike</td>
<td>Whips</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

David Linden and Alison Thewliss
Space Industry Bill [Lords] 6 FEBRUARY 2018 Space Industry Bill [Lords]

Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stephenson, John
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturry, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaney, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David

Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shaihesh
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, rh Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mims Davies and
Kelly Tolhurst

Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartilage, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishit, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Falcon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert

Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hafflon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gordon
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 68

Amendment proposed: 1, page 44, line 35, after “offences,” insert—

“(n) regulations under subsection (1) of this section”—

(Layla Moran.)

This amendment would make regulations made under section 68(1) subject to the affirmative procedure.

The House divided: Ayes 33, Noes 282.

Division No. 115 [3.47 pm]

AYES

Blackman, Kirsty
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chapman, Douglas
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Edwards, Jonathan
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Hobhouse, Wera
Hosie, Stewart

Jardine, Christine
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Law, Chris
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
McDonal, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
Monaghon, Carol
Moran, Layla
Newlands, Gavin
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Swinson, Jo
Thewlis, Alison

Tellers for the Ayes:
Tim Farron and
Mr Alistair Carmichael

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afiyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick

Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartilage, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishit, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert

Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hafflon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gordon
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
under way. The UK has always been at the forefront of the vanguard of the new commercial space age that is now beginning. This is the third time.

Our scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs are ready to meet this challenge. Accessing space is one area in which the UK has not yet had an opportunity to excel, as there has been no market to deliver the services on a truly commercial basis—that is until now. The UK today stands at the dawn of a new commercial space age. This presents us with a huge opportunity. Not only has the surge in small satellite launch demand created a global launch market that is forecast to be worth more than £10 billion over the next 10 years, but direct domestic access to space will reduce our dependency on foreign launch services, fix the fracture in the UK’s space value chain, enable the development of national expertise and employment opportunities and allow the UK to compete for commercial and strategic opportunities for decades to come.

It has been a great privilege to witness Members of both Houses being enthused and engaged by the Bill and its power to unlock the potential of an entire industry. The approach to the Bill in both Houses has been constructive, creative and collegiate. Indeed, in the best tradition of pioneering space missions, it has inspired collaboration, not contest, at all stages of development and debate. That is testament to the importance of our shared ambition.

I again pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who played such an important part in the development of the legislation. Is it any wonder that he is the Conservative MP with the highest vote share in the House? I express thanks to both Houses for well-informed debate, careful consideration and willing commitment to work quickly on this important enabling legislation. I also thank all the Committee members and those who have taken part in debates, including today’s.

Finally, I pay tribute to an example of true cross-Whitehall collaboration. The Department for Transport, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the UK Space Agency, the Civil Aviation Authority, the Health and Safety Executive, the National Space Centre and others all worked together on this Bill. It is a triumph of the best tradition of our Whitehall collaboration.

I thank the Government Front-Bench team for their support, in particular Mr Hunt and Mr Fuller. I also thank the Minister’s officials, who have worked very hard on it as well. I also thank my colleagues in the other place, where the Bill began,
for their very valuable work. They secured a number of important concessions, including the removal of Henry VIII powers, and pressed the Government to introduce a new clause on environmental issues, all of which improved the Bill immensely. It meant that when the Bill came here it was in a much better condition than when it began. I also thank Members who helped to scrutinise the Bill in Committee and those who have made contributions today.

The Minister has said this, as have Members time and again throughout the passage of the Bill: the UK space industry is an important, growing part of our economy. It was valued at £13.7 billion in 2014-15 and supports almost 40,000 jobs. The Bill will establish a licensing regime for spaceports, space flights and satellite launches, which is currently missing from the statute book, and put in place a regulatory framework to allow the further expansion of the industry. For that reason, the Opposition support and welcome the Bill.

4.5 pm

Carol Monaghan: First, I would like to thank the Minister, who has moved seamlessly from his previous role into this new role and is not too far away from where he was a few months ago. I also thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for the work he has done.

It is a nice coincidence, I suppose, that SpaceX will be launching the Falcon Heavy rocket from the Kennedy Space Centre in the next couple of hours. It is the largest rocket ever to be launched and could pave the way for travel to Mars. This is the inspirational industry that we all want to be part of, and for that reason there has been great cross-party support for, and consensus around, the Bill.

The idea of spaceports in the UK is potentially exciting, but it needs investment from both the Government and private industry, and I hope that parts of the Bill will draw down some of that investment. I am pleased that many of the potential sites for spaceports are in Scotland, but I am disappointed that the Government chose not to support new clause 4, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). It would have strengthened the Bill and provided the assurances the industry was calling for. I hope that the cap will be put in place, and quickly, to generate future investment possibilities for the industry.

I want to place on the record the three satellite companies currently manufacturing satellites in Glasgow: Clyde Space, Spire and Alba Orbital. Between them, they ensure that Glasgow is second only to San Francisco, worldwide, for the production of CubeSats. We very much want to support this industry, and it would be great to see these Glasgow-built satellites, manufactured very close to the Clyde—they are all within half a mile of the Clyde—actually being launched. “Clyde built” used to be an indication of quality. Let us hope it is for these new spaceships.

The Bill will, of course, need collaboration between the Scottish and UK Governments, as well as cross-party support, which it has had generally, and I look forward to seeing it strengthened after the consultation process that the Minister described this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.
producing four and five-bedroom houses, which are often out of the price range of first-time buyers, when what we need are two-bedroom houses, bungalows for older people and housing that is accessible to people with disabilities.

There is no doubt that housing in London is very expensive, and London has that in common with major cities across the world. Hotels are also expensive in London, as they are in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong and many other international cities. However, that is not necessarily because there is a shortage of houses or hotels. It could be said that the UK would be better served not by attracting more and more people to live and work in London, but by spreading the wealth-creating sector and financial opportunities across the country rather than allowing London to act as a magnet. Members should not get me wrong—London is a fantastic city, probably the greatest city in the world, and I want to do nothing to diminish its status—but we should not think that what is happening in London must automatically shape policies across the UK, because sometimes the priorities are different.

The Government seem to be describing the housing situation as broken and in crisis on the basis of their analysis of the fall in property ownership among young people, and there has indeed been such a fall. Home ownership among 25 to 34-year-olds has fallen from 59% just over a decade ago to 37% today. Moreover, house building has fallen by 40% since the 1980s. I recognise that there are problems in the housing market, but, again, to reduce them to an issue of supply is an over-simplification.

My analysis suggests that the falls in ownership and house building have in large part been caused by the crash in 2007-08 and the financial fallout from it. Before 2007, we were living in an artificial financial boom. Personal debt was increasing, and some companies were offering applicants mortgages that were worth up to 125% of the value of the houses that they were seeking to buy. Self-certification of income also still existed. All that changed with the crash. Mortgage applicants then had to provide documentary evidence of income, and, while the fall in interest rates should have helped buyers, the affordability of a house was assessed not at the prevailing mortgage rate at the time, but at an assumed rate that would be reached should interest rates be increased.

For example, at the moment the standard mortgage rate is 4.5% and there are many better offers than that available, but applicants are assessed on the basis of whether they could afford to pay their mortgages if rates reached 6% or 6.5%. As was the case 40 years ago, significant deposits are now required by lenders before they will release the mortgage. That has brought about a very significant change.

I am not saying that the Government’s insistence on stronger capital bases for banks is a bad thing; nor is there such a requirement a tightening up of lending practice. What I am saying is that it has had a significant impact on the ability of young people to buy their first houses. The fall in ownership, particularly among young people, and the fall in the number of new constructions did not come about because of a change in planning guidance in 2007-08, because there was no such change. These falls came about because of the change in the financial position of banks and building societies. We therefore have to be careful that we do not respond to a change in lending practice with an easing of planning regulation.

We also need to recognise that at the same time as describing the housing market as in crisis and broken, the Government have set up an inquiry into why developers lend bank, which is something of a contradictory position. Estimates suggest that 320,000 homes granted planning permission over the past five years have not been built. In my constituency, I have seen developers having to obtain an extension to their planning permission because they have reached the end of the statutory five-year period before starting to build. Developers will not deny themselves the profits that would come from building on land for which they have planning permission without good reason, so perhaps we ought to consider that they might be failing to develop the land because there is not quite the demand for housing in some areas that is assumed.

The determination to build ever more houses has led to some councils being persuaded that they need to build on the green belt to meet what is assumed to be their assessed housing need. That points to a confusion and contradiction in green-belt policy. The Government’s planning guidance states that the green belt should not be developed other than in “exceptional circumstances”, yet it fails to describe what constitutes “exceptional circumstances”. The housing White Paper goes on to say:

“Green Belt boundaries should be amended only in exceptional circumstances when local authorities can demonstrate that they have fully examined all other reasonable options for meeting their identified housing requirements.”

However, crucially for the point I am making, planning guidance also says:

“Unmet housing need…is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the ‘very special circumstances’ justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt.”

Planning guidance is going around in circles, because in effect it says that the green belt should not be built on unless nowhere else can be found to build the houses, but that unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt in importance.

This confusion and contradiction in planning guidance, along with the assumption that we have a housing crisis across the whole country, has led to proposals to build around 10,000 houses in my constituency on green-belt land, including 1,000 on land which floods. Indeed, in 2014 the then Prime Minister David Cameron visited my area to look at those very fields that were flooded, as well as the roads and some houses. I can assure the House that he did not visit to look at dry, green fields, yet permission has been granted, on appeal, to build on that very land.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for arriving a little late for this debate; I was talking about the Cotswolds national park, which I know is close to the hon. Gentleman’s heart. He will be aware that, under the Government’s new methodology for housing needs, Tewkesbury is expected to take an additional 21% increase and Stroud a 39% increase. Does he share my concern? I do not know where this methodology has come from or what the implications are, but it will cause a lot more grief in the Stroud and Tewkesbury areas.
Mr Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I am hoping that the housing White Paper, to which I will return in a minute, will attempt to clarify matters. As he will be aware, a lot of planning applications are assessed against the five-year land supply, particularly on appeal, but there is no methodology for calculating that five-year land supply. That is another problem in the planning system that I hope the Government will be able to correct.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, with whom I share a local authority, for giving way. He is making a good point: this is a regional problem. Figures from the Office for National Statistics on household growth in Gloucestershire show that our local planning authorities are building, or planning to build, enough houses to cope with the population growth. There is a significant problem in London and the south-east, but it is not consistent across the UK. My hon. Friend makes that point very well.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and Gloucestershire neighbour. That is exactly the point that I was seeking to make.

Why are there so many proposals to build houses on the green belt, particularly in my area? In the joint core strategy that is being drawn up by the Tewkesbury, Cheltenham and Gloucester planning authorities, Tewkesbury is looking to cover the unmet need of Cheltenham and Gloucester. However, contrary to planning guidance, the green belt is being compromised to satisfy the undoubted duty to co-operate, and this is creating confusion.

Why is Tewkesbury Borough Council doing this? It is because it feels that it must, and I have some sympathy with its position when I read the details of the planning inspector’s report, which again illustrates anomalies in the planning guidance. The inspector states in her report:

“Taking full account of constraints and the outcomes of cross-border exploration, removal of land from the green belt is needed, so far as is justified, to contribute to housing provision and the five-year supply”.

She goes on to say:

“I find that the adverse impacts of removing land from the green belt would not significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits of contributing towards housing and other development needs”.

Here we see clear evidence of the confusion in the planning guidance with regard to protection of the green belt. The inspector is insisting on building on the green belt and on the floodplain to meet housing numbers, yet the planning guidance clearly states that unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt in importance. I am aware that local planning authorities have the right to change the designation of the green belt at the plan-making stage, but that is not the point. The point is that there is a contradiction in the planning guidance.

I am aware that the Government have introduced a White Paper to consider the housing crisis and the broken housing market, but having read through it, I do not think that it is likely to address the problems of the market or the inconsistencies, contradictions and confusions in the planning system. Nor do I think that it will restore a sense of democracy to the planning process. Indeed, the wishes of a significant proportion of my constituents have been completely disregarded in the outcome of this process. We often hear the Government referring to the importance of local decision making, but the existence of the Planning Inspectorate makes a mockery of that, and does not help us to provide the houses that we need.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend have the same problem that we have in Wokingham and west Berkshire, where a large number of planning permissions are granted but the builders do not build enough homes? On appeal, extra homes are then granted in places that do not fit in with the local plan or the infrastructure provisions.

Mr Robertson: I am not familiar with the situation in my right hon. Friend’s area, but I know that the appeals system does not seem to work to the benefit of local communities.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman’s description of his constituency, and it reminds me of my own, which is hemmed in by green belt and also has floodplains. I entirely agree that there is a lack of democracy in the system. Local residents feel that they have no say over wide patches of changes to their villages and towns, and the local authorities feel compelled to carry out actions against the wishes of their own constituents. I commend the hon. Gentleman for making that point; he is entirely right.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Guidance on the provision of affordable housing requires councils to assess the need based on local circumstances, but such housing is not being delivered in practice. The housing White Paper outlines that the Government intend to amend the policy framework to introduce a clear policy expectation that housing sites deliver a minimum of 10% affordable homes, but that is not sufficient to address the issues that the planning system is failing to sort out, particularly for first-time buyers. As I see it, it will still be producing the wrong types of housing—perhaps large three-bedroom houses, but also four and five-bedroom houses—when many areas, including my own, need affordable two-bedroom houses. Such homes are more likely to be within the price range of younger people, thereby addressing the problem that the Government identified in the first place: a fall in ownership among young people.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): In support of the hon. Gentleman’s argument, does he think it significant that the Campaign to Protect Rural England estimates that just over 10% of all the houses built on the green belt since 2009 are actually affordable?

Mr Robertson: I was not aware of that figure, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful intervention. I was speaking about home ownership among young people, but the provision of two-bedroom houses would also help older people who are perhaps looking to downsize after retirement, which would free up larger houses. Yet that is not happening at the moment.
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the biggest problems is that developers can get out of their obligation to build affordable homes by using viability studies? They can submit a planning application, pick the executive homes that they want to build and then, halfway through, they can produce viability studies and say, “Whoops! We cannot afford to build affordable homes.” Will the hon. Gentleman call on his Government to do something about this shambles?

Mr Robertson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The Minister is here and listening to all these points, which I am pleased to say are consistent with my speech. However, I am being glared at by Madam Deputy Speaker because I have spoken for longer than I had intended, so I will wind up my remarks.

I will conclude with the following suggestions. The Government should accept that London’s housing issues are not the same as those facing the rest of the country, that affordability and a change in lending practice is a significant factor in falling ownership levels among young people and that merely increasing the supply of houses will not address that. We need to ensure that more affordable houses are built for both younger and older people. Planning guidance for green-belt land is confused and needs clarifying. Decisions by the Planning Inspectorate often do not reflect Government policy or planning guidance, and its existence is an affront to democracy in itself. The housing White Paper needs revisiting to ensure that we build the right houses in the right places to give the younger generation a real prospect of being homeowners, while also protecting the countryside.

Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for the time today, and I look forward to hearing what other right hon. and hon. Members and the Minister have to say.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman picked up on my hint. As Members can see, many people want to speak, so I will start off by introducing an eight-minute time limit.

4.28 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I want to focus on my constituency and to raise the issue of how the Government keep sending mixed messages about what has priority in local plans, how many houses should be built and the amount of business that should be put in place.

I live and was born and brought up in the Halton area. Halton Borough Council is putting out a local plan for public consultation. I and many of my constituents do not agree with it, but the council tells me that, given the Government’s current rulebook—the national policy planning framework—it is impossible for the local plan to meet the NPPF requirements without going into the green belt. If the Government are serious about their central role of local and neighbourhood plans in the planning system, so that local planning authorities and local communities retain control of where development should…go.

In his letter to MPs on 7 June 2016, the Minister’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), said:

“The Framework makes it clear that inappropriate development may be allowed only where very special circumstances exist, and that Green Belt boundaries should be adjusted only in exceptional circumstances—”
is it an exceptional circumstance that we have no land left on which to build unless we build on the green belt?

“through the Local Plan process and with the support of local people.”

That is the important point. Do local people have the final say, or have the Government put some other consideration in the framework and advice that says differently?

Local people do not want the green belt to be built on, so they want to retain control of where development should or should not go. Halton has run out of land to allocate for housing, yet there is still this requirement to maintain a continuous five-year supply of housing land to meet the housing delivery test.

In his answer to my parliamentary question this week, the Minister said there “is not a local housing target.”

The fact is that no inspector in his Department would allow any council to say, “We are not going to build any housing because we have no land left other than green belt.” The Minister can tell me that this is not true and that the inspector will not impose it. I understand there is not a target, but inspectors will be working to a very clear policy framework. I am interested in what he has to say about that. Many local authorities have much more green belt than Halton. Surely there is a balance to be struck for an area such as Halton, which has urban developed land taking up the great majority of space.

Halton was really where the chemicals industry was born. It was a huge area for that industry, which provided many jobs. That was important, but the industry left a huge legacy of contaminated land in Halton. Few local authorities will have to deal with the scale of pollution that Halton Borough Council has faced. It has done a good job since 1974 in dealing with that legacy and ensuring that a lot of that land has come back into some use, but the council does not have the funds to remediate the contaminated land that is left and the Government must recognise that in their future guidance.

If things continue to follow the same path, we will have little green belt left for future generations to enjoy in my constituency. As we know, such land is very important in terms of enjoyment, exercise, mental health and so on. It is therefore very important that urbanised areas such as Halton have these spaces. I know that the new guidance is being worked on and the first stage of it will be coming out in the spring, but the Minister must answer what the defining factor is for our local authority and for our local community, who has the final say and what is the strongest weight to give to a particular argument. He and his Department, in the guidance, have consistently given out mixed messages about what should be taken into consideration, but they do not make clear what should be given the greatest weight. Should it be what is important to the local community and what they want, or is it the guidance that the Government have sent out for the inspectors to deal with? We do not want inspectors coming to Halton and saying that, because the council has not done what they think it should have done, it should go back and reconsider even if it should have powers taken away from it. The Minister really needs to address that.

My constituents do not want green belt land to be built on. We have suffered a massive legacy of pollution and contaminated land. Our council has worked hard to deal with that, but we are entitled to enjoy our green space and our green belt in Halton as much as anyone anywhere else is.

I wish to mention one final thing, which is the leasehold issue. A number of my constituents have faced a situation where developers have left them with leaseholds that cost them an awful lot of money. The Government say they are going to bring forward some plans to deal with that, but what are they going to do for those people who have already had the problem and have the legacy of it? I hope the Government will make sure they do this retrospectively and help the people who have been conned by the developers, in that they have been charged very high rates for their leasehold. I hope the Government will see to that.

In conclusion, it is very important that the Minister listens to what Halton is saying. I am happy to meet him so that he can see what the specific challenges are in Halton, which many other authorities will have faced.
but the problem was that it led to unstoppable urban sprawl, as cities reached out into the countryside in a never-ending way.

As a result, as a Parliament and as a people we decided to introduce the Town and Country Planning Act 1932 to constrain that sprawl and introduce some order into the development process. That was an extraordinary intervention. We went from a situation in which someone could buy a plot of land, put up a few homes and sell them, to a situation in which the right to develop land was nationalised. The landowner has no innate right to build anything on their land. They have to apply to the Government for permission. That is an intervention that I support. I believe that the British people were entirely within their rights—as my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) is entirely within his rights—to want to defend the precious English countryside, but we need to acknowledge the effect of that intervention and be willing to embrace the measures to ensure that we nevertheless build enough homes for our people.

In France, they have a planning system, yet every single year they build 300,000 or 400,000 homes and they have very much less in the way of house-price inflation than we do. In Germany, they have a planning system, and every single year, routinely, they build 300,000 or 400,000 units, and they too have managed to avoid the UK’s curse: house-price inflation.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is fantastic to see my hon. Friend back in his place, making his customary important points. Does he accept that in Cherwell we too have a planning system, and we are still able to build three houses a day on average, because of positive local leadership? We just have to work harder to make sure that we have the infrastructure to back that up.

Nick Boles: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. The new Minister for Housing, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), will discover, as I did when I was Planning Minister in the same Department, that Cherwell is one of the most progressive authorities on house building and sets an example that many other authorities could do well to study.

When we have made an intervention of the kind we have by nationalising the right to build and introducing a planning system, we need to follow through with the kinds of interventions that the French and the Germans allow themselves, to ensure that land prices do not become the constant fuel of ever-rising house prices, that major house builders are not in the business of eking out their supply as slowly as possible to keep prices as high as possible and that every year we build enough truly affordable housing units—housing that people on average and below-average incomes can afford to rent or buy. That is something that is achieved in Germany and France, and it is something that we comprehensively fail to do.

There will be some on these Benches of the more pure free market cast of mind who would rather that we scrap our planning controls and revert to a system of the 1930s. If we were to do that, it is true that the number of units that we would build every year would go up, that house prices would fall and that more people would be able to own their own homes. It is also true that we would lose huge swathes of precious English countryside, and I simply do not believe that the British people would wear it. The alternative therefore is for this party in government, which believes in the free market and in free enterprise, nevertheless to grasp that further state intervention is necessary if we are to have a house building industry that delivers enough homes for our citizens.

I know that there will be other hon. Members who would like to say more about some of these ideas, but the key interventions that we need to make are these. We need to give ourselves the power to acquire land at a price that is fair to the community as well as to the landowner. Why should landowners benefit from the fluke that gives them planning permission to build on their land when none of their neighbours receives it? Why should the taxpayer bear the cost of the infrastructure—the roads, the sewerage and the schools—that makes land developable in the first place? We need to revert to the situation that led to Milton Keynes and the other new towns, where we were able to acquire the land at a reasonable price, a small multiple of its agricultural land value, and then use the uplift in that land value to fund the infrastructure that the community needs.

We also need to intervene with major house builders to ensure that they build out the sites with planning permission on the schedule that they agreed with the planning authority. My suggestion for how we enforce this is to ask them to offer any sites that they had refused to build out to any other house builder to build on. This is such an important subject, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I hope to return to it in future, but I thank you for your time.

4.47 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), although I did not agree with everything he said. He and I know each other very well, and it is good to see him back in the House.

We constantly hear the same lines about the Government promising to fix the housing market, yet after their seven years in government, it is no secret that we still have an enormous housing crisis in this country. Last year, the number of affordable homes built in this country fell to the lowest level in 24 years.

New policies introduced by this Government have weakened the previous Labour Government’s brownfield-first policy. In fact, under this Government, as of July 2017, 425,000 homes were planned to be built on green-belt land. That represents the biggest yearly increase in proposed development on green-belt land for two decades. To add insult to injury, since 2009, only 16% of houses built on green-belt land outside local plans were deemed affordable.

It is worth pointing out that under the previous Labour Government, 2 million more homes were built and we had 1 million more householders owning their own homes, but since 2010, under this Government, the number of homeowners aged under 45 has fallen by 900,000. There was also the biggest investment in social housing for a generation. On average, Labour councils have built around 50% more homes than Tory councils since 2010.
It is clear that the Government’s Housing and Planning Act 2016 fails to get to grips with the crisis of home ownership. It is simply no good trying to twist this around and placing the blame on those in local government. If that were true, Coventry’s local plan would not have been approved by this Government.

There are issues in my constituency, particularly in the Kings Hill and the Cromwell Lane areas of Coventry, and I have raised those issues many times. In fact, the situation is now so bad, and there is such serious concern, that a new residents association has been formed in the Westwood ward, which covers those areas. The Government now say that they believe that there is a better way to calculate housing numbers. According to the new plans, even more homes will need to be built each year, but those plans are based on incorrect Government numbers. Many residents groups in my constituency have protested against these developments, and I have spoken in defence of the Kings Hill area for many years. The Government seek to provide different formulas and figures. The current figures for Coventry make huge assumptions about students, but the idea that they all stay and live in Coventry and that university is simply not true.

Nationally, the big four developers account for more than 75% of the plots with planning permission, but getting developers building on existing sites is far more important than allocating them yet more land. There need to be firmer consequences for developers that are land banking, so that we ensure that their existing commitments are met before further land is released. Incentives should be introduced to put an end to a slow build-out rates and developers must start building the homes that communities need. The Government say that they listen to communities, but the communities are overruled, as has happened in the Kings Hill area of Coventry that I just mentioned.

Brownfield sites have the potential to deliver more than 1 million homes, so the Government need to reassess the possibilities that they offer. That is crucial, because 70% of the housing proposed for land to be released from the green belt will be unaffordable for local communities. The Government must understand that this is about not only the sheer number of houses being built, but the types of those houses. This needs to happen urgently, so that we can end the housing crisis and give this generation the homes that they deserve.

I have asked the Minister to meet me on two or three occasions, but those meetings have been postponed. I hope that, this time, the Minister will meet me and some of the residents from the areas I have mentioned.

4.52 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Yesterday I was at a planning inquiry in my constituency. It should have been a situation in which a planning inspector signed off a neighbourhood plan produced by a village, but the process has in fact been stopped because of incompatibility with the local plan. It has to be said that the neighbourhood plan had not started quickly enough; nevertheless, it has been stopped.

In response to views expressed by the planning inspector, Mid Sussex District Council has proposed a 500-house settlement to the north of the village of Hassocks. The cumulative effect of that new development and others would be to increase the size of the village by a third. There are huge local concerns about the adequacy of infrastructure, the decision to locate the settlement at the proposed site, the loss of countryside, the closure of a green space between two villages and so on, but the important point is that the parish council was preparing its neighbourhood plan, and it was proposing an increase in the number of houses. Neighbourhood plans have delivered more houses than expected. The parish council proposed a limited number of houses in that location, but 500 was completely out of kilter with the number it expected to produce, and the site of the proposed new settlement is not in the location that the parish council wanted.

During the inquiry, a huge number of members of the public were listening to the evidence given by not only elected representatives, but a vast array of QCs representing an equally vast array of house builders. Members of the public were not allowed to speak, but every time they just said, “Hear, hear,” or disagreed with a point in the way in which polite members of the public in West Sussex do, they were told to be quiet. They were silenced. A reform that was introduced under the Localism Act 2011 and that was designed to empower local communities—giving them the decision about where housing should be located—has suddenly regressed to the old-fashioned planning by appeal process, with decisions taken by the planning inspector and the public literally silenced. I suggest that we need to hold faith with the principle of giving communities more control over where housing goes.

In reality, more housing than expected was produced by the process of neighbourhood planning. I think that those on all sides can agree with the principles of empowerment, of taking responsibility and of putting decision making into the hands of the local community. Upsetting neighbourhood plans undermines those principles and this very powerful reform.

We should understand why this has happened: developers have been gaming the system, and continue to do so. Developers, by not using planning permissions, have driven down the five-year land supply so that we have a planning free-for-all whereas we should have a planned system. Developers have conspired—I use that word advisedly—in Mid Sussex, as they have in other districts in my constituency, to delay putting local plans in place so that they can maintain that free-for-all, yet cynically they have not built.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): My right hon. Friend refers to the power of the local voice. I am sorry that my voice has gone a little, but I will still speak up for local people. That local voice needs to be heard in planning. My area falls within the Stockport local plan area, but that, in turn, falls under the Greater Manchester spatial framework. For four years, one of my villages has been trying to set up its own neighbourhood plan. The community has done a lot of work, but it is now worried about how its neighbourhood plan will fit in, as two other plans are being put in place. There were indications in “Planning for the right homes in the right places” that this would be addressed through a different methodology. Does he agree that we need to keep that approach?

Nick Herbert: Where possible, we need to respect neighbourhood plans. Of course the local planning authority retains the position of a strategic planning
[Nick Herbert]

authority, but we should not allow developers to bust neighbourhood plans by cynical means, which is what has been happening.

It is important to note that the housing that is now being built in West Sussex is far in excess of the level that was envisaged 12 years ago, when I was first elected to the House. The objectively assessed need for local authorities is now 61% higher than it was under Gordon Brown’s draft south-east plan, and it will be double that when the Government bring in the new housing need figures.

New houses are being built. However, it is important that permissions actually translate into new homes.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) back to his place. I agreed with almost everything that he said. We can all agree about the importance of building more houses. He gave us his framing of the fundamental problem, and I agree that returning to the free market is not the answer, and nor is saying that we should hold to the current system, which is clearly not delivering. Somewhere in the middle, we have to identify a more radical reform that will allow us, as he suggested, to capture the uplift in the value of land between what it would be as ordinary land with an agricultural market value, and land with development potential, which suddenly becomes worth millions or tens of millions of pounds per acre. We have to think hard about how we do that.

I want to deliver a warning. Putting into the hands of local authorities powers of compulsory purchase that give them the ability to confiscate land at not the market value, but an assessed value that is far lower, might indeed have the effect that my hon. Friend suggests. While we must explore such ideas, that might also create wholesale property blight across the country, inconveniencing not just the owners of agricultural land, but communities more widely. I look at the effect of a proposed new town in my constituency, which is in the same district of Mid Sussex, but also falls into Horsham district. Neither local authority wants that, but it has been relentlessly promoted by a developer that does not even have an options on the land, against the wishes of the local community and the local councils. That has created an enormous blight on a large swathe of this part of Mid Sussex, because people are fearful that a new town might come and therefore the value of their properties is affected.

If we are to investigate such a reform, we have to be very careful to draw a distinction between previous powers exercised by the Government in relation to compulsory purchase for new towns such as Milton Keynes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford set out, and the idea that we could somehow translate those powers to local authorities in a way that was not carefully constrained. That needs much more careful thinking, but it is undoubtedly the germ of an important idea.

I agree with my hon. Friend that we will need new thinking if we are to increase supply in the way that is necessary. We are not France or Germany. We have a much smaller country, and there are huge pressures on infrastructure, but reform might help to deliver infrastructure for local communities.

We need to produce more affordable housing, but we should try to apply the principles we latched on to a few years ago with the Localism Act 2011, through which we gave communities the power to decide where they wanted housing and the responsibility to exercise that power. That yielded great results, because it meant that communities that had previously said no to developments started saying yes in a very positive way. We should be careful about principles that rely on such state intervention, control or indeed confiscation that they would be anathema to the public and many Conservative Members.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The profits of the top five UK house builders have risen by 389% in the last five years, sometimes at the expense of the people we are trying to help on to the housing ladder. One area in which developers’ profits have come first is commuted sums for grounds maintenance and other communal services. It seems that the idea of a developer paying the local authority a commuted sum to cut the grass and maintain common parts has had its day, and I am not clear whether the blame for that lies with local authorities asking for too much money, or developers not being prepared to cough up the funds in advance. I suspect they would blame each other.

The net effect is that more and more homeowners are having to pay twice for the maintenance of open spaces: once through a management fee; and once through their council tax. Of course, council tax pays for a lot of things, but something as visible and obvious as grounds maintenance leads people to ask why they face a double whammy. My suspicion is that if developers can save themselves half a million pounds, they have a big temptation to cash that and let the customer pay further down the line.

Not only is there a double payment, but the system is inefficient and lacks accountability. If the grass does not get cut on the verges in most parts of my constituency, either a local councillor or I will hear about it and respond, but it is not so easy to get a response when dealing with a private company.

The most high-profile example of how developers shift costs on to consumers is the leasehold scandal. How much have developers pocketed over recent years by selling the freeholds for new estates to investment companies? I hope the message is now getting through to them that that racket has to stop and that they will be ultimately be responsible for their misdemeanours. I am pleased that Ministers have indicated a willingness to act, although I am sure that they are aware of the frustration felt by many who are trapped in unsellable homes, for whom the Law Commission report feels like a lifetime away.

I know that developers have effectively been put on notice that they should not sell any more houses on a leasehold basis, but there are reports that that is still happening. Can the Government issue supplementary planning guidance to local authorities to say that selling properties on a leasehold basis unnecessarily would be a reasonable ground for refusing planning permission? Members will have heard countless stories about leasehold and an industry that is out of control. Now is not the time to recount those, but suffice it to say that although there are some positive examples of responsible developers, I have little confidence overall that the industry has the right moral structures in place to deliver the houses that we so desperately need. We need answers to how these feudalistic practices were allowed to start in the first place.
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): One of my constituents suggested to me that breaking up some of the bigger house builders might improve competition in the market, deliver a better deal for people buying homes and enable us to deliver more homes. I would be interested to hear the hon. Gentleman’s views about that suggestion.

Justin Madders: That is an interesting point. Over recent years, the number of developers has contracted. The sums involved and the years of advance planning needed to build some of these developments tend to favour the bigger builders. I am not sure how we would go about achieving that, but it needs to be looked at.

The Communities and Local Government Committee should also consider this issue because developers—big and small—must explain how their duping of customers was allowed to start in the first place, how much profit they have made from this scam, who drew up the leases that nobody will now sign, how many properties were made leasehold needlessly, what role lenders and solicitors that nobody will now sign, how many properties were allowed to start in the first place, how much profit and small—must explain how their duping of customers should also consider this issue because developers—big go about achieving that, but it needs to be looked at.

I am not sure how we would that suggestion.

Justin Madders: That is an interesting point. At the moment, developers will build at the time that suits them best and will build the types of property that suit them best, but that is not necessarily what suits the demand best. That is something I hear regularly in my constituency, particularly on brownfield sites, but very little of that housing is affordable. That is because the permissions were all granted some time ago, and the developers used the coalition Government’s rules on viability assessments to argue that it was not cost-effective for them to keep to their affordable housing obligations on individual sites. They plead poverty as they tell us that the requirement to build affordable homes means they cannot maintain their 20% profit margins.

As a result, no affordable housing is currently being built on just about every development site. Most developers sought release from their obligations three or four years ago, and many have only started building in the past six to 12 months, so it is quite clear that the affordable housing requirements were not stopping developments from proceeding. There is more than a suspicion that developers have played the system to maximise profit and had no intention of proceeding with their buildings previously. We have had empty sites for three or four years longer than needed, and an opportunity to build much-needed affordable housing has been lost.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It should come as no surprise to anyone that private sector house builders build when—and only when—it is sufficiently profitable to do so. That ought to be an axiom, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees with that. Does he therefore agree that part of the solution ought to be to provide a much wider range of genuine choice to potential consumers—people who want somewhere to live in the affordable space and homeless people, as well as those in the purchasing market—so that private sector developers cannot exercise an oligopoly, as they currently do?

Justin Madders: That is an interesting point. At the moment, developers will build at the time that suits them best and will build the types of property that suit them best, but that is not necessarily what suits the demand best. That is something I hear regularly in my surgery, and it is probably still the No. 1 issue raised there. I am pleased that my local authority, Cheshire West and Chester Council, is now building some council housing, because there is huge demand for it in my constituency. This is the first it has built for nearly 40 years, although, unfortunately, that has taken the borrowing limits under the housing revenue account to the limit, so we need that cap to be lifted.

Most disappointingly, once those properties are built, we will still have less council housing in my constituency than we did a couple of years ago. That is due to the huge increase in right to buy applications in recent times—who can blame people for taking advantage of 70% discounts?—but that policy is short term in the extreme. It is the Government’s stated aim that every council property sold under right to buy should be replaced, but the reality is that that one-for-one replacement is actually running at a rate of about one replacement for every five properties sold.

Is there any wonder? Recently, a three-bedroom semi in my constituency was sold under right to buy for £27,000, and do not forget that the council will get only resources or the time to constantly chase the developer, which has now sold the homes and moved on. What is the incentive for the developer to go back and complete the work it should have done?

I am pleased to say that, after many years of stagnation, there is a significant amount of house building in my constituency, particularly on brownfield sites, but very little of that housing is affordable. That is because the permissions were all granted some time ago, and the developers used the coalition Government’s rules on viability assessments to argue that it was not cost-effective for them to keep to their affordable housing obligations on individual sites. They plead poverty as they tell us that the requirement to build affordable homes means they cannot maintain their 20% profit margins.

As a result, no affordable housing is currently being built on just about every development site. Most developers sought release from their obligations three or four years ago, and many have only started building in the past six to 12 months, so it is quite clear that the affordable housing requirements were not stopping developments from proceeding. There is more than a suspicion that developers have played the system to maximise profit and had no intention of proceeding with their buildings previously. We have had empty sites for three or four years longer than needed, and an opportunity to build much-needed affordable housing has been lost.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It should come as no surprise to anyone that private sector house builders build when—and only when—it is sufficiently profitable to do so. That ought to be an axiom, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees with that. Does he therefore agree that part of the solution ought to be to provide a much wider range of genuine choice to potential consumers—people who want somewhere to live in the affordable space and homeless people, as well as those in the purchasing market—so that private sector developers cannot exercise an oligopoly, as they currently do?

Justin Madders: That is an interesting point. At the moment, developers will build at the time that suits them best and will build the types of property that suit them best, but that is not necessarily what suits the demand best. That is something I hear regularly in my surgery, and it is probably still the No. 1 issue raised there. I am pleased that my local authority, Cheshire West and Chester Council, is now building some council housing, because there is huge demand for it in my constituency. This is the first it has built for nearly 40 years, although, unfortunately, that has taken the borrowing limits under the housing revenue account to the limit, so we need that cap to be lifted.

Most disappointingly, once those properties are built, we will still have less council housing in my constituency than we did a couple of years ago. That is due to the huge increase in right to buy applications in recent times—who can blame people for taking advantage of 70% discounts?—but that policy is short term in the extreme. It is the Government’s stated aim that every council property sold under right to buy should be replaced, but the reality is that that one-for-one replacement is actually running at a rate of about one replacement for every five properties sold.

Is there any wonder? Recently, a three-bedroom semi in my constituency was sold under right to buy for £27,000, and do not forget that the council will get only resources or the time to constantly chase the developer, which has now sold the homes and moved on. What is the incentive for the developer to go back and complete the work it should have done?
a third of that money to replace the house it has just lost. The average cost of a semi-detached house in my constituency is about £148,000, so Members can do the maths and see that this policy is completely unrealistic and needs to be changed.

To conclude—a number of Members have talked along these lines today—I would like much greater political direction and oversight over the house building industry. After all, those involved are the people who will build the homes that we all need. At the moment, they quite understandably organise their affairs to maximise their profits, but housing is part of our infrastructure and a roof over our head is a fundamental right. We cannot just rely on the market unfettered to deliver that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Due to the number of Members who wish to speak, the time limit will have to drop to six minutes. Hopefully, we will not have to drop it again.

5.11 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) in this important debate.

It is fast becoming a cliché to talk of a broken housing market and building for the future, but those rather trite phrases disguise both the difficult problem that we have in not having built enough homes for some time and the significant challenges that remain for the house building industry.

I want to make it clear that I am not against building and development. We of course need to provide new homes to meet the housing shortage, but that should be done in a way that is sensitive to the local environment and sensitive to the wishes of local communities, which in my assessment has hitherto been lacking.

I shall confine my remarks to the specific consideration of housing and green belt policy in Greater Manchester, but the principles could apply equally to other parts of the country.

The pithily titled Greater Manchester spatial framework, commonly known as the GMSF, is the Greater Manchester combined authority’s land management plan for housing, commercial and industrial use over the next 20 years. It will have a profound effect on the shape and character of local communities and will impact on the lives of many thousands of families for generations to come.

I, and others, have serious reservations about the draft GMSF in terms of the methodology for calculating overall housing targets, the scale on which it proposes to release swathes of green belt for housing development, the lack of sensitivity and awareness it displays towards the character of existing communities and the scant regard to additional infrastructure required to support new, large-scale housing developments.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the target population increase in GMSF ought to be wholly reconsidered, especially in the light of Brexit, whereby we will have more control over our borders?

Mr Wragg: There are many flaws in the statistical methodology of the GMSF that I would like to unpack, unfortunately perhaps, or fortunately for the House, I do not have the minutes in which to do so. However, my hon. Friend is spot on.

Further to that, to give an example, the draft framework proposed that 4,900 hectares of Greater Manchester’s green-belt land be built on, representing a net loss of 8% of green-belt land across the area. In my constituency, proposals included a development of 4,000 homes on fields around the village of High Lane—essentially trebling the size of that village, with little regard for the burden of increased traffic on the road network and the increased pressures on public services.

Mary Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. I appreciate the points he is making, particularly about the green belt, because, as he knows, in my constituency 8,100 homes are planned to be built on the green belt. That is not sustainable or wanted, which is why more than 3,000 people signed my petition on that very point, which I presented to the House.

Mr Wragg: The constituents of Cheadle have a doughty campaigner in my hon. Friend. We think we have it bad in the Hazel Grove constituency with the proposals for 4,000 homes. The figure is more than double that in Cheadle, which is beyond the pale. Her constituents are fortunate to have such a vigorous representative in this House.

As my hon. Friend alluded to, in the last Parliament we presented petitions to the House on behalf of thousands of our constituents who are opposed to the massive scale of development on green-belt land and urge instead the development of brownfield sites. I also had the pleasure of introducing a Westminster Hall debate on the matter, which was well attended by colleagues from all parts of the House, including the current Mayor of Greater Manchester. That demonstrated the concerns over the spatial framework right across the region.

Since then, the combined authority has undertaken a public consultation on the Greater Manchester spatial framework, which received an astonishing 27,000 responses. While many of those recognised the need for new housing, concern about the allocation of green-belt land for that development was the single biggest issue raised in the consultation. Concerns over the environment and infrastructure were also raised. The massive response to the draft framework rightly prompted a fundamental rethink of the plan. Work is under way on a second version, which is due to be published in June 2018 and will be subject to a further 12-week consultation. The grass is long on the green belt in my constituency, but I hope that the combined authority have not put the plan into the long grass.

While we await the second draft of the GMSF, I have a few suggestions that might make the revised plan more acceptable to the public. I hope that the Minister will put some of them into practice when considering national planning policy. First, we need a vigorous “brownfield first” policy. Brownfield sites that have had development on them before should be prioritised for the building of houses, rather than the green belt. That not only protects the countryside, but encourages the regeneration of our towns and makes best use of land...
where the necessary infrastructure already exists. In Greater Manchester, there is at least 1,000 hectares of brownfield land spread over 400 sites that has not yet been fully developed for housing. That is more than enough to build at least 55,000 homes and it is probable that more land of that nature can be found. 

We must also look for ways to optimise the density and quality of new housing developments, without eroding the green belt. After all, the green belt is an important barrier against urban sprawl. It encourages us to build upwards and not out. That allows people to live nearer their places of work and does not extend commutes, which in turn reduces the strain on local roads and transport infrastructure.

The Government recently conducted a consultation on the new approach to calculating local housing need, to which I submitted evidence. If the Government wish to proceed, I believe that the most significant policy change that should be implemented is for the new approach to calculating housing need to be considered at county level, rather than at metropolitan borough level. In the case of my local area, it would be considered by Greater Manchester rather than Stockport. It makes more sense to look at overall demand at a broader county level, rather than at borough level, especially in light of the devolution to city regions, combined authorities and metropolitan mayors, which look after other infrastructure and services.

Furthermore, members of the public do not necessarily observe and are perhaps even unaware of council boundaries as they go about their daily lives. They often live in one borough and work in another, and they may travel through several others to get from one to the other. The more artificial boundaries that form the basis of planning policy, the more divorced decision making is from reality. Critically, my proposal would allow flexibility to improve how local authorities work together to meet housing and other needs across their respective boundaries. Just because one borough has higher levels of employment or property values, it does not necessarily follow that it has more sites to build houses on.

In conclusion, the strength of local opinion is clear. The voices not only in my constituency but in neighbouring constituencies and from colleagues across the House are clear: the green belt should be safeguarded and previously developed urban land should be prioritised for housing instead. I recognise that the housing White Paper proposes to make it clear that green-belt boundaries should be subject to change only where the local authority can demonstrate that it has “fully examined all other reasonable options”, including the proper use of brownfield land. Indeed, any changes to green-belt designation should be made only as part of a wider local planning review process to ensure that there are opportunities for community consultation. Giving neighbourhood plans greater legal authority in planning law would be one means of achieving that. I commend the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and hope that those on the Treasury Bench were in listening mode for his submission.

5.19 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who is a Greater Manchester MP. I, too, will discuss the Greater Manchester spatial framework, but I rise to appeal for balance in the pursuit of new housing and the need to protect our green-belt land. Local communities are not mean about the need for new homes in Bury. Grandparents want the best opportunity for their grandchildren to be able to own or afford housing. As has been said, this is about affordability and not just over-supply.

What we do not accept is the universal, one-size-fits-all approach taken by a Government issuing targets to regions without an appreciation of the place itself. Too often, planning lacks a democratic voice and feels too much like a developer’s charter, and the Government have tipped the planning regulations against communities such as mine. I am proud to have stood at last year’s election promising to help to rewrite the Greater Manchester spatial framework. I am clear that by working with our new Labour mayor and the leader of our Labour-led council, Bury now has a voice at the planning table, listening to the concerns of residents across Bury North.

Let me put a Bury case here. Of the some 2,000 people who responded to a survey in my constituency, 90% want local decisions, not Government diktat. New homes are needed, but they should be proportionate to a pre-determined agreement on green-belt land. Bury has the lowest proportion of brownfield sites, so targets handed down to us from London that take no account of the imbalance of green belt and brownfield land are wrong. They need to be adjusted. It cannot be that equal shares for housing targets are applied across a conurbation, when in some areas there is an abundance of brownfield sites, unlike in Bury.

The default to building homes must begin with brownfield sites, as was established under the last Labour Government. In the absence of such sites, we should continue with urban areas that are better supported with infrastructure and local services. Again, the concerns are that the 25-year spatial framework lays out the need for homes and housing, while there is no corresponding plan for the local public services. The Government target for homes has been issued at a time when Bury has lost £120 million from our ability to prepare public spaces, services, networks and local government budgets. Our schools are over roll and bursting at the seams, our waiting lists are heavily populated, roads are brimming with traffic and potholes are minor sink holes, in some cases.

A Government that hands out plans for homes should first accept the need for local community voices to protect the green belt, where there is already considerable reach into that land, and then offer some sight of their plans to ensure that an appropriate level of infrastructure, public services and local government budgets can be associated with those plans. The Government’s consultation on their new methodology for calculating housing need for localities is yet to be declared. We anticipate that it will be used to tweak yearly targets up, so we have no open door to local authorities questioning the housing targets based on the limitations of their area. To date, the Minister has ignored council requests and my requests, which I repeat here, to meet us to understand the Bury-specific issue on this point.

The Government targets ignore our needs. The original GMSF is to be rewritten, but it still sits within the framework guidance that the Conservative Government stipulate. The current set-up pits Tory Government numbers on housing with Labour leaders in Greater Manchester, working with local MPs such as me to
protect green-belt land and minimise the impact of these housing targets on an ever-dwindling local government and public services budget.

Let me end by saying that for every resident in Bury who is unhappy that these numbers are far too high and who feels that green belt should be protected, there is a housing developer who is lobbying very hard, and quite possibly donating to the Conservative party, to argue that—[Interruption.] They don’t like it up ‘em. Those developers are arguing that the numbers are far too low to meet the Government’s target. In Bury, we spoke with one voice and kept the walk-in centre open. Another promise I made at the election was to make the case to protect as much green-belt land as possible from development as a result of arbitrary targets imposed on Bury by this Government. Under their terms, 12,000 units are required in Bury by 2035, but approximately only 5,000 of them can be accommodated on brownfield.

In closing, I wish to propose some solutions. We should allow local authorities to enforce their own affordable housing policies; force developers to develop brownfield first; set dates by which sites need to have been completed; and allow councils to borrow more to mass build.

5.25 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The case for the green belt was put very powerfully by former poet laureate Sir Andrew Motion. He said:

“Since about 1940, the population of Los Angeles has grown at about the same rate as the population of London. Los Angeles is now so enormous that if you somehow managed to pick it up and plonk it down on England, it would extend from Brighton on the south coast to Cambridge in the north-east. That’s what happens if you don’t have a green belt.”

In a densely populated island, the green belt enriches our lives in many ways. It provides a precious opportunity to reconnect with the natural environment and spend time with friends and family outdoors. A substantial part of my constituency is in the green belt, and protecting it will always be one of my highest priorities. When media reports in advance of the Budget indicated, therefore, that the Government were considering dismantling green-belt rules, I argued strongly against this and raised it during Prime Minister’s questions. Thankfully, my right hon. Friend’s answer confirmed her support for green-belt protections, and no plans to rip them up appeared in the Budget after all.

We must build more homes in this country, but we do not have to sacrifice the green belt to do it. The Conservative council in Barnet, for example, is delivering more new homes than any other borough in London, and its main means of doing so is through regeneration of the borough’s major estates. It is in the process of delivering 27,000 new homes under a 15-year plan adopted in 2012. In 2015-16, 1,460 new homes were built in Barnet—4.7% of the total for Greater London. Across its regeneration projects, the council is meeting the affordable homes target of 40%. I support this regeneration programme and other projects, such as the Victoria Quarter development in New Barnet, which is being taken forward by social landlord One Housing on a former industrial site.

Like my Conservative colleagues on Barnet Council, however, I am unhappy about plans brought forward by developers for high-density development squeezed into low-rise suburban areas where it is completely inappropriate, so I have been part of a number of successful campaigns against the demolition of houses to make way for blocks of flats. I am opposing plans for tower blocks of luxury flats in North London business park, which were rejected unanimously by Barnet’s planning committee, and I am fighting against proposals to build on the agricultural fields at Whalebones in High Barnet. I also oppose the planning application being considered this week for Barnet House in Whetstone. Barnet House hit the national news when the owners of the block proposed to use permitted development rights to convert it into hundreds of tiny flats. Described by some as dog kennel flats, some would have been only 16 square metres. Thankfully, the proposal was defeated, but I remain concerned about the scale of the plans that have replaced it.

I appeal to the Government to restrict or abolish the permitted development rights that allow the conversion of offices to residential use without a planning application. They deprive local residents of a say in whether such developments go ahead and mean that the people profiting from the development do not have to make any contribution to the services or infrastructure needed to support the new homes because no section 106 or other contribution can be obtained. This is a particular problem around the Station Road area in my constituency and was raised by residents when I was knocking on doors only a couple of weeks ago.

Another grave concern, I am afraid, is the Mayor of London’s development plan. If this draft plan is approved, not only will it remove protection for gardens; it will actively encourage building over them, which would make it far harder to resist the kind of garden-grabbing development that Barnet Council was recently able to turn down for Crescent Road in New Barnet. The housing density matrix seems to have been completely removed from the London plan. If that goes ahead, there will be no limits on appropriate density in particular areas, which will place huge pressure on councils to approve denser and taller development. The targets for the building of family-sized affordable homes which were introduced by the last Mayor are also to go. The current Labour Mayor wants to prevent new developments within reach of public transport from including parking spaces, which would inevitably displace cars into surrounding streets, thus adding to the problems already faced by my constituents.

The draft London plan was described by a Conservative Member of the London Assembly, Andrew Boff, as a declaration of war on the suburbs. That is strong language, but there is no doubt that the Mayor’s London plan is further evidence that Labour does not care about the suburbs and does not understand them—which is another good reason for Barnet to re-elect its Conservative council on 3 May.

5.30 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): My party has long campaigned for 300,000 new homes to be built every year. There is a compelling social reason for that. Millions of people are now priced out of ever buying a home, and for the lucky few, the only opportunity comes with money from their parents or a direct subsidy from the state. Even then, eight out of 10 new homes are out of the financial reach of working people throughout the country.
The housing market is broken. It is a market built for the few and designed to exclude. The lack of housing is a crisis that is denying people—especially young people and the most vulnerable, in my constituency and across the country—a place to call their own. It should not be a luxury to own a home; nor should it be a luxury to have a secure tenancy. Building 300,000 additional homes every year would at least begin to reverse the decades-long failure to match demand with supply. The Government, however, have only one solution, which is to leave house building to the private sector. The interests of private house builders are simple: high profitability sustained over a long period. That means the slow release of property on to the market, land banking, and—as has already been discussed this afternoon—the building of five-bedroom homes rather than affordable housing.

There is an alternative to that business model. Local authorities and other public organisations must build homes on the basis of different priorities: not profit, but social need and public good. Last Christmas, one in every 111 children in the UK was either homeless or in temporary bed-and-breakfast or rented accommodation. The private sector benefits from that financially, but the private sector does not solve a single problem.

I have raised the subject of social housing, built by the public sector, many times in the House since my election last June, but the Government have not reciprocated. When I talk about the need for social housing, they respond time and again by talking about affordable housing, which is built by the private sector with some levels of public subsidy. According to research by Shelter, such housing is unaffordable for eight out of 10 working families. It gets worse. In my constituency, the local authority has just shown all developers how not to include affordable homes in their planning applications and has set an example of how to get around their own planning obligations to provide affordable housing.

The Government's Budget in November made some noises about empowering councils to build social housing. My party has long called for the housing revenue account to be returned to local authorities and other public organisations, and that is a cause for some celebration. Unfortunately, the Budget's noises about empowerment were not matched by action.

In conclusion, the private sector is not going to fix the housing crisis. The state can embark on a big social housing building programme, and I hope the Minister is listening. The worsening problem of homelessness, as well as individuals and families living in temporary accommodation, is not going to be solved by the private sector. The solutions are there for all to see, but the current position of the Government is blocking any progress. I call on the Minister to listen: the public sector must build again.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): We need to balance two things. On the one hand, we need to restore affordability and the dream of home ownership. In this country, house price inflation has been higher than that of any other OECD country over recent decades. Home ownership among young people is collapsing and the proportion of their income that private renters spend on rent is more than three times higher than it was in the 1960s and '70s, so increasing the supply of new housing is important.

On the other hand, we also want to preserve the important views and green spaces that we treasure. We want to get away from the broken model of speculative, fly-by-night development that we have in our country. In my constituency, people are furious when they spend two years working on a detailed neighbourhood plan only to see a developer swoop in at the last moment and build exactly where they did not want to see building. They are furious when developers, to get their road adopted, instead of spending any money, choose to rip out all the trees they planted when it was built. They are furious when developers tell them no new homes will be built next to the house they are buying, only to find that not only are new homes going to be built, but that the developer wants to drive massive trucks down their cul-de-sac to get there. We are trying to balance two different things, therefore.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) that increasing supply is not the only thing that matters, but it clearly does matter. France has roughly the same population and growth rate as us, but it builds twice as many homes as us and as a result house price inflation is half the rate it is here and half as many people have problematically high rents.

We need to increase housing supply, therefore, but we will never do so unless we address the reasons why people are concerned about development. The main three are as follows: first, we build in the wrong places; secondly, we build without having the economic and social infrastructure new homes need; and, thirdly, there is often no offsetting benefit for nearby residents. To solve these problems, we must not merely tweak the current system, but move to a different system. We must get away from our passive, developer-led system and move towards a more active European system, in which the state plays a leading role in assembling land and deciding where new development happens. We must get away from sequential development—where we tack more and more development on to the end of every village, as in my constituency—and move towards an emphasis on new planned settlements where we can properly plan for new infrastructure.

That is the vision, but how do we get there? First, we need to capture more of the gains from planning gain. At present, we capture only about 25% of the massive uplift in land values that happen at the stroke of a planner's pen when planning permission is granted. If we had more of the gains from development capture, we could pay for better quality development, better landscaping in new development and more social infrastructure and benefits for the community.

I am therefore glad that the Government are looking closely at how we capture more of the gains of development for the community. We need to do that in the way we do it all over the world, and in roughly the same way as we
did for the new towns. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that there must be no question of expropriation or of not paying people the value of their land. However, I agree with the proposals of the excellent homelessness charity Shelter to reform the Land Compensation Act 1961 and compulsory purchase order law, to provide a reasonable price for the landowner and for the community.

I would like us to do what they do in most European countries and in places such as Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea, where the Government play the leading role in assembling land. Local and central Government buy land, give themselves planning permission, sell the land and use the profit to pay for quality development for community.

We must capture the gains of development for the community and then directly address the three causes why people oppose new development. We must get away from sequentialism and tacking things on. I notice that, in a number of cases, planning inspectors have struck down really good locally led proposals for new planned garden villages and garden towns, and we have to stop that. One village in my constituency was going to have a nice piece of separation land between it and the new houses, but in the name of sustainability, that has been turned round and we are now going to have new homes right next to existing residents. Nothing could do more to annoy local residents and increase opposition to development.

Secondly, we need more infrastructure. If we think about the great new planned places such as Milton Keynes, we realise that people do not have to live on main roads, because we can plan a sustainable new community and we can plan for the infrastructure that is needed. Thirdly, I would like to see more community benefit for people who live right by developments. As a localist, I do not believe that central Government should impose a particular number or proportion on the affordable housing that should be built in my constituency. That should be a matter of local discretion, and my local councillors and my local community would like to see less of the community benefit being spent on new social housing in the countryside and more being spent on benefits for existing residents, such as new doctors surgery places, new school places, new parking places and new roads, as well as more landscaping. Those are the things that people want to see.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to do more to share best practice on how the new homes bonus money is spent, to ensure that residents are aware of that gain and that they can relate the gain to the cost of having a development on their doorstep?

Neil O’Brien: I strongly agree with that. Too often, the different systems—from section 106 to the new homes bonus—do not allow the people who are most negatively affected by a development to see the gains from that development.

We clearly need to reduce the demand for new housing as a speculative investment or an investment asset. Unless we do that as well as increasing supply, we will never solve the housing crisis. We need to increase the supply of new homes, and the way to do that is not by pushing new housing down people’s throats and imposing things on them but by having a system that looks at the reasons that people oppose new development and that addresses the underlying concerns. In that sense, I am pleased to agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs and also with my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles).

5.41 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It strikes me that now is the time to act. We have had enough speeches and articles, and enough wringing of hands. What are we going to do to build more houses for the people who need them? In this country there are currently about 128,000 children in homeless families living in temporary accommodation, 86 of whom live in a converted warehouse on an industrial estate in my constituency. There is no single solution to this long-term problem. There are many, but I would like to suggest just three to the Minister that I think are practical, easy and quick, because this has to happen quickly.

First, we need modular homes. Let us go back to the prelab. We have wonderful designs for modular homes in my constituency, including the Y-Cube set up by the YMCA, which provides units at a cost of about £56,000 a year. They have a 60-year life, and incredibly low gas and electricity bills because they are so well insulated. They can be put on small sites, and because of the way in which they can be plumbed in and connected up, it is always possible to get the land back at a later date. This can be done. The private and the charitable sectors are actively doing this now, and we can do it on small sites because the buildings are constructed in a factory rather than on site. One company that I met a few months ago, Ilke Homes, can provide three houses per day once the foundations are built. That is a solution that can be provided quickly.

Secondly, at the moment, public bodies such as local councils and health authorities have an incentive to sell their sites to the highest bidder. Many councils of all political persuasions hide behind the need to get best value. I suggest to the Minister that we need to change the planning framework to ensure that public bodies give first preference to residential development involving social and mixed developments.

Thirdly, we have been talking about the green belt, but, as we all know, the green belt is not always the green belt. The term does not necessarily apply to areas of outstanding natural beauty, parkland or “lungs” in cities. It can apply to the tatty bits of land that it is hard to believe are part of the green belt. I was amazed to discover that there are some 19,334 hectares of undeveloped green-belt land around train stations in London. If we were to develop only those sites, we could build 1 million new homes. Rather than sticking to one side of the argument or the other—building private housing or building public housing—we need a solution and we need it now. I offer just three, but there are many more and I could have a chat with the Minister over a cup of tea at any time.

5.45 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I first dipped my toe into this sort of water quite some time ago as a councillor in a small, unknown local authority in...
south-west London. We swept in and made huge changes to the staff and the attitudes. In the planning department, for example, we introduced planners who thought laterally, took a positive attitude and worked with local developers and local people, bringing in imaginative programmes and buildings.

My constituency is on the edge of London. It remains a beautiful constituency: 90% of it is green belt, sites of special scientific interest, areas of outstanding natural beauty or similar. Most of the constituency falls within the Mole Valley District Council area, but the western wards form part of Guildford Borough Council’s area. In developing its local plan, the district council is trying to meet its housing numbers with potentially spectacular developments adjacent to and around Leatherhead. To do so successfully, it will need to build imaginatively, higher and more densely. That is understood and expected by most people, including many Leatherhead residents. Of course, there is the usual small group, living in aspic, who want only low-rise housing and everything to be essentially the same. Whatever the eventual outcome, however, it is obvious to me that the local team, led by Councillor Simon Edge, is prepared to think outside the box, so I have real hopes.

I spent a period as a Minister in the then Department of the Environment and one of the things that I discovered was the variation in local authorities. Some are excellent, high quality and low cost and work with local residents, but some will not budge. When it came to planning, some local authorities—I will not name them—I will not name them—killed any hope of development and they are still there. Hopefully, Mole Valley council will not do that. Guildford Council, which has put its draft plan out for consultation, is a complete contrast. Some 57% of the housing that it intends to develop lies on current green-belt land and several thousand of the houses are in the Guildford wards of the Mole Valley constituency. The plan has been out for consultation in some form twice and the protests were gigantic.

Three of the plan’s main sites lie adjacent to a section of the A3. Those who use the road will recognise the section from Guildford to Hook as one of the most consistently overloaded roads. The A3 crosses over the M25 at junction 10, which is the busiest, most accident-prone junction on the M25. Plans are in hand to improve the junction dramatically to meet current demands, but not the demand that will result from Guildford Council’s plans. The council leaders should look to the surroundings of the town itself and use their imagination to build higher and denser quality housing.

I visited my old borough of Wandsworth to see how the council is handling the demand for homes. It has more homes under construction or in planning than the rest of inner London put together. That has been achieved through exciting, often iconic developments and a combination of compact development, quality development and height. In desperation, I sent the leader of Guildford Council a photograph of one of the more spectacular iconic towers. It is stunning. It is tall—it is far too tall for Guildford—but it is an example of how tall can be made to fit. However, my thoughts and those of many others have been rejected by the leadership.

The inquiry on the plan will be a battle to save the green belt. I hope that the Minister will look over the shoulder of the inspector at each of the local plan inquiries. It is an opportunity for that inspector—and there are some very good inspectors—to assess the quality of the council as well as the quality of the local plan. If the local council is raiding the green belt as an easy option, rather than moving back in and around the towns, the plan should be heavily rejected and the council should be sent back to think again.

5.50 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing this debate. The contributions have been excellent. I often meet constituents who bemoan the quality of our debates. I always tell them, “Don’t bother watching on Wednesday lunch time. Switch on the BBC Parliament channel on a Thursday or Tuesday afternoon and you’ll get an entirely different impression.”

What has been interesting is how many of the issues that have been raised on both sides of the House have parallels. Listening to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), I was struck by how statist their solutions appear, which I strongly encourage. I remember two or three years ago when my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) first mooted the idea of seizing land off developers who are not getting on with building. It was seen as positively communist. It appears that, all the way from Doncaster to Grantham, the centre ground of politics really is shifting. I encourage much of that.

It is important to recognise that Governments can free space for the private sector to develop, but the rules of the game are the rules of the game at the moment. Given those rules, it is useless for us to come to this place and complain that developers do not build houses from which they cannot make a profit. We need to understand that. If we rely entirely on the private sector, we will get houses built and developed in areas where those houses will be profitable. London authorities will build houses at an amazing rate, but nothing like the same numbers will be built in towns in the north, where there has not been the same sort of investment in infrastructure and where a variety of other things have not been done. We will not see anything like the same numbers built and we will not get them built on brownfield sites.

In Chesterfield in 2005-06, a housing development was being built on the old Bryan Donkin site. The developer went bust about a third of the way through the development. That huge brownfield site remained unbuilt for the next seven or eight years. Therefore, there is no point our coming to this place to bemoan the fact that developers, which are companies that are ultimately there to make a profit, are not building on sites on which they will not make a profit.

What has been lacking from this debate is the sense that housing and planning are just one part of this whole thing. We need to talk about skills because, if there are not enough trained people in the construction industry to get more sites built, there will be an impact on the cost of labour, which will have an impact on the number of houses that are built.

Transport is incredibly important. The north has huge potential, but we need to improve the transport infrastructure. When 10 times more is spent on transport infrastructure in London than on transport infrastructure
in other parts of the country, it is unsurprising that everyone wants to move into London, where they can move about easily, and not into areas where they cannot move around so easily.

There has been a lot of talk about the green belt and that is sometimes misleading. Whenever I fly over Britain during the day while travelling overseas, I look down and see that Britain is a green and pleasant land—I fly over field after field before coming to a town or city. If we are to build these houses, the public sector needs to have a role because the public sector can build even in times when building is not profitable.

I would like to see the Government address the issue of right to buy. I am not against right to buy, but unless councils can borrow and know that they can build new houses without the prospect of having to sell them at a discount three years later, local authorities will not build these houses. Local authorities have a role to play in this and I would like the Government to recognise that.

I would like this debate to recognise the importance of transport and local infrastructure. We have heard about the objections in many areas to developments, but often when people are objecting they are concerned about the impact on schools, roads and local health services. Infrastructure needs to be a part of all this discussion, as do skills; we need a much wider debate.

In the final minute available, while touching on the planning issue, I also wish to discuss the issue of Traveller sites. In Chesterfield, we have a local plan, which is currently under consultation. The council has identified two sites for Travellers already in Chesterfield, but it has been told it needs to identify two more. There is a huge amount of public concern about that. Four sites in my constituency—in Grangewood, Newbold and Inkersall—have been consulted on and I know there are two such sites in the constituency of the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley). The pressure that is going on councils is unfair. There is also pressure on constituents, who are, for understandable reasons—I would be concerned for exactly the same reasons—very concerned about this. If we are going to see local authorities put in control of their areas, we do not need to see them forced to have such sites, as is currently happening in Chesterfield.

5.56 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), who rightfully highlights the importance of skills and training for the next generation of people going into the building industry. On the 100th anniversary of universal suffrage, we also need to encourage more women to look at opportunities in the building trade.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing such an important debate on housing, planning and the green belt, about which every constituency across the land has many common concerns. If we get this right, we can create wonderful neighbourhoods and communities with the right level of green spaces, and the right sort of housing and infrastructure. If we get it wrong, however, as we too often do, we lose those valuable green spaces, because they are the places that developers choose first to build upon. We are then left with the brownfield spaces that have been left behind, which are the blots on the landscape and the areas that people in local communities want to see developed first. One of the principal intentions in developing a green belt was not just protecting green spaces, but ensuring that inner-city brownfield sites were developed before those green spaces were taken up.

There is currently too much urban sprawl, which leads to all sorts of problems. It leads to the distinctive identities of communities, villages and towns merging into one, whereby they become an endless suburbia. It works against public transport, because where there is urban sprawl, it is difficult for buses to follow routes that will make enough money so that they can to keep running. It also means that people are a long distance from railway stations, meaning that they cannot get on a train, and if they are able to, they probably have to drive to the railway station, thus creating congestion and other traffic problems. Developers, councils and railway authorities also too often do not put in parking spaces at railway stations that will enable people to park up safely, which creates all sorts of problems for local residents because their streets are congested with all the cars.

We see across Greater Manchester that many of the new developments that are permitted, often by Labour councils, are not mixed housing that all people in the community can take advantage of. They are often executive estates, which are not there for the local community. That needs to change, and something that ought to drive that change is devolution to Greater Manchester. There is a huge and wonderful opportunity for Greater Manchester to have a vision about how it develops its planning and housing and, within the Greater Manchester spatial framework, ensures that housing, planning and protecting the green belt are all married up.

I would like the Minister to clarify something. I understand that the Greater Manchester spatial framework involves individual councils coming together to agree how many houses will be built. Wigan Council agreed its allocation of 16,500 houses, but then voluntarily chose to have an additional 3,000 houses on top of that. That goes against the wishes of local residents, who were already complaining about road congestion before Wigan Council sought to impose an additional 3,000 houses. That is the council’s choice—it referred to its ambition to have those extra houses.

The Greater Manchester spatial framework will enable council leaders and mayors to work together to create a vision for development, but the first vision offered was an abysmal failure that was rightly torn up due to popular demand. The tearing up of that first framework in turn delayed the Greater Manchester spatial framework mark 2, and that delay has enabled developers to target and cherry-pick greenfield spaces such as the Bowlands Hey and Leigh Hall developments in Worsleythorpe and the Hill Lane development in Blackrod, against local wishes.

The independent planning inspector has said that the failure to put the Greater Manchester spatial framework in place means that no meaningful weight can be given to planning objections. As a consequence, our green spaces are being taken up, communities are being damaged and communities are being damaged. Is it a coincidence that the Greater Manchester spatial framework mark 2 is to be published in June, following the local elections?
What is it that council leaders in Greater Manchester do not want us to know? Will voters have a chance to see the proposals before the May elections?

Mr Harper: That proposal sounds sensible. I am not familiar with the detail, but given what my hon. Friend sets out, it sounds like the local authority is focusing on demand. We will need significantly more of that if we are to meet demand in London.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury put his finger on it when he spoke about housing demand. Clearly, compared with the situation when I was younger, we are much tougher with the loans that people can take out. When we look at what happened to the financial system after the banks made unwise lending decisions, such practice is probably very sensible, but it does make it more difficult for younger people to purchase houses. I welcome what the Government have done on the finance side of the argument, and two things are particularly welcome. The Help to Buy equity loan scheme is helping a significant number of young people who can afford a mortgage to be able to finance their deposit. It is not true to say, as some people do, that that only deals with the demand side of the equation, because it is of course only used for buying new houses. If we look at how house builders operate, we see that they build houses as they sell them. If we make it possible for a first-time buyer to purchase a home through the Help to Buy equity loan scheme, the house builder will then build more houses on that estate, as I have seen clearly in my constituency. Such practice helps on the demand side, which in turn generates housing supply.

I also welcome the introduction of the lifetime individual savings account, which enables younger people to save for a pension or a home, but I have one policy suggestion for the Minister. I am very supportive of our auto-enrolment policy to ensure that everybody saves for a pension, so will he consider whether we could apply auto-enrolment to lifetime ISAs? A young person going into the labour market would then find that their savings and their employer’s contributions would go into a lifetime ISA—at least that would be an option—so that the money could be used to fund either a pension or a home. If someone is a homeowner when they retire, they will not need such a significant pension, because they will not be paying rent on the home that they own. I think that that sensible proposal might make younger people keener to save for a deposit, because they would find it more affordable, so I urge the Minister to consider the suggestion.

I am grateful that the Government have said so much recently about the northern powerhouse. Given the location of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury, I also welcome what the Secretary of State for Wales did with the Severn growth summit to encourage the development of what we might call a western powerhouse to create another centre of gravity for developing economic growth in Wales and the west country. It seems to me that one of the real problems is that we will not deal with the housing crisis simply by building more homes. London, for example, has high levels of immigration—23% of Londoners are non-UK born residents, and 156,000 migrants moved to London in 2016. Having listened to colleagues’ concerns about excessive house building in London, I argue that we cannot build our way out of the problem. A longer-term solution is to generate progress in the northern powerhouse—in transport and in infrastructure, and particularly in housing, which is one of the key areas in that part of the country—and then generate development in what I might call the western powerhouse in the west of the country and Wales. We could also look at things...
such as the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford growth corridor, so that we actually see economic development spread more equitably across the United Kingdom. That would mean that rather than feeling the pressure to move to London, or to get a job or create a new business there, young people in many parts of the country would feel able to stay in their home towns and cities, or indeed to move to Manchester and the great cities of the north. That will happen if we create a powerhouse that is globally competitive, as London is.

**Toby Perkins:** I am much happier with where the right hon. Gentleman is finishing his speech than I was with his position six or seven minutes ago. It seems that London has doubled in size during my lifetime, but the major cities of the north have hardly changed. If the message that the Government get today is that we need continually to expand the size of London, I agree entirely that we will not build our way out of this problem, as we will just continue to feed that demand. The solution has to be investment in infrastructure and skills all around the country, not just focused on London.

**Mr Harper:** I am glad that I have cheered up the hon. Gentleman as my remarks have developed, and I hope that I have had that effect on at least one or two other colleagues. He is right that that is the answer. There is a regional housing problem in the United Kingdom. House prices in London and its surrounding areas are massively out of kilter with the rest of the country, and we can deal with some of that by building houses. We do need to increase the density of house building in London, so I welcomed what the Government said yesterday about building upwards, and having slightly increased housing densities and slightly higher rise properties—not massive, but perhaps with more storeys than a traditional two-storey property—but we also need to spread economic growth across the country.

People with housing challenges who live in London should be as supportive of investment in the northern powerhouse and other parts of the country—and in creating a great, globally competitive city in the north—as people who live in the north. Such investment would result in us sharing economic growth more equitably across the country. That is how we deal with the housing challenges that we face more fairly and equitably, and it would also help the whole country’s economic growth and make us more globally competitive.

6.11 pm

**Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for calling this important debate. I am delighted to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper).

Does the Minister know how many affordable houses were built for Islanders two years ago? Thirty-five. Would the Minister hazard a guess at the number of affordable houses built for Islanders last year? Thirty-four. Just 79 affordable houses were built in two years for an island with a population of 140,000. This is utterly unacceptable. It is proof of a system in need of reform and, judging by the many voices here, in need of much greater local flexibility and the support from the Government that that would entail. I would like briefly to outline the problem and to suggest a few thoughts on the situation, locally and nationally.

Like many areas, the Isle of Wight needs sustainable, intelligent and sensitive regeneration to drive economic and social development. The current housing system does not serve the Island well. It is a system of developer-led housing, which generates only a small number of affordable houses. It fails to deliver the right type of housing. It is not sustainable. It encourages urban sprawl and all the transport problems identified by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) and others. It forces communities to accept unpopular local developments. And in a place like the Isle of Wight, which has a visitor economy and an important tourism industry, greenfield development actually damages our economy.

A better system would be one where there is a funding scheme to support housing associations and others to build—as a significant, if not near-100%, solution to our housing problems—genuinely affordable housing for local people in small-scale developments in existing communities. That would ensure that we were able to provide housing for our people and to protect our environment at the same time. The wrong type of housing actually damages our society, because what developers want is not what my constituents need. It is not designed for local people. And, frankly, even so-called affordable housing is not really affordable for many people who earn the Island’s average wage.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** May I say how much I support the line that the hon. Gentleman is taking about the use of the word “affordable”? Does he agree that applying the word “affordable” to housing that is 80% market rent probably means that it is unaffordable for most?

**Mr Seely:** I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestion. I would say semi-affordable, rather than affordable—and, even then, people are reliant on the bank of mum and dad.

Housing associations tell me that what they need is one-bedroom or two-bedroom housing, but what is built, because we are part of a south-east market where people come to retire, is three-bedroom and four-bedroom housing, which is not what Islanders need. One of the most painful experiences of the last election was hearing the desperation of young people unable to find anywhere to live. I want a system that prioritises housing for Islanders at prices they can afford, and specifically for young Islanders. Indeed, research that I commissioned from the House of Commons Library a few months ago shows that an increase in our population on the Island has not led to an increase in prosperity—quite the opposite. Our gross value added per head has actually gone down slightly since 2000, while adult social care costs threaten to bankrupt us on a near-annual basis.

Throughout Britain, especially in island communities, in national parks, in areas of outstanding natural beauty, and perhaps even in the big cities nowadays, our country needs a system of building that is sensitive to the environment, caters for the resident population, and has much greater local flexibility. In considering these housing proposals, I am thinking not of the next five to 10 years—where to stick a housing estate now—but of what my Island is going to look like in 50 or
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), about where and how we should be building and the interaction with other things such as skills and the like. I do not think it is an either/or discussion, as we could do both. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield said, we have to build up the skills base and the infrastructure in the places that we have the privilege to represent. At the same time, I completely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean that there are parts of this country where there is a clear imbalance in demand and supply, and we need to try to address that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury said, planning should be regional. We have clear evidence of problems with house building in certain parts of the country, primarily in London and the south-east. Given that a limited number of Members from London and the south-east are here at the moment, I guess I can get away with saying that, because they are not listening. There is a clear case for adopting the proposals and approaches that have been described. The suggestion from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) with regard to building close to train stations is a very interesting one for areas where there is an acute supply difficulty.

However, in my constituency and those of many Members who have spoken today, we do not necessarily suffer from that acute supply difficulty. The Nationwide house price index suggests that in the past 10 years, the real-terms increase of house prices across the country has been in the order of 20%. In the constituency that I have the privilege to represent, we have had single-digit increases at best in some wards, and prices in some wards have reduced in real terms by up to 22%.

If supply is a proxy for actual demand and for the issues we are talking about, there are examples in places such as North East Derbyshire where, because house prices are falling or staying static, there cannot be the demand issues that we are seeing elsewhere. That necessitates a different approach in places such as London and the south-east from places such as North East Derbyshire.

When we are talking about these issues, we also need to think about collaboration. When I go home every weekend, I get off the train at Chesterfield and drive past large swathes of brownfield land that could be redeveloped. In fairness, I know that the council is hoping to redevelop that land, but I understand the frustration of my constituents who drive past the same brownfield land and then are expected to accept increased building on greenfield or green-belt land in my constituency. As an addendum, my constituency has pledged to build a significant number of houses on brownfield land, so I am not trying to shift that to other parts of the country.

Along with collaboration and a regional approach, we have to accept that this requires local leadership. Localism requires local people to take control, and there is ample evidence that while the opportunity has been given by the Government since the Localism Act 2011, it has not been taken up in far too many places. My council in North East Derbyshire has not put in place a local plan since 2005. That plan is now 12 years old. North East Derbyshire is one of just 15 councils in the country that have been called out by the Government for failing to do that. The Labour leadership of the council still, six days after the Government’s deadline, has made no public comment that I can find on the website about how it will solve that issue.
The council has spent 12 years going through the first three stages of an eight-stage process, which means that on current form, it will arrive at a local plan some time in the 2040s. That is probably not where we need to be as a forward-looking part of the world. We have to ensure that there is local leadership and local ownership, and where there is not, perhaps we need to look at how to replace people who refuse to take up the opportunities afforded to them.

In the time I have left, I want to focus on the second and third parts of the subject of the debate: planning and the green belt. I completely understand and accept the need to build more houses and that there should be a debate about that in places where we may have to build on green belt and greenfield land, but that should be locally led, locally understood and locally accepted.

Local residents find the apparent iniquities within the planning system incredibly frustrating. For example, people are unable to build a single farm building in certain parts of the country, and yet large-scale developments such as the ones talked about today are pushed through on account of local plans not being in place, so developers can swoop in and make applications in the way that has been described, as I see in parts of my constituency such as Wingerworth and Old Tupton. That is unacceptable because it undermines confidence in the planning system.

I would also say—I know I am going slightly off the point about housing—that such confidence is also undermined when we look at hydraulic fracturing. I spent most of yesterday in a planning committee meeting in Matlock for Derbyshire County Council to make a decision on fracking. When we have large-scale planning proposals such as that one, which will see the wholesale industrialisation of significant rural parts of our country, which local people are told that they should accept, despite not being able to have incremental increases in affordable housing in their local villages, they find that very difficult to accept.

I welcome the Localism Act, even though it brings challenges. We have to look at ways in which we can rebalance our approach in such matters from a regional perspective. However, we must also make sure that there is confidence in such planning approaches and in the planning system by ensuring that such large-scale and often unwanted developments are contextualised in a system in which people are heard.

6.26 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to contribute to this very important debate. It is also a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who, if I may say so, spoke with clarity and force this afternoon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing the debate.

We have a challenge in this country: in one word, affordability. I see that quite clearly in my constituency of Witney and west Oxfordshire. We are very lucky that, statistically, we have almost full employment. It is a very pleasant part of the country in which to live—it is very green, with beautiful buildings, lots of jobs and Oxford nearby—and it has relatively good transport links, although more of that, perhaps, in a moment. However, that means there is a real challenge, because for very many people, the cost of housing has simply outstripped the ability to pay. This has an impact on all sorts of services that my constituents need. To give just one example, it affects the recruitment of GPs in rural areas. That is a very real challenge. For swathes of young people—when I say that, I mean people under 40—owning a home, a dream almost universally shared, has become out of reach, and we absolutely must tackle this challenge.

There is certainly an issue with supply. I am well aware, as all hon. Members will be, of the statistic showing that, for many years under Governments of all colours, insufficient houses have been built. We have been building approximately a half of what we need. However, it is very important that we do not become fixated and obsessed simply with numbers. This is not all about supply or simply numbers, not least—I am very glad that the Government are reassessing the NPPF—because there is a question mark over how the supply figure reached through the strategic housing market assessment is calculated. There is a suspicion that it is too reliant on developers, who in due course drive the figure higher than it actually is.

We sometimes get the terminology wrong in this House. We tend to talk about developments when we should really be talking about communities, and we tend to talk about houses when we should really be talking about homes, because they are precisely what we are building in this country. We need to remember that we are building communities, and those will be the communities of the future. It is in 20 or 30 years’ time, when the builders have long since moved out and other MPs are representing the area, that the success of the rules we are putting in place now will be judged.

In my constituency, I am very keen that we do not just look at the green belt, important though it is to protect it. A relatively small amount of my constituency is green-belt land, but I have some of the most beautiful countryside in the country. Communities simply will not accept a cavalier approach to house building in such areas, and we need to guard against such an approach.

I am glad that the White Paper has been published and has addressed a great many of these issues and that the NPPF is being looked at. I have spoken about how the need figures are calculated and I am glad, too, that the issue of building on brownfield lands first is being looked at as a priority by the Government.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), who is not in his place, who really hit the nail on the head in talking about the build-out rate. It is crucial that when planning permissions have been granted the developers build them out, that there is not a practice of land banking and that they do not, for reasons of profit or any other reason, fail to build those out. This simply must happen. It must be built into the planning system. There might be things that the Government can do to help or that local government can do to help, such as bringing in small builders or local builders to ensure that those areas can be built out as and when local communities need them.

We need robust local plans throughout the country, and I would also like neighbourhood plans to have teeth. One of my hon. Friends referred to the fact that if local communities are asked where they think the housing ought to go to serve their needs, more housing might be built, but what is crucial is that local communities are
consulted and listened to about those homes. They know which areas are likely to be flooded and which areas are unlikely to be able to take any traffic growth. They are therefore able to advise district councils—and, in due course, the Government as well—on where housing should go.

I would like those neighbourhood plans to have more teeth because nothing is more infuriating for a community than to spend months and thousands of pounds developing a neighbourhood plan— they are not cheap—only to find that it is given next to no weight in the local plan process. Those plans simply must be given weight. I suggest that the results would be good for everyone as we look at tackling this affordability challenge.

In the short time remaining, I want to look a little more at infrastructure. Communities, quite reasonably, oppose housing developments nearby when people worry about how they are going to get to work, where their children are going to go to school and which GP surgery they will go to if they are ill. The garden village scheme in many ways has a lot to commend it, because for many years we have seen penny packeting, where housing is put on the edge of a village but nothing else is added, so there is no increase in road provision, no increase in the number of GP surgeries and so forth. However, it is crucial that the schemes are well planned and the garden villages indeed have GP surgeries and shops and that the infrastructure, particularly around roads, is introduced at the same time.

There is such an example in my constituency, just to the north of Eynsham. Hon. Members who have heard me speak on just about any subject in the House will know that I will almost certainly mention the A40 at some point, and I do so again now. I am well aware that there is a lot of concern about the development in Eynsham, because anybody leaving Witney or any of the towns and villages in that area—I do not live far away myself, so I am well aware of the problem—or anybody leaving Eynsham spends hours in traffic as things are now. If thousands of houses are built in Witney and thousands are built to the north of Eynsham, people understandably fear that the infrastructure simply will not cope—and it really will not when we are talking about the A40, which is a single-track road heading into Oxford.

It is crucial that, across the whole of planning, that infrastructure is built in first, so that we have the schools and GP surgeries that we are going to need and that we do not have thousands more people trying to pile into the same local Co-op. Crucially in my case, the A40 must be addressed.

I am grateful to the relevant Department, which is well aware of my submissions on this subject. I am grateful, too, that my local county council has put in a strong housing infrastructure fund bid and that the major road network consultation is taking place at the moment.

I want to talk about innovation. In this country, we have not made anything like enough use of what are called prefabs or timber-frames, and we must do much more. There is a real challenge of affordability here that can be addressed through using technology and innovation. In my constituency, I have examples of companies that build just such structures.

On architecture, people expect that if housing is being built it will reflect the nature of the area in which it is being built. Having that would mean that we also had the consent for the housing that we need. That must never be forgotten.

I end by noting that we are building communities—places—and it is the people who live in them who really matter.

6.34 pm

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): I start by thanking right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed today, not least the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who secured this important debate. It is good to see the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), a former Planning Minister, back in his place.

I am acutely aware that the subject of this debate is often contentious and that discussion of the green belt can be fraught with difficulty. It is very good that this afternoon there has pretty much been consensus across the House. I understand that Members may be concerned that the need to build more homes will lead to increased pressure to build on green-belt land, but we must recognise that that pressure would be ameliorated to an extent if so much of our development land was not subject to land banking. I know from experience that that is a growing problem that is hampering the ability of local authorities to deliver the homes we need.

Some of the figures are startling. Last year, Shelter estimated that more than 320,000 homes that have been given planning permission in the past five years have not been built. That alone represents much more than a year’s worth of the supply of new homes that we need. Numerous organisations have expressed concern about this issue, including Shelter and the National Trust, and The Guardian and other publications have investigated its extent. The results are alarming. The Guardian has suggested that the nine biggest house builders are sitting on 600,000 undeveloped plots of land.

That is why Labour has, for several years, called for “use it or lose it” powers to ensure that planning permissions are used and that sites are built out. There must be both incentives for developers to build sites out at a faster rate and greater enforcement on those that do not.

I am glad that the Government have finally announced a review of build-out rates, but I fear that it is sadly too late. In the meantime, thousands of families have missed out on the opportunity of getting a new home. I would be very grateful if the Minister told us whether the Letwin interim review of build out is likely to report in the spring and how soon he expects proposals to come to the House to tackle land banking. I would also like to know whether the review addresses the reason for stalling on a number of sites and the need for remediation funding, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg).

Let me be clear about Labour’s green-belt policy. As was stated in our manifesto last year:

“We will prioritise brownfield sites and protect the green belt. We will start work on a new generation of New Towns to build the homes we need and avoid urban sprawl.”

That has been a consistent Labour policy. It was reiterated in the Lyons review in 2014, which stated that

“the policy of containing urban areas in England has been highly effective in its objective of preventing urban sprawl and stopping adjacent cities from merging together. There is clearly value in the preservation of areas of amenity land close to our urban areas for people to enjoy.”
It continued:

“Planning authorities seeking to meet local housing need should be reminded that current policy provides for both review of and change to green belt boundaries, including swaps of land, as long as that is in the context local plan preparation or review and is the subject of detailed local consultation.”

We want to protect the green belt, but to continue to give local authorities the flexibility they need to change it in line with local expectations and local plans.

The Government are letting communities down over the protection of green-belt land and are not giving local authorities the tools they need to protect high-quality green spaces around urban areas. Organisations such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England have expressed concern that the changes being made following last year’s housing White Paper to define the exceptional circumstances in which green belt development is acceptable are “insufficiently robust”.

Dr Drew: Does my hon. Friend understand the frustration in places like Stroud when the number of affordable housing units needed is ratcheted up, but we are completely unable to prevent the developers from building executive houses? Does she agree that that dilemma just makes us unable to prevent the developers from building executive houses in places like Stroud when the number of affordable houses are “insufficiently robust”.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which has been made throughout this afternoon. The change signalled by the Government is what I think led my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) to label the policy “green belt first”.

My hon. Friend the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Bury North (James Frith) also clearly highlighted the difficulties of that approach.

Last year, the Government proposed a new method for calculating the housing need for local authority areas, but unfortunately the new formula does not take into account the amount of land that is protected in a given area. For example, in County Durham, 43% of the area is green belt, an area of outstanding natural beauty or under conservation area protection. Again, that causes problems for the local authority, and the Government need to address the issue urgently.

The National Housing Federation said that the Government’s target of 300,000 new homes a year will not be met unless we make better use of land. So far, as the Minister will know, we have not come close to reaching that target, with only—this was a huge improvement on previous years—183,000 homes built last year. The Government need to reach the target, and that point was made very effectively by my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins).

The National Housing Federation has called for the Government to “think innovatively about how best to use public, brownfield and greenbelt land to build the homes and communities”—communities is a very important point—that “we need”.

I agree that there must be more creative and collaborative solutions to the housing crisis. We need to see much more of local authorities working together, with much greater support from the Government, to set up new towns and garden cities.

The Government must do more to ensure that local residents and businesses feel in control of development in their areas. Too often, people are left feeling that planning is done to them, rather than it being a process in which they can participate. We know that the Department will prepare a new draft of the national planning policy framework for consultation soon, and the Government must take the opportunity to address some of these issues. That point was made excellently by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North. The local plan process must be strengthened and proper consultation must be guaranteed. There must also be greater investment in planning departments, which have been starved of resources. They need additional resources to ensure that developments are correctly assessed and that local policies are properly implemented.

A survey of local councillors that was carried out last year by the Local Government Information Unit and the National Trust found that 50% of local councillors saw sites being approved for development that were not in line with local plans. However, it should be through the local and neighbourhood planning process that appropriate sites are allocated for development and that any changes to protected designated green belt are undertaken. In that way, communities can best plan for sustainable development and control future development in their area.
the point of departure, not the point of arrival. We need to deliver in the region of 300,000 homes each year, if we are to provide the homes Britain needs and make them more affordable for the nurse, for the teacher, for those young families on low and muddling incomes trying to get on to the housing ladder.

This is not just about those who are buying, of course: increasing the supply of new homes is vital for bringing down the cost of renting, too. The Government have an ambitious plan and we are restless to get more homes built. There is no silver bullet, as hon. Members pointed out. There are just various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle and we must be assiduous in putting them all together. The first policy lever is the national planning policy framework. I am pleased to say that we will be consulting on changes to the NPPF to reduce obstacles to home building. In that context, I listened carefully to the range of concerns raised by hon. Members across the House.

I will not pre-empt publication, but as the House will know from the Secretary of State’s statement, we intend to consult on changes, for example, to density to free up local authorities to build perhaps one or two storeys higher—whether apartments, terraced homes or other designs—if that is in keeping with their local area and in accordance with what local constituents and communities want. That will provide greater flexibility in towns and urban areas, where demand is particularly high. The points about regional variations in demand and affordability were well made by hon. Members across the House. We want to encourage homes to be built—we want to clear away those obstacles—and to promote local design, buy-in and support for this national mission. We will therefore publish a revised draft of the NPPF and launch our consultation by Easter.

I want to be clear on one issue on which feelings always run high—I know from my own local experience how important it is: the green belt, which is cherished by hon. Members and their constituents and communities.

Our NPPF makes it clear that most new building on green-belt land is inappropriate and should be refused planning permission, except in very specific circumstances, and only in exceptional circumstances may a local authority alter the green-belt boundary, after consulting local people and submitting a revised local plan for formal examination. Broadly, since 1997, the proportion of green-belt land has stayed relatively steady at 13%.

There is a broader point here about home building and the overriding need to carry local communities with us, whether rural, suburban or urban communities. That is why last week the Government announced the first wave of money being allocated from the homes infrastructure fund. Last week alone, we targeted £866 million of investment, or 133 local housing projects, from London to Manchester, Cornwall to County Durham, to unlock building capacity for up to 200,000 new homes. We recognise we need more homes, but we also know that communities worry about new developments—my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) made this point very well—and ask some reasonable questions: what will it mean for congestion on the roads, and what will it mean for pressures on schools and local NHS services? There is certainly a link with pressures from immigration. Once we have left the EU, we will have greater scope and control over that to get the balance right.

The Government hear those concerns loud and clear. That is what the homes infrastructure fund helps to address. We will be having a further round of funding in about a month—time to deal with bigger infrastructure projects. The key is that, by investing in local authority-led projects in areas where demand is greatest, we can build not just more homes but stronger communities at the same time, which is crucial to the strategy the Government have presented.

I come now to the next public policy lever that we must yank even harder to speed up the rate of building—the shadow Minister and Members on the Conservative Benches made this point. There is, I think, a cross-party consensus on the objective, although whether there is such a consensus on the means is another question. The point was made very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) and also by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods).

Let me put this in context. In the year ending March 2017, 304,000 planning permissions for new homes were granted, an increase of 15% on the previous year and of 70% on five years ago. The latest figures—which, admittedly, date from 2016—show that detailed planning permission was granted to 684,000 homes that had not been completed.

The Government’s position is clear: new homes should be built as soon as possible once planning permission has been granted. Our housing White Paper contains a range of proposals to tackle issues that delay or prevent the building out of developments. They include proposals to give local authorities stronger tools with which to ensure that sites with planning permission are built out, to provide more transparent data on housing delivery and to tackle delays associated with, in particular, pre-commencement conditions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is leading a review of the gap between the number of planning permissions being granted and the new homes actually delivered, with a view to reducing it. The review panel will make its recommendations for closing the gap and will report on its findings later this year. We want to establish what more can be done to ensure that developers cannot wriggle out of commitments to build more affordable homes in the right places, after planning permission has been granted. That is another important piece of the jigsaw: another important element of the strategy that we are presenting today.

Members across the House made the point that Governments must lead by example. This is not really about a private sector monopoly; the state has a role to play. That argument was made especially clearly and saliently by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). Releasing more surplus public sector land to boost the supply of new homes is obviously a powerful way of achieving our goal. We will be pressing Whitehall Departments to release more of that surplus public sector land, with a view to generating a further 160,000 new homes. Homes England can help them by providing expertise and targeted investment.

Let me return to the objectives to which I referred at the beginning of my speech. The release of public sector land offers opportunities to provide less expensive homes for essential public sector workers such as nurses, teachers and police officers.
Siobhain McDonagh: May I suggest that that will happen only if the Government force—or encourage—public sector bodies to do it? Extorting their good will will not work.

Dominic Raab: I know that the hon. Lady has a great deal of experience in this regard and she is right. I suspect that what is needed is a mixture of coaxing and cajoling, carrot and stick. We must try to ensure that there is a win-win. However, it seems to the Government, and certainly to me, that there is a huge opportunity not just to build more affordable homes, but to control the process to ensure that those homes are for key workers on low and middle incomes.

We have heard a range of excellent speeches. I shall try to do justice to as many as possible in the time available. The hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) raised the issue of funding and, in particular, the issue of the homes infrastructure fund. As I have said, we want to encourage the building of more homes, but we know how important it is to provide the infrastructure that will enable us to carry communities with us.

Derek Twigg: May I press the Minister on that, if he does not mind? Halton Borough Council is saying that, because the brownfield land is either contaminated or has already been allocated and used, there are exceptional circumstances to build on the green belt. My constituents do not agree and nor do I. Can the Minister tell me whether that is correct? May I also ask whether he is going to do anything about developers who build on green belt before all the brownfield land has been used?

Dominic Raab: The national planning policy framework makes it very clear that building on the green belt must be the last resort. Well disposed as I am towards the hon. Gentleman, he will not tempt me to start commenting on individual plans or planning applications, but I can tell him, in relation to his own local authority, that we did not have a bid for the homes infrastructure fund and we want the bids to be locally driven. Then we will look on them as sympathetically as possible—in accordance, obviously, with a set of criteria—to maximise the output.

Mr Seely: Does my hon. Friend understand that, for smaller authorities such as Isle of Wight Council, which is just about the smallest county council in Britain, it is difficult because we do not have the capacity always to know how the central Government system works? Therefore, we lose out when it comes to applying for some of these funds.

Dominic Raab: I listened to my hon. Friend. Friend’s passionate, tenacious and articulate speech on behalf of the Isle of Wight. I am happy to look again at whether we can provide any support in relation to the bidding process, but we are in a Catch-22 because we will be criticised for imposing ideas on local communities—particularly the smaller ones—if we do not allow bids to be community-driven and led. However, let us take that forward and see whether we can work together.

I cannot tell my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) how fantastic it was to see him in the Chamber, back in fine fettle, setting the housing market in context. As usual, he is a one man walking ideas factory, offering ideas that I am already in part looking at trying to take forward. He made a powerful case for the national mission to build more homes for and by trying, as we—I emphasise this—carry communities with us, to think in radical terms to get this job done.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) made some important points about the green belt. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) brought his experience directly from a local public inquiry to inform the debate at the national level. He also raised the issue of equality of arms between developers and local communities, an important point well made.

Mr Jim Cunningham rose—

Dominic Raab: I am going to make some progress as I need to allow two minutes for the wind-up, otherwise it would be frowned upon by Madam Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wera Hobhouse spoke with passion and conviction. She is right that we need to address this at many levels. I like the sound of some of her ideas and look forward to hearing that cup of tea with her and seeing how we can take them forward.

This Government’s mission is to reverse the decline in home ownership and revive the dream of Britain as a property-owning democracy. We must revive that dream for the key workers and for those on low and middle incomes striving to get on to the first rung of the housing ladder. Above all, we must deliver the homes we need for the next generation. We must build the homes Britain needs in the right way and in the right places. That is a great challenge, but an even greater opportunity, and one we must seize with both hands.

6.57 pm

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister and all the Members who have contributed to this debate; as I anticipated, it was heavily subscribed. Members raised points from their own constituencies, which was perfectly correct. That gave a good flavour to the debate, which has given the Minister a lot of good ideas—and maybe a few headaches as well.

In winding up, I want to pick up where the Minister finished. I entirely agree with him: one of my favourite Margaret Thatcher policies was that on home ownership. She extended home ownership to so many people who previously would not have had the chance to own their
own home. I am absolutely with the Minister and the Government in their desire to increase the number and percentage of people who own their own home.

I am pleased that the Minister recognised that housing supply is not the one silver bullet. Indeed there is no silver bullet. I stress that the building of more and more and more houses will not necessarily lead to greater affordability. There is not an easy answer, but we must work even harder to make sure that we achieve what I think all Members want.

I certainly will contribute to the discussions on the planning guidance. I ask for further clarification, however, on the green belt and unmet housing need. As I said earlier, the Government have stated in planning guidance in the past that unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt in importance. The Government must be a little clearer on that as we move forward.

**Dominic Raab** indicated assent.

**Mr Robertson:** I am pleased to see the Minister nodding to my request on that point.

Again, I thank all Members for contributing to this interesting and important debate.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered housing, planning and the green belt.

**PETITIONS**

**NatWest bank closures**

7 pm

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on the closure by the Royal Bank of Scotland of two of its NatWest branches in my constituency. I present it on behalf of the residents of the towns of Penistone and Stocksbridge, and it has been signed by 1,400 citizens.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Penistone and Stocksbridge, Declares that the proposed closure by the NatWest Bank of its local branches in the towns of Penistone and Stocksbridge should be reconsidered by the bank; further that the closure of these branches will leave both towns without bank services; further that the bank claims electronic banking will still allow customers to access services; further that the petitioners believe for many customers that this will not be possible and further that petitioners maintain that the closure of these branches could have a detrimental effect on many small business in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons reconsiders the closure of these two branches.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002109]

**Sherburn Hill School, County Durham**

7.3 pm

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** The second petition is from the residents of Sherburn Hill on the closure of Sherburn Hill School. They believe that Durham County Council has not guaranteed that all its pupils will be eligible for transport-to-school funds.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Sherburn Hill, Declares that the proposed closure of Sherburn Hill school in County Durham is contrary to the wishes of the local residents and that children will have to attend other schools in other villages; further that the community at Sherburn Hill have already lost all other existing community facilities, including a Sure Start centre and a community centre, and that the closure of this school will represent the closure of the last communal indoor space in the village; further that Durham County Council have not fully investigated other options for keeping the school open.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call on Durham County Council to reconsider the decision to close Sherburn Hill school.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002108]

**Closure of Lloyds bank branch in Woolston**

7.4 pm

**Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I did not think that I would be the first to present a petition about a bank closure, but I have no doubt that I will not be the last. Before I get to the text of the petition, I want to say that I am disappointed with the chief operating officer of Lloyds Bank Group, Juan Colombás. I wrote to him twice on my constituents’ behalf, but I did not even receive the courtesy of a reply. The petition is about the closure of the last bank branch in a district of my constituency.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Southampton Itchen, Declares that the residents of Woolston object to the closure of Lloyds Bank which will result in there being no banks left in Woolston.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Lloyds Bank, a bank that was bailed out by the taxpayer during the financial crisis, to reconsider the decision and keep the Woolston branch open.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002110]
Autism: Educational Outcomes

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

7.5 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): As a female MP, I am honoured to have secured this Adjournment debate on the 100th anniversary of women gaining the vote.

Last week saw the launch in Parliament of the “Autism and education in England 2017” report of an inquiry, which was co-chaired by myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), that formed part of the work of the all-party parliamentary group on autism. The report came about due to our first-hand experience as new MPs of listening to many parents who visited our surgeries to tell us their stories of the difficulty of getting support for a child with autism.

The often invisible nature of autism means that it can be difficult for a child to get a diagnosis. The process can be long and difficult for parents, often taking years rather than months. Parents feel that the extreme pushing that they have to undertake to get a diagnosis for their child often means that they are labelled as bad or difficult parents who just cannot cope with a naughty child. As a result, a diagnosis can be missed or delayed by many years. Many parents tell me—I know that colleagues have had the same experience—that they often have to resort to paying for a private assessment so that their child can get a diagnosis and start receiving the support that they need.

The problems for parents and autistic children do not end even once a diagnosis has been made. The lack of support that they receive in our schools and education system is shocking, and teachers, who desperately want to help these children, can feel inadequate and unable to offer support because they have had little or no training. I am pleased to say that that will change this year, because initial teacher training will include dealing with children on the autistic spectrum. However, that will not tackle the lack of training for existing teachers and headteachers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. We are all in the Chamber for the same reason: we know constituents who have faced such problems. A Northern Ireland Department of Health report confirmed that there has been a 67% increase in the number of school-age children across all trust areas in Northern Ireland who are diagnosed with autism. I am sure that the figure for the hon. Lady’s area is similar, so does she agree that that massive increase must lead to an increase in the support for such children in schools? If each class has a classroom assistant, it is a vital step towards improving educational outcomes for children with autism.

Maria Caulfield: I agree. Our report found that as many as one in 100 children attending our schools is on the autistic spectrum, which means that a significant number of children need our support.

Our inquiry heard from teachers who told us not only how they struggle to support students in mainstream schools because of a lack of special educational needs provision, but about the difficulties they experience because they have not received training. That comes on top of a lack of specialist provision for children for whom mainstream education is not sufficient. However, such children are often placed in mainstream education, which just cannot cope with their needs.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on their first-class report, which will make a big contribution in this area and a big difference to people’s lives.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) agree it is not just initial teacher training—autism awareness training is being included in that training for the first time this year—but the training of teachers who are already in place, such as by the Autism Education Trust, that is making a difference? In the light of her study, would she go further and say that school leaders, school governors and other people involved in educational institutions should also be trained in autism awareness?

Maria Caulfield: My right hon. Friend is correct, and one of our report’s findings is that the training needs to go wider than just teachers. I will touch on that when I come to our recommendations.

Given the lack of support, children on the autism spectrum often end up in crisis. If they had received the support they needed in the first place, and if they had received a quicker diagnosis, such children would often thrive in school.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I commend the hon. Lady on the report of her inquiry, which she co-chaired with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

Cora Leeson, who is a passionate campaigner and advocate for children with autism in my constituency, contacted me after the launch of the report to highlight her concern about the number of fixed-term exclusions from school of children with unidentified SEN, including those with autism. Does the hon. Lady share my concern about the educational attainment of children who are being excluded because they have not received a diagnosis or because, if they do have a diagnosis, they are not receiving appropriate support within mainstream schooling?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady is right. Some 17% of children with autism have been suspended from school at some point. Of that number, 48% have been suspended three or more times, and 4% have been permanently excluded, so the current school system is not working for a significant number of children. That has consequences in later life because, as experts told our hearings, if these children have the right support, they should be doing well in school. Because of their educational outcomes, only 16% of autistic adults currently end up in full-time work, and only 32% end up in any type of work at all. That tells us that their experience in the early years of being excluded or suspended from school has an impact on their educational attainment, which has a long-term impact on the rest of their lives.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I declare my interest at the outset. My wife is a music therapist and much of her work is with children who have autism, which gives me an insight into many of the challenges that families face.
I am listening to my hon. Friend with great interest. Does she agree that children with special educational needs have just as much right to be educated as every other child and that that education can make a real difference to their ongoing lives? We must not forget them, but we must also not forget their parents, who can often feel very isolated. SEN provision in schools can make a real difference for parents, too.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is right. These children have not just a right, but a legal right. As the inquiry heard, the most frustrating thing is that existing legislation should be providing for such care in the education system. We have not only the Children and Families Act 2014, but the Autism Act 2009, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) introduced. The 2009 Act, which is the only disability-specific piece of legislation that we have in England, sets out how autistic adults should be supported.

The problem is therefore not that the legislation is not in place, but that it is not being upheld. As the 10-year anniversary of the Autism Act approaches, we need a national autism strategy to help children and young people, to ensure that the current laws are upheld and to make sure that all autistic children receive the help to which they are legally entitled. Without that, we will continue to hear these desperate stories of parents and their children who are not getting the support that they need.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that there is also a need for speech therapists, child psychologists, occupational therapists and other health professionals to support the special needs of those children in being diagnosed with autism in the first place?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. This is absolutely about not just teachers, but the whole support staff. Our report calls on the Government to introduce a national autism strategy by the end of 2019, which should include training for school staff, the provision of a specialist curriculum for all pupils who need one and measures to reduce bullying and promote inclusion in schools. We also ask for an understanding of autism to be embedded in the education system, and we want ongoing training for teachers, including headteachers.

We are asking local authorities to collect data on children in their areas, because commissioners cannot plan a service if they do not know how many children are in need of it and on what part of the autistic spectrum those children sit. The needs of a high-functioning autistic child are very different from those of a child at the other end of the spectrum, so local authorities need to be collecting data so that they can adequately commission services.

We ask that Ofsted is required to monitor the implementation of the 2014 Act. One of the most striking pieces of evidence we heard in our inquiry was the admission of Ofsted inspectors that they do not always assess how children with autism are supported in schools when they carry out their inspections. If that is not being enforced, it is no wonder that schools are not getting the resources they need to support these children.

We also ask that local authority staff—this point was made in an intervention—as well as teachers receive training about the requirements of the 2014 Act. This is about more than teachers, who know that they need training, because a range of individuals involved in supporting children could also do with such training.

The Secretary of State came to our launch in Parliament last week. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle has met him since, and I know that my right hon. Friend is supportive of our report’s findings. He has asked us to list the aspects of our report that we could introduce into policy, so we will certainly follow up on that. As a society, we are failing autistic children and their families, and that has a key implication for a huge number of people in our society.

During our inquiry on autism and education in England, we heard that too many families face an uphill struggle to obtain the help and support to which their children are entitled. Children with autism only have one childhood, so there is only one chance of getting it right. The impact of getting it wrong can be far reaching for the rest of their lives. We therefore urge the Government to look carefully at our report, and to develop a national autism and education strategy before the end of 2019 that will support local authorities to become more effective commissioners for children on the autism spectrum and ensure that schools are equipped to ensure that autistic pupils are supported in the way the existing law says they should be. In the words of a suffragette, Emily Wilding Davison, this is about “deeds not words”.

7.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on securing this debate and I congratulate her and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on the excellent work they have done in this report. The debate is timely, following the recent all-party group inquiry on autism and education, where she co-chaired the work. I welcome the report and its recommendations. As we have heard, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State attended its launch last week, and I am grateful for this opportunity to set out the Government’s position.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes is right to highlight the fact that a diagnosis of autism can take a long time. I recognise how frustrating that can be for families and cannot stress enough that people do not need to wait for a formal diagnosis to secure support for their child—that is the message I want to send out from the Dispatch Box. The majority of children and young people with special educational needs or a disability will have their needs met within local mainstream early years settings, schools or colleges. As soon as it becomes apparent that a child may require extra help, the child’s school should begin to provide support in line with the SEND—special educational needs and disability—code of practice.

The code of practice is clear that, if a local authority considers that it may be necessary for special educational provision to be made for a pupil through an EHC—education, health and care—plan, it must conduct an EHC needs assessment. An assessment can be requested by the school, by the child or young person’s parents, or by the young person themselves, if they are over school leaving age.
Melanie Onn: Can the Minister tell us how long it takes between a school identifying that a child has an issue and that child receiving the intervention and support that they require? In too many areas throughout the country, it is taking far too long.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady raises an important point. It is taking far too long. I have been in the job only three weeks, but I have already heard that message from many parents who have made exactly that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes talked about the importance of training school staff effectively to support those with autism. With more than 108,000 children and young people in schools having been identified as having autism, I agree that it is vital that they are well supported in their education, so that they have the best possible chance of achieving their aspirations, living independently and finding sustainable employment. Having teachers who are confident and competent to support them is fundamental for children to thrive in school.

Autism presents particular challenges for teachers. It is not always easy to understand how the world appears for a child with autism and what might be driving particular behaviours, especially if someone has not come across autism before. For the child, that lack of understanding can lead to frustration, a failure to enjoy and engage with learning, and challenging behaviour, which can in some cases end in temporary or even permanent exclusion. That is why we are keen to ensure that education staff are well placed to support children and young people with autism.

Our approach to initial teacher training ensures that newly qualified teachers are equipped to support children with special educational needs, including those with autism. To be awarded qualified teacher status, trainees must satisfy the teachers’ standards, which include a requirement that they have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with SEN, and are able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them. We have also launched a consultation to explore how we can support teachers at the early stages of their careers by strengthening the qualified teacher status.

I am pleased to say that we are currently in discussions to extend the Autism Education Trust contract to deliver autism training to existing education staff in early years settings, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes mentioned, as well as in schools and colleges. The Department has funded that training since 2012 and it has so far reached more than 150,000 people—not only teachers and teaching assistants but support staff such as receptionists, dining-hall staff and care takers, thereby encouraging a whole-school approach to supporting pupils with autism.

It is important that teaching staff can access resources to help them to support children on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. We recently published a new resource, developed by ASK Research and Coventry University, which sets out evidence on effective approaches to supporting children and young people with special educational needs, including those with autism. We have also funded a school improvement programme to further support the embedding of good SEND practice in schools, including by working with local areas where the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission local-area inspection reports include significant concerns about school provision.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box and am heartened to hear his positive response to my colleagues’ report. Does he agree that it is important that Ofsted understands autism and the requirements of children with autism? They cannot fully report on and inspect educational establishments unless they themselves are trained, so will he ensure that all Ofsted inspectors receive training on autism?

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend raises an important point and I shall try to address some of what she has said in the rest of my speech. It is important to think about who inspects the inspectors. Who is satisfied that they know and can identify autism?

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes also raised the need to reduce bullying. It is an issue that affects far too many autistic children and young people. The Government have always been clear that bullying of any kind is absolutely unacceptable and should never be tolerated. It is important for schools to respond promptly to support the bullied child and ensure that the bullying does not happen again. Last year, we published revised guidance for schools on how to prevent and tackle bullying in all its forms and to help them to create a safe and disciplined environment where pupils are able to learn and fulfil their potential.

The report also highlights the disproportionate exclusion from school of autistic children. It is really important that schools have an inclusive ethos, and they have a duty under the SEND code of practice to ensure that pupils with SEN are able to engage in the school’s activities alongside pupils who do not have SEN. I know that exclusion, especially illegal “informal” exclusion, is a particular concern for the parents of autistic children.

Under the contract with the Autism Education Trust, we are continuing to fund the excellent work of the National Autistic Society in providing advice and information on exclusions to parents and education professionals. Feedback shows that parents, in particular, value this service, helping them to understand their rights in situations where their child is at risk of exclusion, or has already been excluded.

None the less, we want to understand more about exclusions and their impact. That is why, in October 2017, the Prime Minister announced the launch of a review of exclusions practice and the implications for pupil groups that are disproportionally represented in the national statistics. The review will look at how schools use exclusion and how this impacts on all pupils, but in particular it will look at why the practice of exclusions is so varied and why some groups of children, including those with SEND such as autism, are more likely to be excluded than others. It will also be an opportunity to share best practice.

The 2014 SEND reforms were the biggest change to the system in a generation and placed a firm focus on involving young people and their families directly in planning their own support—

Melanie Onn: The Minister is being very generous this evening; I do thank him. I just want to take him back to the Prime Minister’s review. When will that piece of work be published and when will we be able to look at the results of that review?
Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. In my speech, I will go on to address some of the issues—not just the Prime Minister’s review, but the Lenehan review and the Bercow work as well. We are looking very seriously at this matter, and the impetus from the Prime Minister and No.10 is only helping us to focus even more resources on making sure that we get this review right.1

As I said, the 2014 SEND reforms were the biggest change to the system in a generation and placed a firm focus on involving young people and their families directly in planning their own support, which is particularly relevant for children and young people on the autistic spectrum, where one size definitely does not fit all.

The Children and Families Act 2014 and the 0-25 SEND code of practice 2015 are built on best practice developed over many years. They are improving the support available to children and young people with SEND by joining up services for 0 to 25-year-olds across education, health and social care and by focusing on positive outcomes in terms of education, employment, housing, health and community participation. This increased focus on the transition to adulthood, employment and independent living is especially important for those with autism who often need additional support to manage transitions and enable them to achieve their aspirations.

I was pleased to see that the report on autism and education of the all-party group on autism found that the principles behind these reforms remain the right ones, and I agree that the challenge is now ensuring effective implementation of the legislation. The transition to education, health and care plans is being phased in over three and a half years and will be complete in March 2018, by which time all statements of SEN should be converted. I understand the pressures on local authorities and recognise that this is a challenging task. I am grateful for the hard work and commitment of all those involved. It is important that all local authorities meet this deadline and achieve it in a way that ensures that good-quality assessments are undertaken and that high-quality plans are in place. We know that there is more to do to ensure that the spirit of the reforms is fully realised, as they require a big change in culture, but we are seeing examples of good practice and are receiving positive feedback from parents of children with SEND. In 2016, the Department carried out a survey of more than 13,000 parents and young people who received an education, health and care plan in 2015; 62% agreed that the help and support described in their plan will achieve outcomes agreed for the child or young person, and 66% were satisfied with the process overall.

The report rightly highlights the importance of a clear accountability framework for these landmark reforms. I agree that it is important that the SEND reforms are implemented as intended. It may be helpful to the House if I set out some ways in which we are supporting this.

We have introduced a new series of joint inspections by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission to see how well all local areas are fulfilling their responsibilities for children and young people with SEND, including those with autism. These new inspections are a key part of our accountability framework for the reforms and are driving change on the ground, particularly by improving joint leadership across education and health.

The Government have provided over £300 million to support local areas to implement the changes made to the SEND system. This includes £15,000 of grants for parent-carer forums in each local authority area and funding for 1,200 independent supporters to help families to navigate the education, health and care needs and planning process and to help local areas to improve practice in engaging children and young people. I recently confirmed the individual allocations to local authorities for further implementation funding for 2018-19, recognising the work that is still to be done to ensure a successful transition to the new system.

The Department has funded a SEND leadership programme and recently completed legal training to all councils and their health partners to ensure they are clear on their statutory responsibilities and to support better collaborative working. We have committed £23 million of additional funding to support strategic planning of high-needs provision. This will support local authorities in predicting local needs for education, health and care services for children and young people with SEN or disabilities, through the use of prevalence data and other sources of information. We are also working with NHS England to improve joint working at a local and national level through peer review, monitoring and challenge. For example, the 2017-18 NHS provider contract includes a requirement to report on meeting the six-week deadline for health input into education, health and care plans.

It is important that future support for all children and young people with autism and SEND more generally is targeted where it will be most effective. The recommendations of the report by the all-party parliamentary group on autism, alongside those of other recent reports—such as the Lenehan review of residential schools and colleges and the upcoming Bercow review, “Bercow: Ten Years On”, which is expected later this year—will inform our current consideration of our strategy for achieving this in 2018-19 and beyond.

Question put and agreed to.

7.32 pm

House adjourned.

Leaving the EU: Cross-border Trade

1. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Irish Government on cross-border trade after the UK leaves the EU. [903756]

2. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Irish Government on cross-border trade after the UK leaves the EU. [903757]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I have regular conversations with the Irish Government on a range of issues. We both recognise the importance of the trade that takes place across the island of Ireland, which is worth some £4 billion to the Northern Ireland economy. Equally, though, we must not forget the importance of the GB markets to Northern Ireland, where sales are worth some £14.6 billion. We are committed to protecting both these vital markets.

Stephen Gethins: Scottish Government analysis has shown that a no-deal scenario could cost Scotland up to 8.5% of its GDP. Government analysis suggests that Northern Ireland could be cost up to 12% of its GDP. Does she believe any analysis she has seen, and is this too high a price to pay to keep a Tory civil war from breaking out?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He will know that I have been working extraordinarily hard over the last few weeks on talks, and I will address those matters when I answer Questions 4, 5 and others. The important point is that for Northern Ireland’s voice to be heard in the way the Scottish and Welsh voices are heard, we need a devolved Government in Stormont. That is what we are working towards.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and the fact that she is in discussions with the Irish Government. In her discussions, has she reflected with the Irish Government on what would happen to cross-border trade if one part of these islands that was in the common travel area joined Schengen, as the Scottish National party keeps arguing for? That would see a border not just in the Irish sea but across this island.

Karen Bradley: We are clear that the economic and constitutional unity of the United Kingdom is fundamental to all we are doing, and we are determined to ensure that the UK single market—the most important single market to Scotland and to Northern Ireland—is retained.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that the United Kingdom is Ireland’s largest trading partner and that 30% of all employment in Ireland is in sectors that are heavily related to UK exports, will the Secretary of State outline what discussions have taken place to ensure that this mutually beneficial partnership continues unhindered by the petty point scoring, statement making, headline grabbing whims of EU leadership?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman puts his point more eloquently than I could ever dream of.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Given that the Irish Republic would lose out most if there was not a good deal with the European Union, is the Secretary of State making it clear to all the Irish Ministers she is meeting that they have a role to play with the European Union and that they should be standing up for their country’s attitudes and making sure we get a good deal, which is to their benefit?

Karen Bradley: The reality is that a good deal is a win-win for everybody—not just Ireland but all the EU27 member states. Not having that is a lose-lose; nobody benefits from not having a good deal.
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Prime Minister has been clear that there will be no continuing customs union between the UK and the EU. Does the Secretary of State agree that that means a divergence of regulations between Ireland and Northern Ireland and that paragraph 49 of December’s agreement must be activated? In that case, will she tell us what specific solutions to address the unique circumstances of the island of Ireland she is proposing?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes the point that there are unique circumstances in Northern Ireland—unique anywhere across the whole of Europe—and those unique circumstances have to be reflected. The UK Government’s intention is to resolve the matter of north-south trade—and east-west trade—through the overall UK-EU agreement, but we are absolutely determined to make sure that we respect the integrity of the north-south border and that we respect the agreements that were made in Belfast nearly 20 years ago.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I welcome the glistening new team to the Front Bench? I am sure the whole House agrees with me in saying how pleased we are—we are absolutely delighted—that the Secretary of State’s predecessor is recovering so well from his surgery. May I particularly welcome the Parliamentary Under-Secretary? He is the eighth Minister that I have had the privilege of shadowing; I do not know whether that is the kind of job that he will do well, but I plead not guilty.

Now that the new team have had a chance to find their way around, particularly on the border, and they have studied the issue of the electronic border, do they believe that such a frontier is feasible or is it just a fantasy?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words. I too pay tribute to my predecessor, who I am pleased to say is recovering well at home. I know the whole House wishes him well, wishes him a speedy recovery and looks forward to welcoming him back to this Chamber.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the matter of the border. We are determined that there will be no new physical infrastructure at the border, and we will maintain things such as the common travel area, which has been in existence since well before the EU.

Apprenticeships

3. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps are being taken to increase the number of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Sháilesh Vara): I too thank the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) for his kind words of welcome. He and I have worked together on a number of issues, but this is the first time we have met across the Dispatch Boxes, and I look forward to constructive engagement with him and his team.

On my hon. Friend’s question, this Government are committed to reaching our pledge of 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. Through our industrial strategy, we are committed to helping young people across the country to develop the skills they need for the future. My hon. Friend will appreciate, however, that delivering apprenticeships in Northern Ireland is a devolved matter. As such, that is another reason why we need to see a restored Executive up and running.

Maria Caulfield: Employers in Northern Ireland recently told members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that while there is no Northern Ireland Executive in place they are having to pay the apprenticeship levy but have no access to the funds to take on apprentices, because without an Executive the block grant is not being distributed. The apprenticeship levy in Northern Ireland is turning into a stealth tax for businesses. Does the Minister agree that this is another reason why we urgently need a Northern Ireland Executive in place?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and gives an excellent example of why it is so important that we have a devolved Assembly up and running again. Important decisions, such as the one she mentioned, need to be taken, and that is why we need the Assembly up and running as soon as possible.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is worrying that we hear of the loss of apprenticeships, and yesterday we had an announcement that Williams Industrial Services in my constituency has actually gone into administration. What help will the Minister give us to ensure that we retain manufacturing and the apprenticeships there?

Mr Vara: May I say at the outset that I am very sorry to hear about the position of the company in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency? I very much hope that the employers will follow all the legal processes by way of consultation and everything else that needs doing as far as the employees are concerned.

On the promotion of more jobs, it is clearly important that the devolved Assembly is up and running because it has a critical role to play. In the absence of such a devolved Assembly, however, I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are doing all we can. Indeed, only recently we met Invest NI with a view to seeing what is happening in Northern Ireland and what we can do to help.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): One of the best apprenticeships programmes is run by Bombardier. Does the Minister agree it is fantastic news for those apprentices that the complaint against Bombardier has been soundly rejected?

Mr Vara: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. It is very welcome news that the United States International Trade Commission unanimously agreed with Bombardier, and we very much look forward to working with Bombardier, which plays such a critical role in the UK economy, particularly in Northern Ireland.

Devolved Government

4. Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): What progress has been made in talks on the restoration of devolved government.

Karen Bradley: I too thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. It is very welcome news that the United States International Trade Commission unanimously agreed with Bombardier, and we very much look forward to working with Bombardier, which plays such a critical role in the UK economy, particularly in Northern Ireland.
Karen Bradley: I firmly agree that, after almost 12 months without devolved government, we absolutely need to have the Stormont institutions back up and running. The people of Northern Ireland voted for their politicians, and it is incumbent on those politicians to deliver. However, we respect the fact that this is a cross-party and cross-community resolution, as set out in the Belfast agreement. As I have said, I am determined to do everything possible to give this the best chance to succeed and to get devolved government back up and running, and I will do nothing to jeopardise that.

Bob Blackman: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment to ensuring that devolved government is restored as soon as possible. Does she agree that one of the stumbling blocks is that certain parties—namely, Sinn Féin—keep coming forward with new demands that were not part of the original aim of forming the Executive?

Karen Bradley: I apologise. I would very much like to give Members much more explicit and detailed answers, but that would simply not be appropriate at this stage. However, as before, I commit to returning to the House as and when I have something concrete to say on the matter.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her new post—and the Under-Secretary of State—and wish her well in her continued efforts to facilitate talks in Northern Ireland. She knows that we are not the stumbling block to the restoration of the Executive. In the meantime, will she give a clear commitment to the people of Northern Ireland, and to this House, that the budget for Northern Ireland will be set as soon as possible, given that the head of the civil service has said “we cannot go much beyond the beginning of February without clarity about how much departments and various public bodies are going to have to spend next year” because the lack of a budget is affecting services, including health and social care? The current position is intolerable. We need a budget and we need it now.

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments—he and I have discussed this issue. He will know that my predecessor took action on the matter, and obviously I have had discussions with the civil service in Northern Ireland. I have met some very dedicated public servants who are doing their best to deliver, but in the absence of devolved government that is becoming increasingly difficult. That is why we need devolved government, and we need it quickly. I understand the point he makes. My predecessor took action on the matter and I am sure that he will be assured by that.

Nigel Dodds: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, in so far as that goes, and I look forward to her bringing forward proposals, without prejudice to the ongoing negotiations, so that we do not have a situation in which Departments, people and services are suffering. Does she agree that the recent statement by Alex Maskey of Sinn Féin about Northern Ireland being a “putrid little statelet”, justifying IRA murder in order to bring about rights, shows the sheer disgrace, irony and hypocrisy of Sinn Féin preaching rights and equality by justifying murder and disrespecting the state of Northern Ireland?
Does she agree that that sort of attitude must stop? If respect is to mean anything, it has to mean Sinn Fein showing respect towards Unionists and those who believe in the Union.

Karen Bradley: I think this shows that it is incumbent on everyone in public life to think very carefully about the words they use in public and the way they may be interpreted.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I too welcome the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary. I look forward to working with them and of course wish the Secretary of State’s predecessor a speedy recovery.

We understand that the Secretary of State will not want to give a running commentary on the talks, but there is enormous frustration in Northern Ireland after a year in limbo, with successive Secretaries of State telling us exactly the same thing. Can she at least confirm that one of the big sticking points in the talks is rights—not just language rights, but marriage equality rights? Can she tell us whether she will consider taking that issue off the table by legislating for equal marriage rights in Northern Ireland, which are enjoyed in Staffordshire?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As I said, I do not wish to say anything at this stage—I know it is frustrating for all that I cannot say more, and I am frustrated too—but I will come to this House and make a full statement as and when I am able to. Equal marriage is clearly a devolved issue and quite rightly should be legislated for in Stormont. That is the right place for this legislation to be enacted, and I look forward to a devolved Government being in place that can do that. He will recall that when the matter was debated in this Chamber for our constituents in England and Wales, these Benches were entitled to a free vote and Members of Parliament voted in line with their conscience.

Owen Smith: And the right hon. Lady will know that Northern Ireland did have a vote in the Assembly on this issue in November last year. It voted in favour of taking forward marriage equality for Northern Ireland, so she could show leadership on this issue and respect devolution, and potentially bring forward the prospect of devolution being resolved. Will she answer a very simple question that I think many people in Northern Ireland will want me to ask: what is she going to do differently in the weeks and months ahead to show leadership and break the deadlock?

Karen Bradley: The talks have resumed. They are detailed and intense. The parties are engaged and working late into the night most nights to reach a resolution. I think that the politicians in Northern Ireland understand the frustration of the people of Northern Ireland and want to deliver for them, but there are differences that need to be overcome. I am doing everything I can to try to get a resolution so that accommodation can be found and devolved government can be restored.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I would like the Secretary of State just to take a few moments to explain to the House and the people in Northern Ireland the level of engagement with the smaller parties in Northern Ireland—the Alliance party, the Social Democratic and Labour party, and the Ulster Unionist party—in the recently resumed talks. I have had it reported to me that they had a cup of tea and a bit of a chat, and said, “Thank you and goodbye, see you on Thursday.” I cannot believe that that was the level of engagement, so would the Secretary of State give some reassurance about the level of engagement with smaller parties, please?

Karen Bradley: All parties have been included within the talks process since 24 January. I have met all the main party leaders on a number of occasions, including at the roundtable on Monday, and we are due to hold another one later this week. The hon. Lady will understand that unless the two big parties—the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Fein—can reach an agreement, we are not able to achieve devolved government, so it is right that there is detailed, bilateral discussion between those two parties. Yesterday, for instance, I spoke to or met all the party leaders.

Frictionless Border

6. Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What discussions has she had with the Irish Government on maintaining a frictionless border on the island of Ireland.

Karen Bradley: All parties have been included within the talks process since 24 January. I have met all the main party leaders on a number of occasions, including at the roundtable on Monday, and we are due to hold another one later this week. The hon. Lady will understand that unless the two big parties—the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Fein—can reach an agreement, we are not able to achieve devolved government, so it is right that there is detailed, bilateral discussion between those two parties. Yesterday, for instance, I spoke to or met all the party leaders.

Tony Lloyd: If the Government are committed to regulatory alignment on both sides of the Irish border, has it made it easier that the Prime Minister has declared that there will be no membership of the customs union or single market?

Karen Bradley: All parties have been included within the talks process since 24 January. I have met all the main party leaders on a number of occasions, including at the roundtable on Monday, and we are due to hold another one later this week. The hon. Lady will understand that unless the two big parties—the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Fein—can reach an agreement, we are not able to achieve devolved government, so it is right that there is detailed, bilateral discussion between those two parties. Yesterday, for instance, I spoke to or met all the party leaders.

Andrew Rosindell: Does the Minister agree that once the UK leaves the EU we will have a duty to protect the rights of Irish citizens under UK law, through the common travel area, which predates Britain’s membership of the EU?

Karen Bradley: All parties have been included within the talks process since 24 January. I have met all the main party leaders on a number of occasions, including at the roundtable on Monday, and we are due to hold another one later this week. The hon. Lady will understand that unless the two big parties—the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Fein—can reach an agreement, we are not able to achieve devolved government, so it is right that there is detailed, bilateral discussion between those two parties. Yesterday, for instance, I spoke to or met all the party leaders.

Frictionless Border

Karen Bradley: All parties have been included within the talks process since 24 January. I have met all the main party leaders on a number of occasions, including at the roundtable on Monday, and we are due to hold another one later this week. The hon. Lady will understand that unless the two big parties—the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Fein—can reach an agreement, we are not able to achieve devolved government, so it is right that there is detailed, bilateral discussion between those two parties. Yesterday, for instance, I spoke to or met all the party leaders.

Andrew Rosindell: Does the Minister agree that once the UK leaves the EU we will have a duty to protect the rights of Irish citizens under UK law, through the common travel area, which predates Britain’s membership of the EU?
Mr Vara: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and is right that the reciprocal rights under the common travel area between the UK and Ireland predate either country’s membership of the EU. I can assure him that the joint report from last December contains a commitment to maintaining the common travel area arrangement.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): A recently published European Parliament report has indicated that it will be possible to have a frictionless border after we leave the EU, but is the Minister not concerned about the friction in relations between the UK Government and the Irish Republic? Will he comment on the threat issued by the Irish Foreign Minister yesterday that he will block negotiations unless legislation is introduced to force the Northern Ireland Assembly to introduce EU regulations?

Mr Vara: All the parties involved recognise that this is a difficult negotiation, but we are all committed to being flexible and coming up with innovative solutions. Our relationship with Ireland goes back centuries: trade, geography, history and so on. We have an excellent working relationship with Ireland. We hope to continue that relationship to secure the best solution possible to the issue of the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that whatever arrangements are needed to achieve a frictionless border between north and southern Ireland will apply to the whole UK?

Mr Vara: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are committed to the constitutional and economic integrity of the UK. That will stay as it is currently.

Leaving the EU: Transitional Arrangements

7. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on negotiating a transitional arrangement with the EU that benefits Northern Ireland after the UK leaves the EU. [903763]

14. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on negotiating a transitional arrangement with the EU that benefits Northern Ireland after the UK leaves the EU. [903770]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shaiilesh Vara): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State forNorthern Ireland has regular conversations with Cabinet colleagues on a range of EU exit issues, including on an implementation period. We recognise the importance of negotiating an implementation period that benefits the whole UK, including Northern Ireland. [Interruption.] We welcome the EU’s agreement to negotiate an implementation period. The precise terms should be agreed as quickly as possible to provide vital certainty to businesses and citizens. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is most unfortunate that neither the Minister’s mellifluous tones nor the content of his answer could properly be heard because of the number of private conversations. I think he deserves a more attentive audience.

Chris Law: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I grasped the word “negotiation” in there. Has the Secretary of State agreed a concession in those negotiations with the Brexit Secretary that will allow Northern Ireland to remain part of the single market and customs union, while the UK leaves, to avoid a hard border—yes or no?

Mr Vara: I say again that the United Kingdom is committed to leaving the single market and customs union and to the integrity of the constitution and our economy.

Tommy Sheppard: I think that we are all a little confused about how the Government intend to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. The Minister’s Cabinet colleagues are falling over themselves to secure the maximum possible separation from the EU and the least possible realignment. Has he ruled out the idea of separate arrangements for Northern Ireland governing trade and commerce, or not?

Mr Vara: Let me say again that the constitutional and economic integrity of the United Kingdom remains. We are in phase 2 of the negotiations, and these matters are currently being discussed. I am sure that all the parties—Ireland, the United Kingdom and the European Union—recognise the difficulty of the issue and will be as flexible and innovative as possible.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that it is about time the Government demonstrated a “no surrender” attitude to the EU bureaucrats who try to blackmail us and bully us over flights, passenger duty and everything else? Stand up to them, man! Stand up to the EU, and let us get on with leaving it. [Interruption.]

Mr Vara: Let me just say—I [Interruption]—that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will stand up to anyone and everyone when it comes to maintaining the best interests of the United Kingdom. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. Let us hear Thangam Debbonaire.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Good Friday agreement was one of the greatest legacies of the last Labour Government. Is the Minister content that messing up the border issue could make destroying the Good Friday agreement one of this Government’s legacies?

Mr Vara: I assure the hon. Lady that the joint report published in December this year by the European Commission and the United Kingdom makes it absolutely clear that the Belfast agreement remains intact, and all of it will remain intact.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903806] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 7 February.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I know that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Captain Dean Sprouting, who died in a road traffic
accident in Iraq on 31 January. His death was not the result of enemy activity. I know that Members in all parts of the House will want to join me in offering condolences to his family and friends at this difficult time.

One hundred years ago yesterday, women won the right to vote. [HON. MEMBERS: "Some women."] Indeed: some women. I am pleased to say that universal suffrage did come for women 10 years later, under a Conservative Government. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in marking the heroic and tireless struggle that led to women having the vote, because it forever changed our nation’s future.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Liz McInnes: My constituent Natasha Dudarenko suffers from Fanconi anaemia, a debilitating disease that carries a high risk of cancer. Natasha was receiving lifetime disability living allowance, which was removed following an assessment for the personal independent payment. When she appealed, she was told that because she had a degree, she did not need as much support. I am sure the Prime Minister is aware that diseases, including cancer, are no respecters of qualifications. What urgent action will she take to improve the quality and standard of PIP assessments?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the Department for Work and Pensions is constantly looking at the standard of the PIP assessments that are being made. I am sorry to hear of the case that the hon. Lady has described. I think that most people will be very concerned after hearing about it, and I am very surprised at the judgment that was made in relation to that individual. I suggest that the hon. Lady sends us the details of the case, and we will ensure that it is looked into.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of UKIP-led Thanet Council’s broken election promise to support the reopening of Manston as an airport. On the basis that the Manston site was to be redesignated as “mixed use”, with thousands of houses, local councillors sensibly rejected the plan, and I salute them for doing so. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that Thanet will now be given as much time as is reasonably necessary—perhaps under a new administration—to get our local plan right?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter on behalf of his constituents. I understand that Thanet District Council has not adopted a local plan since 2006, which is why my right hon. Friend the Housing Secretary has written to the district council to begin the formal process of considering intervention. This is a very serious step that shows that the council has not been doing what it should be doing in relation to a local plan. So my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering whether to intervene, and he will make an announcement in due course.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Captain Dean Sprouting from Jarrow on his death and in offering our condolences to his family on the terrible incident that happened.

It is of course the anniversary of women first getting the right to vote in 1918, and I pay tribute to all those who campaigned all over the country to achieve that right. We should understand that our rights come from the activities of ordinary people doing extraordinary things to bring about democracy and justice within our society, and those women who suffered grievously, being force fed in Holloway prison in my constituency, and those who suffered so much need to be remembered for all time. Working-class women as well as many other women fought for that right, and it is one we should all be proud of.

With crime rising, does the Prime Minister regret cutting 21,000 police officers?

The Prime Minister: May I first say to the right hon. Gentleman that we should be saluting all those who were involved in that struggle to ensure that women could get the right to vote? I was very pleased yesterday to have the opportunity to meet Helen Pankhurst, the great-granddaughter of Emmeline Pankhurst, and to see that that memory is being kept going. As I said yesterday in my speech, I heard about the suffragettes’ fight from my late godmother, whose mother was a suffragette and both of whose parents knew the Pankhurste.

The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of police numbers and crime. What we actually have seen from the crime survey is that crime is now down at record low levels. That is what has been achieved, and it has been achieved by a Conservative Government who at the same time have been protecting police budgets.

Jeremy Corbyn: Recorded crime is up by one fifth since 2010 and violent crime is up by 20%, and during the period when the Prime Minister was Home Secretary £2.3 billion was cut from police budgets. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary warns that neighbourhood policing risks being eroded and the shortage of detectives is a “national crisis”. Does the Prime Minister think the inspectorate is scaremongering?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of police numbers and crime. What we actually have seen from the crime survey is that crime is now down at record low levels. That is what has been achieved, and it has been achieved by a Conservative Government who at the same time have been protecting police budgets. The right hon. Gentleman mentions the issue about recorded crime, and one of the challenges we have seen in the police in recent years is ensuring we get proper recording particularly of certain types of crime. I am pleased to say that we have seen improvements over the past seven to eight years in the recording by the police of certain types of crime.

The right hon. Gentleman also talks about the issue of police budgets. As I have said, this is a Government who are protecting police budgets, and I might remind him that the Labour party’s former shadow Home Secretary, now the police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester, himself said that the police could take an up to 10% cut in their budgets.

Jeremy Corbyn: The inspectorate also found that the police are failing to properly record tens of thousands of offences, and in addition to cutting 21,000 police officers, the Government have cut 6,700 police-community support officers. The chief constable of Bedfordshire says:

“We do not have the resources to keep residents safe... The position is a scandal.”

Too many people do not feel safe, and too many people are not safe. We have just seen the highest rise in recorded crime for a quarter of a century. The chief
constable of Lancashire said the Government’s police cuts had made it much more difficult to keep people safe. Is he wrong?

**The Prime Minister:** On the issue of recording crime, the right hon. Gentleman mentions HMIC, and when I was Home Secretary, I asked HMIC to look at the recording of crime to ensure that police forces were doing it properly. Indeed, some changes were made as a result, so we now see better recording of crime. We also see £450 million extra being made available to the police. Over the past few years, we have also seen the creation of the National Crime Agency, and our police forces are taking more notice of helping to support vulnerable victims and doing more on modern slavery and domestic violence—taking seriously issues that were not taken seriously before.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** If you ask the inspectorate to look at unrecorded crime and it tells you what is going on, the least you could do is act on what it tells you. I want to quote something that may sound familiar to the Prime Minister:

“...the first duty of the Government is to protect the public and keep them safe, and I have to say to the Government that they are not putting enough focus on police resources.”—[Official Report, 18 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 5.]

If she casts her eyes to the far Conservative Back Benches, she will see the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and that is what he said about her Government and what they are doing. Gun crime has increased by 20% in the past year, and the chief constable of Merseyside recently said:

“So have I got sufficient resources to fight gun crime? No, I haven’t.”

Does the Prime Minister think he is crying wolf?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman cannot get away from the fact that the Government are protecting police budgets. In fact, we are not just protecting police budgets, but increasing them with an extra £450 million. We are also ensuring that our police have the powers they need to do the job that we want them to do. Indeed, some changes were made as a result, so we now see better recording of crime. We also see £450 million extra being made available to the police.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Since 2015, direct Government funding to the police has fallen by £413 million, and Chief Constable Dave Thompson of West Midlands police said:

“The current flat cash settlement for policing means force budgets will fall in real terms.”

In addition to police cuts, other public service cuts are clearly contributing to the rise in crime: 3,600 youth workers have lost their jobs; 600 youth centres have been closed and boarded up; the probation service has been cut and privatised; and reoffenders are committing more offences. When it comes to tackling crime, prevention and cure are two sides of the same coin, so why are the Government cutting both of them?

**The Prime Minister:** We have put in place various pieces of work on anti-knife crime, on serious violence and on issues such as domestic violence. But I come back to the point I made in my last response: the right hon. Gentleman voted against changing the law so that anyone caught carrying a knife for a second time would face a custodial sentence. He has called for much shorter sentences for those who break the law. He might want to reflect on the fact that knife crime fell when there was a Conservative Mayor in London, but knife crime is going up now that there is a Labour Mayor in London.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I am very clear that crime is of course wrong. The way to deal with it is by having an effective probation service, by community service orders and by the rehabilitation of offenders. What the Prime Minister said goes to the heart of her record: she was Home Secretary for six years, but crime is up, violent crime is rising, police numbers are down and chief constables are saying they no longer have the resources to keep communities safe. After seven years of cuts, will the Prime Minister today admit that her Government’s relentless cuts to the police, probation and social services have left us all less safe? The reality is that we cannot have public safety on the cheap.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman really needs to reflect on what Labour would be doing if it was in government. You can only pay for our public services if you have a strong economy. What would we see with the Labour party? We do not need to ask ourselves what we would see, because the shadow Chancellor’s adviser told us at the weekend:

“We need to think about the obvious problems which might face a radical Labour government, such as capital flight or a run on the pound”. That is what Labour would do: bankrupt Britain. The police would have less money under Labour than under the Conservatives.

**Q3.** [903808] **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): While I have been travelling around the country to meet people from diverse communities, members of the Jewish and the Muslim communities have raised the point that the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 should specifically take into account people’s faith considerations, because in their faiths, loved ones must be buried within 24 hours. Will the Prime Minister, join me, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and the Weald (Mrs Grant) and faith communities in looking at this very important matter?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point on behalf of communities across the country, which he does from the unique position of his own experience and understanding of these issues. It is important that we take account of specific requirements of someone’s faith, especially when they have lost a loved one and are grieving. Although, as he will be aware, coroners are independent judicial office holders, I understand that the Ministry of Justice is speaking to the Chief Coroner about this point to see what more can be done. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Yesterday it was announced that 10 Royal Bank of Scotland branches in Scotland that had been earmarked for closure are to be reprieved. I am grateful for that news, which comes on the back of community pressure and the leadership that has been shown on this issue by the Scottish National party.
On three occasions, I have asked the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions to call Ross McEwan into No. 10 Downing Street. Will she accept her responsibilities, given that we own RBS? Now that we have saved 10 branches, will she call in Ross McEwan and join us in calling for all the branches to remain open?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before, it is of course important that customers, especially those who are vulnerable, can call on the services they need. Obviously I welcome the Royal Bank of Scotland’s decision, which is a commercial decision for the bank. If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen on ensuring that people, including perhaps those in remote communities, have access to the services that they need, he should ask himself why the Scottish Government have been such a failure in ensuring that people in remote communities have broadband access to online banking. The Scottish Government need to get their act together because, quite simply, Scotland under the Nats is getting left behind.

Ian Blackford: That was pathetic. The Prime Minister has not lifted a finger; we saved the banks.

Yesterday we celebrated the achievements of the suffragette movement, which was about democracy, equality and fairness for women. However, today in the United Kingdom, 3.8 million women are not receiving the pension to which they are entitled. A motion in this House last November, which received unanimous cross-party support—the vote was 288 to zero—called on the Government in London to do the right thing. Will the Prime Minister do her bit for gender equality and end the injustice faced by 1950s women?

The Prime Minister: As people are living longer, it is important that we equalise the pension age of men and women. We are doing that, and we are doing it faster. We have already acted to give more protection to the women involved. An extra £1 billion has been put in to ensure that nobody will see their pension entitlement changed by more than 18 months. That was a real response to the issue that was being addressed. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about equality, he has to recognise the importance of the equality of the state pension age between men and women.

Q5. [903810] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I never thought I would see the day when where I lead, the Leader of the Opposition follows—there is clearly hope for him yet.

Last year, the Government advertised for the post of disability commissioner. My noble Friend Lord Shinkwin applied for the position and was appointed to it, yet only a few weeks later he was told by the Equality and Human Rights Commission that the post had been abolished altogether. Was the Prime Minister consulted about that decision? Does she agree with the decision to abolish the disability commissioner? The EHRC is an independent body, and it was its decision to abolish the disability commissioner. The question is: what is being done to help disabled people and how can we ensure that we are helping them? That is why we are committed to tackling the injustices that they face. We are spending more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions—that is a record high. But, of course, we do want to ensure—I urge the commission to do this—that the EHRC pays proper attention to the needs and rights of disabled people, because that is an important part of its remit.

Q4. [903809] Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): My constituents’ son was killed by a learner driver who was taking a lesson. With one in four young drivers being involved in an accident within the first two years of starting to drive, and 400 deaths or serious injuries on our roads involving young drivers each year, will the Prime Minister meet me and my constituents to hear their story, and consider introducing a graduated licensing system for the UK, as other countries have done?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Lady raises an important issue. I will certainly look at her request and I will also ask the Department for Transport to do so. As she says, too many people suffer loss and tragedy at the hands of learner drivers in these circumstances, and we will certainly look at that.

Q7. [903813] Dr Andrew Marrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Royal Marines are the most adaptable of our elite infantry. They are central to our amphibious capability and provide much of our special forces. Does the Prime Minister agree that reducing them further at this stage would be inconsistent with this Government’s strong record on defence and security?

The Prime Minister: The Royal Marines do indeed play a vital role in defending our country and I pay tribute to them for all that they do. Protecting the UK is, of course, our priority. As my hon. Friend will know, we have in place a review—a modernising defence programme—that is about ensuring that our defence capabilities meet the rapidly changing and evolving threats that we face. That is the right thing for us to do. Of course, any comments and suggestions that have been made about cuts to defence are purely speculative, and I remind him and other hon. Members that in fact we are committed to increasing our spending on defence.

Mr Speaker: In offering him best wishes for his birthday on Sunday, I call Mr Dennis Skinner.

Q6. [903811] Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I didn’t know about that. I don’t celebrate things like that—I don’t think you should celebrate age.

Anyway, there is another group of people who need help, and they are the people who work in the national health service. What they told me last week was that the best period they ever experienced was under a Labour Government when they had the money increased from the other place, are a fine example of how disabled people can be standing up, speaking up and ensuring that they take their rightful place in public life.

On the issue of the disability commissioner, the EHRC is an independent body, and it was its decision to abolish the disability commissioner. The question is: what is being done to help disabled people and how can we ensure that we are helping them? That is why we are committed to tackling the injustices that they face. We are spending more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions—that is a record high. But, of course, we do want to ensure—I urge the commission to do this—that the EHRC pays proper attention to the needs and rights of disabled people, because that is an important part of its remit.
£33 billion in 1997 to £100 billion in 2010. That was a golden period. Why did that Government do it? How did they do it? The then Chancellor of the Exchequer put 1% on national insurance and, in hypothecation terms, that went directly to the health service. It is called long-term stability. Under this Government, people do not know whether they are coming or going. It is high time that this Government did the same as we did between 1997 and 2010—get wea ving!

The Prime Minister: And happy birthday, Dennis.

The hon. Gentleman asks why the Labour party was in a position of being able to spend more on public services. I will tell him why: because a Conservative Government had left a golden economic legacy.

Mr Speaker: I call Alberto Costa. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] Order. Mr Costa, I do not think you know how popular you are.

Q9. [903815] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Conservative-led Harborough District Council has recently refused IDI Gazaley’s proposed expansion of the enormous Magna Park logistics park in my constituency. Given the Prime Minister’s recent welcome remarks about sustainable developments, will she please arrange for me to meet the relevant Ministers to discuss the creation of a national planning framework for the future location of these enormous logistics parks?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and this matter is obviously of considerable interest to his constituents. Of course we need to get the right balance between enabling development to take place, and therefore growth, and continuing to protect and enhance our natural environment. The purpose of the planning system is to contribute towards achieving that sustainable development. On the specific issue of logistics parks, I am sure that a Housing, Communities and Local Government Minister—indeed, perhaps my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue.

Q8. [903814] Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that if a universal credit claimant forgets their username or password, they must attend a face-to-face interview at a jobcentre to have it reset? The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions cannot give a date for when that will be fixed, so will the Prime Minister commit to no further jobcentre closures until universal credit claimants can access basic online functions, as are available for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and for banking?

The Prime Minister: I will ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to look carefully at ensuring that a date is identified for when this change will be made.

Q10. [903816] Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): According to Library statistics, around 3,400 people in my constituency were diagnosed with cancer last year. Cancer survival rates have meant that 7,000 people are alive today who might not have been if the 2010 survival rates had stayed the same. Does my right hon. Friend see that as a testament to the NHS and the Government’s investment in it, and does she welcome that news while recognising that we need to do more?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is very good news that there are 7,000 more cancer sufferers alive today than there would have been had we simply continued with the way we were in 2010. I am very happy to join him in welcoming that news. Cancer survival rates have increased year on year, but of course we want them to increase even further. Last year, there were 7 million more diagnostic tests than in 2010, and 290,000 patients started treatment for cancer—that is 57,000 more than in 2010. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that although we should welcome the improvements that have been made and congratulate and thank the NHS staff for all they have been doing, there is more for us to do. That is why we are backing up our plans for cancer with a further £600 million to implement the cancer strategy for England.

Q11. [903817] Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): NHS figures show that, in the south-west, the growth in NHS funding is 2.2% less than the national average. It is also true that the situation is more challenging in the south-west because of an ageing demographic and issues due to sparsity. Does my right hon. Friend agree that providers in the south-west, including NHS Kernow, deserve their fair share of NHS funding? Will she take action to address this inequality?

The Prime Minister: The national formula, which is the basis for calculating the funding for clinical commissioning groups, takes into account a large number of factors, including rurality and demographics, which are the factors that my hon. Friend suggests need to be considered. NHS Kernow did see an increase in its funding this year and it will see a further increase next year, taking its funding to more than £760 million. That is part of our commitment to ensuring that we put extra funding into the NHS, but of course we continue to look at ensuring that the distribution of that funding takes account of all the factors that it needs to.
Prime Minister support my Bill to consign this heartless, Dickensian law to the history books across the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: We recognise that we need to take action in relation to rough sleeping, which is why we are putting more money into projects to reduce rough sleeping. That includes projects such as Housing First, which are being established in a number of places to ensure that we can provide for those who are rough sleeping. None of us wants to see anybody rough sleeping on our streets, which is why the Government are taking action.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Today is the anniversary of the signing of the Maastricht treaty, and we have come a very long way. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her approach to the customs union? May I also mention the fact that, in the Liaison Committee last December, I warned her about ultimatums from the EU, as I did again in my urgent question only last week? Will she be good enough to be very robust when discussing these matters in the Brexit Committee, as I am sure that she will be, so that we ensure that we repudiate any of these EU threats?

The Prime Minister: At the time when the Maastricht legislation was going through this House, I suspect that there would not have been many thinking that my hon. Friend would stand up to recognise the anniversary of the signing of the Maastricht treaty. I suspect that he feels able to do so only because we are coming out of the European Union. I assure him that we will be robust in our arguments. As I have said right from the very beginning, we will hear noises off and all sorts of things being said about positions, but what matters is the position that we take in the negotiations as we sit down in the middle of giving her answer—perhaps she has concluded it—and Members must not shout at the Prime Minister when she is doing so. The Prime Minister has concluded; I call Chris Philp.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Recent reports have suggested that the European Commission is asking that we enter into certain limited, legally-binding agreements in relation to bits of our exit in isolation. Will the Prime Minister confirm that it remains the Government’s policy that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and that we will therefore only enter into a legally-binding agreement in relation to the entire exit agreement, not just parts of it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. It was reflected in the joint report published in December that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. The negotiations that are now taking place are to put greater detail into the definition of the implementation period, and we expect to do that by the March European Council. Alongside side that, the negotiations will look at the legal basis of the withdrawal agreement. Of course, both the withdrawal agreement and the implementation Bill will have to come to this Parliament for agreement in due course. At that stage, I would expect to have the future relationship set out in a way that means people are able to look at the whole package when they come to make that decision.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister knows that one of the key objectives of American trade negotiators in any future deal after Brexit is to secure access for American companies to do business in the NHS. Will she give an absolute guarantee that the NHS will be excluded from the scope of those negotiations? Will she also confirm that she has made it absolutely clear to President Trump in her conversations with him that the NHS is not for sale?

The Prime Minister: We are starting the discussions with the American Administration, first of all looking at what we can already do to increase trade between the US and the United Kingdom—even before the possibility of any free trade agreement. The right hon. Gentleman does not know what the American Administration are going to say about their requirements for that free trade agreement. We will go into those negotiations to get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): A recent report by Open Doors highlights the top countries where Christians suffer horrific persecution. We need to take action and send a signal to other nations. These countries are often associated with luxury holidays. Will the Prime Minister consider earmarking a specific fixed percentage of international aid to go towards tackling religious persecution?

The Prime Minister: I know that this is an issue of concern to many Members of the House. I was pleased, a matter of weeks ago, to meet Father Daniel from Nineveh and Idlib, who talked about the very real persecution that his congregation were suffering and had suffered in the past. He presented me with a bible that was burnt; it had been rescued when a church had been set on fire. This is a real issue. All our aid is distributed on the basis of need in order to ensure that civilians are not discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion. We are working with Governments, the international community and the United Nations to support the rights of minorities and to ensure that our aid reaches those in need. We will,
of course, further explore what more support we can give to ensure that we address the persecution of religious minorities.

**Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab):** The Prime Minister will be aware that all free trade agreements involve some customs checks and, therefore, infrastructure at frontiers, which would be completely incompatible with maintaining an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. As the Cabinet Sub-Committee will apparently finally get around to discussing this today, will the Prime Minister explain to the House why she is so opposed to the UK remaining in a customs union with the EU? Not only would this be better for the British economy than a vague “deep and special partnership”—whatever that is—but it would help to ensure that that border remains as it is today, which is what we all want.

**The Prime Minister:** The United Kingdom is leaving the European Union. That means that we are leaving the single market and the customs union. If we were a full member of the customs union, we would not be able to do trade deals around the rest of the world. And we are going to have an independent trade policy and do those deals. The right hon. Gentleman asks about customs arrangements. Well, I suggest that he looks at the paper published by the Government last summer.

**Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** The brain injury charity, Headway, says that a family recently had to pay £1,500 over 15 weeks in hospital car parking charges. CLIC Sargent says that families who visit their children who are sick with cancer have to pay hundreds of pounds in parking charges. Despite Government guidelines, 50% of hospitals charge for disabled parking, and staff—from nurses to hospital porters—have to pay hospital car parking charges. Given the unanimous support for the motion in the House of Commons last week, will the Prime Minister address this social injustice and abolish hospital car parking charges once and for all?

**The Prime Minister:** I recognise that my hon. Friend has been campaigning on this issue for some time. As he says, we have set strong guidance for hospital trusts on the issue of car parking charges, and we do of course look to ensure that it is being met. Individual hospitals are taking their own decisions on this matter, but it is right that the Government have set very clear guidelines for those hospitals as to how they should approach this.

**Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** The Prime Minister has done much to tackle modern slavery. My constituent was trafficked here as a child, sold at least once on the long journey, and then forced to work in the dark in a cannabis factory for years. Now the Home Office is proposing to send him back to Vietnam. Will the Prime Minister intervene not just in this case but in this complex and confused area of the law?

**The Prime Minister:** I recognise that, as the hon. Lady says, there are cases that are complex in terms of the legal application. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has heard the case that the hon. Lady has set out and will, I am sure, look at that particular issue—both the individual case and the wider point that she is making. As we know, the best possible solution to this, which we all want to ensure, is for people like her constituent not to be trafficked into the UK in the first place to work in these cannabis factories.

**Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con):** Like many, I am delighted to note the good progress in lifting the ban on beef exports to China. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that we are able to export Scotch beef and other Scottish products such as whisky to other parts and all parts of the world?

**The Prime Minister:** I was very pleased that when I was in China last week we were able to work with the Chinese Government towards the opening up of the Chinese market, particularly to beef products and dairy products, which are two key issues for the United Kingdom. I am also pleased to say that the chief executive of the Scotch Whisky Association was on the business delegation with me, and was doing everything that she does, most ably, to promote the interests of Scotch whisky. Of course, the answer to my hon. Friend’s question is that we are making sure that we can have an independent trade policy, developing trade deals around the rest of the world, which means that good Scottish products, and indeed good products from the rest of the UK, can be sold around the world.

**Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab):** Centuries-old GKN, a world-class company and Britain’s third-biggest engineering company, is facing a hostile takeover by Melrose, leading to break-up, sell-off, closures and redundancies. That would make a mockery of industrial strategy. The Government have the power to intervene because of the defence work carried out by GKN. Will the Prime Minister act in the national interest and block this unwanted takeover?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course, the Business Department will be looking closely at, and has been following closely, the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I can assure him that I, and the Government as a whole, will always act in the UK national interest.

**Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con):** With one of the largest undeveloped brownfield sites in the country located in my constituency in Stanton, will my right hon. Friend explain to the House how the new housing infrastructure fund will help Erewash residents to buy a new home?

**The Prime Minister:** The housing infrastructure fund is a very important development. One of the major complaints that constituents—residents—often have when they see the possibility of development in their area is lack of infrastructure. The housing infrastructure fund enables that infrastructure to be put in place so that it can support developments in a way that helps to support local residents. I am very pleased by the Housing Secretary’s announcement of nearly £900 million last week. We are seeing real interest in the housing infrastructure fund. It is making a difference. It is enabling more homes to be built and more of my hon. Friend’s constituents to buy their own home.

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** My constituent is 58. She has COPD, four pins in her leg, and a walking frame, and is just out of hospital after having blood clots in her lung. She got a taxi to Bridgeton jobcentre yesterday only to find the doors locked because the Government closed it on Friday. Will the Prime Minister apologise for not having told my constituents in Bridgeton,
or any of the constituents, apparently, whose jobcentres are being closed; will she refund my constituent the £10 she spent on a taxi; and will she apologise for this absolutely ridiculous situation?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady that, yes, we are seeing some jobcentres being closed in Scotland. There is not going to be any decrease in the level of service that is offered to the people of Scotland. We are increasing the number of work coaches across the country. What we are doing is ensuring that we can continue to provide a good service to the people of Scotland.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Intimidation on social media is a growing issue for many people across the country, especially for women standing for election, as yesterday highlighted. Can my right hon. Friend update us on the progress that is being made and does she agree that we should take no lessons from a party whose shadow Chancellor has called for violence against women on this side of the House?

The Prime Minister: May I say to my hon. Friend that I think this issue is a particularly important one? I said yesterday, as indeed my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said at the weekend, that we are consulting on a new offence of intimidation of election candidates and campaigners. That follows the report from Lord Bew and his committee about the degree to which there was intimidation at the last general election, particularly intimidation of women, BME candidates and LGBT candidates. This is an absolute disgrace and it has no part in our public life. I would urge the shadow Chancellor, once again—he keeps refusing to do this—to apologise to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for saying that she should be lynched.
Taylor Review

12.47 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the Government’s response to the Taylor review.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): I am delighted to set out the Government’s response to the review of modern working, which was led by Matthew Taylor. He set out his ambition that the Government should place as much emphasis on creating quality jobs as they do on the number of jobs. Good work and developing better jobs for everyone in the British economy are at the centre of the industrial strategy vision.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly said that, as we leave the European Union, there will be no roll-back of employment protections, but today we are committing to go further and to seek to enhance rights and protections in the modern workplace for even more people. We will support employers who give individuals their correct employment rights, but we will prevent undercutting by unscrupulous employers who try to game the system, by clearly defining who is employed and who is not. We will extend the right to receive a payslip to all workers, including a statement of the hours that they work. We are requiring employers to clearly set out written terms from day one of the employment relationship, and to extend that to all workers. We are taking forward 52 of the 53 recommendations in the Taylor review, and all but one of the recommendations from the joint report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee.

For workers on zero-hours contracts, we are creating a right to request a stable contract. For the first time, the state will take responsibility for enforcing a wider set of employment rights, including sick pay and holiday pay, for the most vulnerable of workers. Employers who lose tribunal claims against staff and are found to have had no regard to the law will face fines of up to £20,000, quadrupled from the current £5,000. We will also ensure that employment tribunal awards are paid correctly.

The Government are very grateful to Matthew Taylor and his panel, as well as to the many individuals and organisations who contributed to the review. I would also like to thank the BEIS, Work and Pensions and Scottish Affairs Committees for their contribution to this work. Through our response, we are acting to ensure good work for all, to protect the rights of those on low pay and to ensure that more people get protection, security and certainty in the work they do.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The tragic case of Don Lane, a DPD gig worker, epitomises the precarious and unstable working life many people face and the failure of the Government to protect workers. They needed to do something bold today, but it appears that they are simply papering over the bleak realities with rhetoric. Launching four consultations, merely considering proposals, and tweaking the law here and there is not good enough. How would any of this have actually helped Don Lane? It simply would not—that is the fact of the matter.

So I ask the Minister: which rights will apply to which workers from day one? How will they be quantified for zero-hours workers? Why, despite public support, have the Government not protected agency workers by abolishing undercutting through the Swedish derogation? How does a right to request more stable hours differ from the current position? Without an obligation on the employer to accept such a request, it is meaningless.

Why have the Government not brought forward any meaningful proposals to protect gig workers? Defining working time misses the point. We needed clarity on workers being paid when they are logged into apps waiting to receive jobs, as well as clear and urgent direction on the legal status of gig workers. Why was there not even one mention of trade unions? On the genuinely self-employed, we see the creation of a website allowing the self-employed to talk to each other—well, bravio! Why is there no system of support and no recognition of the precariousness of their situation? This is simply window dressing.

What we needed today was radical new architecture of the law at work to protect workers, in which the genuinely self-employed are offered key protections and the involvement of workers through their trade unions is crucial. We saw none of that, and to miss those things out of any recommendations is to miss the ocean and look at the pebbles underneath.

Andrew Griffiths: I have to say that I share the hon. Lady’s desire to improve the rights and protections for the workers we represent in our constituencies. It is disappointing that in her long response she was unable to welcome any of the steps we are taking. As a result of the actions set out in our response to this review, millions of workers will have greater rights and access to more protection. Indeed, I argue that we can rightly claim to be leading the world in improving the quality of work for our constituents.

The hon. Lady seems to argue that it is wrong to be consulting on these issues. I hope the House will understand that in addressing the issues she raises—such as employment status in the gig economy, the rights of agency workers and better transparency in the workplace—we are modernising employment law to make it fit for the future world of work. We are seeking expert views on how to do that, which is absolutely right. Our intention is clear, and we are consulting the experts on how we deliver on that promise. Matthew Taylor himself has said that these issues are complex and we must take time to get them right, but the House should be clear that we are consulting on them in order to act. Rather than rolling back employment legislation, which we are sometimes accused of, we are improving the rights of workers and the enforcement of those rights.

The hon. Lady mentions the very regrettable case that has been in the newspapers over the past few days. I extend my sympathy to the family of the individual concerned. I cannot speak about individual cases, but I direct her to page 15 of our response. It clearly sets out what we are going to do to ensure we have the correct definition of workers’ status, so they can have access to the kind of things she is talking about—sick pay, days off and the ability to attend doctor appointments if necessary.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is competition for workers in a fully employed market not the best engine for driving forward improved conditions?
Andrew Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for reminding us that we have record numbers of people in work. Unemployment is at its lowest rate for 40 years. It is true to say that the labour market is tightening, but I see that as an opportunity. Businesses are realising that if they want to retain their best workers they need to offer the best possible arrangements for those workers. We are also clear that whatever the situation, we want to act to protect the most vulnerable workers in our society. That is what we are doing in the Matthew Taylor report: we are giving them the protection they need.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Government’s response does not address the issue of bogus self-employment, which affects 1.8 million workers. The right to request is different from an actual right enshrined in law. Has the Minister looked at the contents of the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, in my name, which addresses many of these issues? Will the Government look at simplifying the definition of a worker to one definition, to eradicate bogus self-employment? Will they look to legislate to ensure that workers have a fixed and regular-hours contract? Will they address the issue of late-notice shift changes and cancellations, which affect those with caring responsibilities? What protections are there for workers under contractor liability where an employer ceases trading or absconds?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. What I would say is that this is addressed in our response to the Matthew Taylor review. What he is talking about is the need for a better definition of workers’ status, be that employed, self-employed or worker. We are consulting to make sure we address those points, and I am very happy for him to be a part of that consultation. I am very happy to talk to him and to talk about his Bill, but we are clear that by having a definitive definition of people’s employment status we can solve some of the problems he highlights.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Having sat on the joint BEIS and Work and Pensions Committee, I am really pleased to hear from the Minister today that the Government will adopt its recommendations. The area of case law on the meaning of “worker” is really complicated, so I understand the need for consultation to understand it. We heard evidence of Uber and Deliveroo not treating their self-employed workers as if they were employees. It is a complex area. I urge the Minister to do this as quickly as possible, because there are other issues to consider, such as national insurance contributions and how the Child Support Agency deals with self-employed earners. This is a big, big area, so getting that clarification quickly would be welcome.

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend makes that point very clearly, and I thank her for the contribution that she and her fellow members of the Committee made to our decisions. She is absolutely right that we need to get on with it, and that there is huge complexity in relation to people’s status. If the only possible response, as it is at the moment, is to engage lawyers, go to the courts and undertake expensive litigation, that will not help the people she highlights at Uber, Deliveroo and so on. We are very clear about our intention, and we are getting on with the job to make it a reality.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I welcome the response to Matthew Taylor’s review—seven months after he published it. The Minister’s response today seems to be “we are now consulting the experts”, but that is exactly what the Government did when they asked Matthew Taylor and his panel to undertake their review. I am afraid there is very little from the Government’s response today that will do anything to genuinely help the bogus self-employed, including Don Lane, who are crying out for desperately needed reform. The Work and Pensions and BEIS Committees produced a Bill that the Government could take through Parliament, with cross-party support, to sort this out. The country is crying out for change. I urge the Government to be a little bit more ambitious.

Andrew Griffiths: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are hugely ambitious. These proposals will help millions of workers. I pay tribute to the recommendations that her Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee made, and we are accepting all but one of the recommendations contained in that report. She will understand, as I think Matthew Taylor said when he gave evidence to the Committee, that this is hugely complicated, and we need to consult further. We are not consulting about whether we should do this; we are consulting about how we do it. I thank her for her contribution and reassure her that our ambition is strong.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the measures set out by my hon. Friend. Alongside the living wage, they give the belief that we are the true workers’ party of the United Kingdom. Do the proposals also apply to apprentices, some of whom are not even paid the right apprentice wage?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response and for the work he does to ensure that the Conservative party is the party of the worker. He is absolutely right: this Government are committed to ensuring that people get fair pay. That is why we are putting a record amount—£25 million—into enforcing the living wage and the national minimum wage. As a result of that record commitment, we have seen a record £11 million of wages recovered for some of the most vulnerable and low-paid workers in our society. I assure him that all workers, including apprentices, are on our radar. We are beefing up the enforcement teams, and we are going to make sure that workers get the pay they deserve.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): As the Prime Minister established the Taylor review in response to a report written by Andrew Forsey in my office, I thank the Minister for his statement. Previously the Government rejected one of the Taylor recommendations, which was that if workers in the gig economy were required to turn up to work at their employer’s request in times of low demand, they should still be paid the minimum wage. The Government rejected that proposal, thank God. Will the Minister again affirm that that is the Government’s position?

Andrew Griffiths: I place on record our thanks to the right hon. Gentleman for his continued work in this area. He is right to say that that continues to be the
Government’s position. However, we are consulting. The benefit to the employer is flexibility, but we have asked the Low Pay Commission to look again at whether people on zero-hours contracts should get some preferential, extra payment to compensate for the inconvenience.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Can the Minister confirm the Government’s plan in relation to employers’ national insurance contributions, to ensure that the tax system is not incentivising unscrupulous businesses to pretend that their employees are self-employed?

Andrew Griffiths: Clearly that is very high on the agenda. The work we are doing in relation to status will ensure that people who are genuinely self-employed are classified as such. Employers who are trying to game the system by pretending that someone is self-employed when in fact they are working will be addressed. The reality is that if it looks like work and feels like work, it is work, and people should be paid in the same way.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will recall the Government’s awkward embarrassment when they tried to align national insurance for the employed and the self-employed. Can he explain how the Government propose to deal with that outstanding anomaly?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for that question. The Chancellor set out our approach to those matters, and I have nothing further to add at the moment.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Government’s position on this and urge them to make quick progress, but there is one area in which employment rights are potentially about to be seriously damaged: the right of British citizens to work in 30 other countries in the EU and the European economic area as we leave the EU. What are the Government doing to ensure that young people and others have the opportunity to go and work overseas, bringing great benefits to their own career and, when they return, to their businesses or the companies for which they work, which they have enjoyed for many decades?

Andrew Griffiths: I wondered how long it would be before we got on to the “B” word, Brexit. I know that my hon. Friend is hugely concerned about that, as are businesses large and small up and down the country. He will have to wait a little bit longer, I am afraid. That announcement will, I am sure, be made by someone higher up the food chain than I, but I can assure him that the concerns of workers and British business are being heard by Government.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Zero-hours contract carers get paid for face-to-face work, so they get paid for every 15-minute visit, but none of the travelling time in between. They often have fragmented contracts and have to be available for work throughout the seven days of the week, and they do not have proper time off. That is one example. Then we have couriers, who have to deliver more than 100 packages a day for 48p a package. They often have to keep driving 15 hours a day, six days a week, and they are called self-employed. Surely the Minister has got to end that appalling practice by properly defining and enforcing employment law. Nothing he has said today has reassured me that he is going to help the 3.2 million people who are missing out on their basic employment rights.

Andrew Griffiths: Allow me to try to reassure the hon. Lady that those issues are being taken care of. She will be aware that a Green Paper on social care is imminent, and those social care issues will be covered within it. She talks about when workers in the gig economy are clocking on and off and what constitutes their working time. If she has read the report, she will know that we recognise that the law should be clearer about when people are being paid and the hours that they work. We will address that within the consultation and come up with firm proposals.

Alex Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Minister on the positive way he is taking forward the Taylor review and the Government’s ambitions. Back in May 2014, I brought forward a ten-minute rule Bill to ban unpaid internships. In 2016, I introduced a private Member’s Bill to ban unpaid internships—which the Labour party did not support, I hasten to add. When the Minister is dealing with the section of the Taylor review on unpaid internships, I urge him to liaise closely with our noble Friend Lord Holmes of Richmond, whose private Member’s Bill on that issue is in Committee in the other place at the moment.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend for the great effort and the huge amount of work he has put into standing up for the rights of those young people who are being abused in relation to internships. He has raised that issue many times in the House, and I can reassure him that we are cracking down on sectors where unpaid interns are doing the job of a worker. There will be proper enforcement, and young people who feel they are being abused in that way will be covered. The enforcement will be strengthened, and we will ensure that those people get the wage they deserve.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): While I of course welcome the publication of the Taylor review, may I press the Minister a little bit further? As my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) said, the Taylor review recommends ending the Swedish derogation that allows agency workers to be employed for extended periods on worse terms and conditions than the person working by their side on a more permanent contract. Is the Minister still considering that recommendation, or is he going to ignore it?

Andrew Griffiths: I can be absolutely clear with the hon. Lady that we are very attuned to the impact of the Swedish derogation and how it can be used unfairly on workers.

Ms Angela Eagle: What are you going to do?

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady asks me what we are doing about it: we are specifically consulting. In the report, she will see that there are four consultations, and one specifically comes forward with proposals. [Interruption.] She may sigh, but we have to listen to the experts, and then we will deliver. We recognise the
difficulties in relation to the Swedish derogation. We want to extend the support both for agency workers and those who feel that they are being disadvantaged—

[Interruption]—on terms and conditions, exactly—and we will be taking this forward with firm proposals.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Is it not the case that the Government asked Matthew Taylor to undertake a report, Matthew Taylor brought forward some recommendations and the Government are getting on with implementing what Matthew Taylor asked the Government to do?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. We can see from the response of Opposition Members that they realise this Government are bringing forward protections for millions of workers. This Government are providing them with sickness pay and holiday pay, and the enforcement needed to make sure that those vulnerable people on the lowest pay get the pay they deserve.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): When Matthew Taylor came before the Scottish Affairs Committee, he spoke of the inspiration he derived from the Scottish Government’s fair work convention. Will the UK Government be implementing something similar?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, and for the work that the Scottish Affairs Committee has done. We took a great deal of interest in that work, which raised some very interesting points. She raises the issue in relation to Scotland. Our focus is clear: we are delivering on the commitments—the 52 commitments—in the Matthew Taylor report, and we will be doing so as a matter of urgency.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): While I am sure that millions of low-paid workers will welcome the fact that the Government are going to issue four consultations, they may well be more concerned that the Government’s own impact assessment on our leaving the European Union included the assumption that employment rights would be deregulated. Will the Minister tell the House which employment rights were included in the assessment, and whether the Government will make an ongoing commitment to maintain at least current employment rights?

Andrew Griffiths: I am sorry, but the hon. Lady clearly missed the three times I have said in response to this urgent question that not only are the Government committed to maintaining employment rights as they are currently set out, but we are going further in extending rights and protections to millions more workers. As a result of what we are doing by taking forward the brilliant work of Matthew Taylor, we will have employment protection that is not just as a good as in the rest of Europe, but the best in the world.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Opposition Members have a longer memory than Government Members, because we remember that this Government took away employment tribunal fees support and disallowed people even from accessing justice in the workplace. This is too little too late—four consultations—because we need transformational politics when it comes to employment regulations in this country.

Andrew Griffiths: I do have a long memory. I have a memory of the recession brought on by the previous Government, and I have a memory of the millions of people unemployed as a result of their policies. We are talking about memory, but the hon. Gentleman seems to forget that today we have one of the most dynamic economies in the world, record employment, record low unemployment, a minimum national living wage of £7.50 that was introduced by this Government, record numbers of women in work and an economy that is the envy of many.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The general secretary of the TUC, Frances O’Grady, has said that these measures will do nothing to tackle the problem of what she describes as “the hire and fire culture of zero-hours contracts or sham self-employment.”

I know my constituents in Blaydon, many of whom work in the gig economy, will be disappointed that the Government have not taken a more dynamic and firm approach in tackling such basic rights and are putting this out for a further period of consultation.

Andrew Griffiths: I would just remind the hon. Lady that if she actually reads the report, she will see that we are asking the Low Pay Commission to consider higher minimum wages for workers on zero-hours contracts—

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Consider!

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady says “Consider”, but I would have thought she was a supporter of the Low Pay Commission and that she would think this was a good idea.

We are creating a right for all workers on zero-hours contracts to request a more stable contract, and the Government want to go further than the Matthew Taylor report to address the issues of exclusivity of agency workers or those on zero-hours contracts. I would have thought that the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) welcomed that; I know many in the trade unions organisation do.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): One of the issues not within the scope of the Taylor review was that of unpaid work trials, which is regrettable. However, on 16 March my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) is bringing forward his Bill to end exploitative unpaid work trials. Will the Government be supporting it?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am happy to meet his colleague to discuss his Bill.

**BILL PRESENTED**

**VAGRANCY (REPEAL)**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Layla Moran, supported by Caroline Lucas, Wera Hobhouse, Christine Jardine and Jo Swinson, presented a Bill to repeal the Vagrancy Act 1824.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 162).*
Homelessness (End of Life Care)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.16 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about end of life care and support for homeless people with terminal illnesses, including through the provision of housing for such people; and for connected purposes.

Not having a roof over your head at night and being homeless on the streets must be frightening—cold, lonely, depressing. To be seriously ill, as well as homeless, seems to me to be beyond frightening, with people wondering when they will die, when the pain will stop and whether anyone will care or even notice. Yet homeless people are dying on Britain’s streets, in our parks, in doorways or, if they are lucky, in ill-equipped hostels.

Although it is difficult to give precise figures on how many people are dying like this, the evidence we have from those working on the homeless frontline is that it is happening time and again. Homeless people are dying alone in pain in Britain in 2018. Let us look at some of the figures we do have. The average age at death of a homeless person is about 47 years. Homeless people are attending at A&E departments six times as often as people with a home. They are admitted to hospital four times as often, and they are staying three times as long.

I have spent a fair bit of time since last June’s election finding out more about this horror, thanks to amazing organisations such as Pathway, St Mungo’s, Hospice UK and Shelter, as well as some new work by the Care Quality Commission and some hard evidence and research by a range of academics, especially at University College London and the Faculty for Homeless and Inclusion Health. Listening to these experts and reading their work, including many interviews with homeless people themselves, I have been genuinely shocked about the wave of suffering right under our noses that we continue to ignore.

These same organisations are also doing incredible work to tackle this suffering. There are charities, GP practices, hospices and hostels around our country that are helping seriously ill homeless people, and showing what is possible when groups of professionals, volunteers and researchers come together and resolve to find solutions. Yesterday, I visited the Royal Trinity Hospice by Clapham common to see how one of Britain’s amazing hospices has reached out to homeless hostels in its area to share the excellent palliative care it can provide.

My first message to the House today is a positive one: we can give decent end-of-life care to everyone, including the most marginalised homeless people, if we resolve to do so. We can as a Parliament say that no homeless person in this country, whoever they are and wherever they are from, need die on our streets.

I do not believe that legislation alone can ever deliver the lofty aims that we in this House often seek. The Bill alone will not be a magical cure. To reach the goal of good end-of-life care for society’s most marginalised people, we will need better integration of services and new types of accommodation—most likely including specialist hospice hostels—and we will need to train staff, in the NHS, in homeless hostels and in hospices. But the law can help, not least as a huge catalyst for change.

My starting place is the current housing law that states that somebody has no right to housing if they are “intentionally homeless”. That is a curious legal phrase, cruelly curious—because, in truth, very few people deliberately aim to be on the streets. In my experience as a constituency MP, the vast majority of so-called intentionally homeless people want nothing more than a roof over their heads. However, this intentionality test has survived at the legal centre of most decisions on homelessness for over 20 years. Today, I am saying that the test should disappear for homeless people who are terminally ill. In future, if a doctor diagnoses a homeless person with advanced ill health and certifies that they expect that person to die within the next 12 months, that person would have an automatic legal right to appropriate housing, along with an appropriate package of care and support for their needs.

In discussing the detail for this simple idea with housing lawyers and palliative care experts, we soon focused on what would count as terminally ill, because estimating when someone is going to die is hardly an exact science. Moreover, we hope that good palliative care will extend life. The test we went for therefore comes from the best practice that GPs are being encouraged to adopt for all their patients—namely, that they should set up a palliative care register. GPs add patients’ names to their palliative care register if they expect that they are at high risk of dying within the next 12 months. The trigger I am proposing for these new rights for seriously ill homeless people would therefore use a system that most doctors already have.

In many ways, what I am asking for is only a small change, but I believe that it could have profound effects on the lives and deaths of many homeless people. It would force housing departments in councils across England, and their social services departments, to act without question. I think that the Bill would add to the excellent work of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who piloted his Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 through the House. His Act will force councils to think harder and longer about preventing homelessness in the first place, and my Bill would force them to prevent people dying without a home.

The original idea for my Bill came from my wife, Emily, who is a housing lawyer specialising in social housing issues. In discussion with Emily and other housing lawyers, it became absolutely clear to me that the existing law does not go far enough. Dying homeless people need a new basic and automatic right to housing and care that their GP can trigger and that the council cannot question. The right that I am proposing is for appropriate housing, so the local authority will not be able to fob the person off with a bed and breakfast miles away. Indeed, under the Bill, the authority’s social services department would have to get involved, too, by liaising with the GP and other parts of the health service to ensure that the right care and support is there.

I do not want to pretend to the House that implementing this will be easy. Homeless people can present with some of the most challenging health issues imaginable—a wide variety of mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions and severe respiratory conditions. The evidence also suggests that the homeless often lose
trust in people—in the hospital doctors who had no choice but to discharge them back on to the streets and in the family members from whom they have become estranged. Their past use of the NHS can make it difficult to patch together a full medical history. They might have self-discharged from hospitals to feed an addiction, or because the institutional setting proved just too much for them. But it is the complex nature of the health and social needs of many homeless people that demands that we act. If we truly want to end health inequality in our country, we have to start with end-of-life care for the homeless, because the people this Bill is trying to help are currently experiencing the worst health care and outcomes of any group in our country.

Homeless people can find it difficult or even impossible to advocate for themselves, but with three quotes I want to let three homeless people speak to the House now:

“Bad death is being lonely...no friends around you when you’re passing away. Well, death is never really good, but at least it’d be better with friends around...you know, someone to hold your hand and whatever.”

“I think when you’re homeless and you’re out on the street so long, you’re surrounded by grief and death and a lot of stuff. It makes you cold. It makes you unfeeling towards people.”

“End of life? What end of life are you talking about? I’m on the street and nobody cares about me.”

Friends, please support the Bill. Let us show that we do care.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Edward Davey, Ms Karen Buck, Bob Blackman, Sir Vince Cable, Mr Kenneth Clarke, Caroline Lucas, Norman Lamb, Kate Green, Wera Hobhouse, Geraint Davies, Christine Jardine and Mary Creagh present the Bill.

Sir Edward Davey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 163).
Mr Kevan Jones: Is it not a fact that between 2010 and 2015, the police budget from central government was reduced by 5% every single year? The Minister makes the point that this is all taxpayers’ money, but is it not the case that he is continuing to move the burden of taxation away from central government and on to local ratepayers?

Mr Hurd: This is a false argument from the Labour party. The fact remains that when one looks at police funding, on average something like 70% of local police force funding across the system still comes from the centre. The settlement barely changes that. We are responding to calls from many police and crime commissioners for greater flexibility in their local precept. That is what we are delivering but, in the face of continued Labour smoke around police cuts, we cannot get away from the fact that as a result of the settlement, we will invest over £1 billion more in our police system in 2018-19 than we did in 2015-16.

Stephen Doughty: If everything is so rosy, why do we hear about a very different picture from chief constables and police and crime commissioners in their regular sessions before the Home Affairs Committee? I want to ask the Minister a specific question about funding for capital cities. I have repeatedly asked, as has the South Wales police and crime commissioner, for Cardiff to get additional resources, given its responsibilities as a capital city. Why are the Minister and the Government refusing to do that? Cardiff gets less funding per capita than the west midlands, Merseyside and Greater Manchester. Given our responsibilities as a capital city, surely that is not right.

Mr Hurd: I am happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman personally to discuss that in more detail. I am not suggesting that everything is rosy in the world of policing, as the police face a very challenging set of circumstances, but I am announcing how we will increase investment in our police.

Tony Lloyd: I wonder whether the Minister will accept this point. He tells us that there is a flat-cash settlement, which in effect is a cut from central government at a time of massively increasing demand on our policing due to many different reasons, such as terrorism and organised crime. How can he possibly square the Government cut with that increase in demand and the fact that the public feel less secure?

Mr Hurd: The numbers cannot lie. As a result of the settlement, if PCCs do everything that we are empowering them to do, we, as a society, will be investing over £1 billion a year more in our police system than was the case in 2015-16. The Labour party can continue to talk the language of cuts, but the numbers tell a different story. There will be £1 billion a year of additional public money in our policing system next year compared with the position in 2015-16.

Sir Edward Davey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I will give the right hon. Gentleman a bit more time to recover from presenting his excellent ten-minute rule Bill, so I will proceed with my argument.

When shaping the settlement, I spoke personally to every PCC and chief constable in England and Wales. The Home Office collaborated closely with the police’s own demand and resilience review. I am incredibly grateful to frontline officers across the country who gave me their time and very candid opinions during my visits. I also thank Members from all parties who engaged with me on behalf of their local forces.

We heard three messages from that engagement. First, it is very clear that demand on the police has risen, and it has done so in areas of greater complexity and resource intensity. That does not mean that the British public are experiencing more crime. Indeed, the independent crime survey for England and Wales, which our independent statisticians confirm as being the most authoritative data on long-term crime trends, shows that the public’s experience of crime has continued to fall. It is down by almost 40% since 2010. However, police-recorded crime, which is a different thing, has risen significantly since 2015. Again, the independent statisticians are clear that the drivers of that growth include improved police recording of crime, and the fact that more victims of high-harm hidden crimes, such as domestic abuse, modern slavery and child sexual exploitation, are coming forward—

Gloria De Piero: When police cuts are made, it is our poorest communities that suffer most. Lone parents and the unemployed are twice as likely to be burgled as the average person, and the deprived and unemployed are twice as likely to be the victims of violent crime. Do not the police cuts show what side of the argument Conservative Members are on and who they stick up for? It is not the poor, who need the police more.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more that the impact of crime falls hardest on the poorest communities. That is not in doubt, but I hope that, as a Derbyshire MP—

Gloria De Piero indicated dissent.

Mr Hurd: I beg the hon. Lady’s pardon. Lady’s pardon, but even if I have to shift my geography, I do not think that my argument will change. I hope that she welcomes the fact that Nottinghamshire police will receive £4.5 million more cash in 2017-18 and the statement from her PCC, Paddy Tipping, that he will use that money to recruit more police officers.

Sir Edward Davey: Thank the Minister for giving way and for allowing me time to recover. He keeps making a point about police reserves, but for the benefit of good public debate, will he tell the House—either today or in a letter—what the recommended level of reserves is? What do the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary set out? Will he tell us the right level of reserves so that we may judge the comments that he keeps making?

Mr Hurd: As a Liberal Democrat who worked tirelessly in government to promote more open and transparent government, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman
will have no problem with the principle of greater accountability and transparency around the use of public money, which is the kernel of the debate. The guidelines are not mandated. The advice that police treasurers get from the body he mentioned indicates that they should be thinking of about 3% to 5% of revenue as basic contingency reserves. The £1.6 billion that I cited in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) represents around 15% of annual revenue, so the reserves that the police hold clearly go above what might be reasonably expected for pure contingency funding. That is absolutely fine, as long as the people whose money that is get a good explanation of what the money will be used for.

Charlie Elphicke: My right hon. Friend says that the right level for reserves is about 5% of revenue, but Gwent police’s figure is 42% and that for North Wales police is about 24%. Does he know any reason why the reserves of those police forces are quite so high?

Mr Hurd: To clarify, the advice for treasurers, in terms of pure contingency funding, is that prudent levels would be about 3% to 5%. It might be entirely appropriate for police forces to hold significantly more than that, as Gwent does—it sits at the extreme end of the spectrum—but my point is: what will the money be used for? It is public money and we are entitled to know.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I remind the Minister and the House that a reserve can only be spent once, and it is simply unsustainable to plan a police budget on the basis of one-off spending. If police authorities have plans to spend their reserves, what will the Minister’s answer be when we set next year’s police grant and those reserves are no longer there? We cannot keep spending reserves.

Mr Hurd: I accept that point, and I will address it in my remarks, but it does not undermine my central argument, which is not necessarily to criticise the level of reserves, but simply to say, “Tell us what you’re going to spend it on,” because it is the public’s money.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hurd: I need to move on to make sure that colleagues—

Stephen Doughty: I want to ask about the reserves.

Mr Hurd: There will be another opportunity to talk about the reserves later.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hurd: As a courtesy to my colleague, I will give way.

Richard Drax: I am most grateful. My right hon. Friend is doing an excellent job under difficult circumstances—[Hon. Members: “You created them.”] I remind Members that the Labour party virtually bankrupted this country. We are dealing with the consequences of living within our means, and this—sadly—is one of them. May I put the record straight? The hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) cited a connection between a lack of officers and the poor, and asked which side of the argument we were on. Members on both sides of the House believe in law and order whether you are rich or poor. I just wanted to put the record straight.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, which is part of the reason why we are making this commitment of additional investment in our police system.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: Out of courtesy to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, I give way.

Yvette Cooper: The Minister will know that the Select Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the changing pressures on policing, and part of that will involve our looking at resources. Of course, the additional funding for counter-terrorism is welcome and extremely important, but the real-terms squeeze on police forces’ core funding from central Government is a real concern for forces throughout the country. Given the changing patterns of crime, including the rise of not just violent crime, but online fraud—forces have told us that 95% of online fraud cases are not being investigated at all—as well as the pressures on support for vulnerable people, is he not worried in his heart of hearts that he is simply not providing forces with enough money to keep people safe?

Mr Hurd: No, I am not, and I will address that. I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for welcoming the increased investment in counter-terrorism policing, although I understand that her Whips will send her through the Lobby to vote against it. It will be interesting to see how she explains that to her constituents.

On the right hon. Lady’s more general point, I am arguing that given our very constrained public finances, which I think everyone understands, the settlement is fair and comprehensive. It represents an increase of £1 billion in annual investment in our police system compared with 2016. There is a recognition that the pattern of demand on the police has changed significantly. They are doing more work in areas of greater complexity and resource intensiveness, and they are having to build the capability to tackle modern crime, not least cyber and online crime. The Minister for Security and Economic Crime, who is sitting next to me, is working hard to build those capabilities, with a significant budget.
Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I press the Minister further on counter-terrorism? A number of local forces are saying that the so-called new money for counter-terrorism is not new money, but has been financed by backfilling from neighbourhood policing. We all know that neighbourhood policing is vital to any long-term counter-terrorism strategy.

Mr Hurd: I need to correct that, because it is fake news. The money for counter-terrorism is ring-fenced—this is new money. I note the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but I also note that, as I understand it, he will be voting against this money today.

I was talking about the serious changes in the nature of demand on police as a result of the increase in recorded crime. I was at pains to point out that some of the drivers of this growth in recorded crime are welcome, as they reflect improvements in the police recording of crime, following substantial criticisms from the inspectorate back in 2014. They also reflect the fact that more victims of high-harm hidden crimes are coming forward, which I am sure the whole House welcomes. We are also clear, however, that there is genuine growth in low-volume, high-impact violent crime, which concerns us all. That will be the focus of the Government’s upcoming serious violence strategy.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): When will the Government publish that strategy?

Mr Hurd: We said that we would publish it in the spring. It comes on top of regulations to ban the sale of zombie knives, and a consultation on a range of new offences around the sale and possession of dangerous weapons.

In addition to the changes in demand I have outlined, there is the escalation and evolution of the terrorist risk. In the context of police resources, the point is that demand on the police has risen, which has put more pressure on our police—there is no doubt about that.

The second message we got from many PCCs and chiefs across England and Wales was a request for greater flexibility regarding the precept. PCCs are, of course, elected by their local populations, and many want a greater ability to determine how much local funding they can raise to deliver for their communities. The third message was a request for greater certainty over future funding so that PCCs are able to plan more effectively and free up reserves for investment. I am pleased to confirm that the Government have proposed a funding settlement that responds positively to all three messages.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I hope that my right hon. Friend will give me a nice answer, because I will be voting tonight as well. He knows that Lincolnshire police force has been historically very badly underfunded, and we are grateful to him for visiting Lincolnshire and taking an interest. What steps is he taking to improve the situation in Lincolnshire and support our excellent police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones, who is having to use funding flexibility to protect police numbers and effectively put up council tax. What is the Minister doing to help us in Lincolnshire?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend has been a tireless advocate for more resources for Lincolnshire policing. It is a stretched police force, but the PCC, Marc Jones, is doing an excellent job. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that Lincolnshire will receive another £3.3 million next year, and if all goes well it will get something similar in 2020. He will know that the independent inspectorate notes that Lincolnshire is one of the forces that still needs to make efficiency improvements, but I undertake to work closely with that force to monitor the situation. As I said in the written statement accompanying the provisional grant, we have not lost sight of the fair funding review; we just feel that the comprehensive spending review, which will shape police funding for the next five years, is the most appropriate context for that work. I hope that the combination of those things will assure him of the sustainability and effectiveness of Lincolnshire policing.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Minister said that he had received three messages—let me give him a fourth one, from the people of St Helens: antisocial behaviour—up; robbery, theft and burglary—up; violent and sexual crime—up; police funding—down; police numbers—down. What is he going to do about it?

Mr Hurd: On one level, I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but increased funding is going into his police system, and if he actually tells an honest story to his constituents about crime, he will refer them to the national crime survey, which shows that crime, in the experience of his constituents, continues to fall, alongside the national trend.

In terms of the shape of the settlement, I want to be clear that there will be no reductions in the amount of core grant paid to any PCC.

Mr Kevan Jones: Yes, there will be.

Mr Hurd: No, there won’t. There will be no reduction in the amount of core grant paid to any PCC. This means that PCCs will keep all the benefits of tax-based growth in their area. That is a change, and one that West Midlands police, for example, were particularly keen on. That is a change: there will be no reduction in the amount of core grant paid to any PCC. We are also giving PCCs and Mayors more flexibility on their precepts. The settlement empowers them to ask their local residents to make a bigger contribution to support local policing. We want this to be affordable, at a time when money remains tight, so we have limited increases in local police precepts to an additional £1 a month—or 25p a week—for a typical band D household. If all PCCs use these powers, they will be able to invest, collectively, a further £270 million in 2018-19. Since 2016-17 local force funding has been protected in cash terms, including police precepts, but this settlement goes further. The combination of flat grant and rising precept in 2018-19 means that all PCCs can maintain their funding in real terms next year if they use the new council tax flexibility.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry, but the Minister is completely wrong. Flat cash is a cut when inflation and other pressures on PCCs are taken into account. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) asked what the Minister could do to help the Lincolnshire
force. What the Minister is doing is pushing the increase on to local taxpayers. Why did he not say that to the hon. Gentleman?

Mr Hurd: I will make two points to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who, as ever, is thoughtful on these matters. The combination of flat-cash grant from the centre and an increase in precepts means overall net-net “flat real” for local police forces. [Interruption.] That is what I said, and that is what is true. Labour Members continue to ignore the second part of that combination, which is the increase in precepts. [Interruption.] I know that Labour Members have a problem with this, because they continue to pretend that someone else will pay. What we said in response to PCCs who wanted increased flexibility on precepts was that they should go to the people in their locality and say, “I should like to ask for an extra 25p a week as an additional contribution to local policing; would you accept that?” Where surveys have been carried out, PCCs have met with approval rates of between 75% and 80%, which suggests that that was the right question and the right answer.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister has just been caught red-handed trying to use smoke and mirrors to kid people that the flat-cash settlement that he is announcing today means that any increase in the precept will be wholly spent on additional resources for the police. That is simply not true. The truth is that the Government are cutting the resources that they are giving to every police force in the country, and are asking residents to foot the bill for a poorer service. That is a total disgrace, and the Minister should stop attempting to misdirect people who are following the debate.

Mr Hurd: I will take no lessons on distorting the truth from Labour Members who continue to peddle the lie that there is such a thing as free Government money, or that someone else will always pay. The response from people on the ground who were asked, “Are you prepared to put a bit more money in to support your local police?” was a resounding “Yes”. I am not misleading the House. The combination of flat cash from the centre and increases in precepts—the ability to maintain growth in council tax precepts—means that we have moved, at local level, from flat cash to “flat real”, before we come to the additional investment from the centre. That means that next year the Government will invest over £1 billion a year more in local policing than we invested in 2015-16.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Excuse my ignorance, but is it in order for an hon. Member to accuse a Minister of the Crown of misdirecting the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): [Mr Kevan Jones] 

Mr Hurd: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I appreciate the sentiments of my colleagues on the Back Benches.

I was talking about the additional investment that we are making from the centre. So far I have talked about what we are doing to enable PCCs to increase their investment as a result of increases in the local precepts, but we are also providing an extra £130 million for additional investment in national priorities such as digital technology and the police special grant. This is not somehow disconnected from the earlier conversation; it is about how we invest, as a country, in the police system.

The police special grant is an essential tool to help forces who face exceptional events, and it is right for us to do that. This year we are using it to help Greater Manchester and the Metropolitan police respond to the horrific terrorist attacks, as well as helping forces such as South Yorkshire to pay for very large investigations of child sexual exploitation. We are increasing special grant funding by more than £40 million next year to ensure that, for example, we can support the Met in providing security for the commonwealth summit in April.

We are also increasing our crucial investment in police technology. If we are to fully realise the potential benefits of mobile technology and ensure that officers spend as much time as possible on the frontline to protect the public, we must deliver modern 4G communications for the police service and key databases that can be accessed on the move, and must give the police the tools that they need to track down suspects as quickly as possible. That requires investment from the centre. We are, for example, creating a single national automatic number plate recognition system with a greatly enhanced ability to track vehicles and link different vehicles, locations and crimes in order to detect and prevent crime and safeguard vulnerable people.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I have already taken a great many interventions from Labour Members, and I need to make some progress to allow the debate to flow.

Of course, the No. 1 responsibility of Governments is the safety of our citizens. The tragedy of five terrorist attacks in London and Manchester in 2017 has sadly reinforced the threat that we face from terrorism. It is therefore right that we are increasing funding for counter-terrorism policing both this year and next and it is disappointing that Labour Members will vote against that tonight. In September we announced £24 million of new money this year, which would go to forces throughout the country to meet the costs relating to the tragic terror attacks. I am also pleased to confirm that the Government have agreed to provide a further £4 million this year to meet the costs arising from the attack at Parsons Green. We are significantly increasing the counter-terrorism policing budget for 2018-19 to £757 million. That is £70 million more than was scheduled, and reflects the priority that we attach to the incredibly important task of protecting the public.

As well as increasing funding by around £450 million in 2018-19, we have signalled—and I think this is the first time we have done so in the context of police
grants—that we are prepared to protect Government grant and repeat the additional precept flexibility in 2019-20. That is a response to the calls from many PCCs and budget-holders for more forward visibility to help them to plan more effectively. We have made it clear that the 2019-20 local police settlement will depend on progress made by forces this year in three critical areas: productivity, financial efficiency and transparency about financial reserves, which we discussed earlier. All those need to be improved.

Stephen Doughty: South Wales police are already doing all those things. We have reduced the reserves to the minimum level allowed. We have collaborated hugely on bringing services together. Seven contact and control rooms have been reduced to one, and 18 custody facilities have been reduced to four. Our command unit structure has been streamlined, we have reduced the estate by a third, and we have reduced the fleet by 20%. The bottom line is that, with demand going up, we have reduced the reserves and made all those efficiency savings. Now the Minister is offering a flat-terms settlement, which is a cut. Where else do we go?

Mr Hurd: What I am actually offering is £6.7 million of additional cash investment in South Wales policing next year. I have taken on board everything that the hon. Gentleman has said, and I congratulate the leadership of South Wales police on what it has done to improve efficiency. The level of the reserves is not extravagant. Where I take umbrage with the hon. Gentleman is on the amount of investment, which, as I have said, will rise by £6.7 million next year. I hope he will welcome that.

Improved productivity means making better use of the most important asset in the police system, which is police officers’ time. In 2018, in the modern age, that means making the most of the opportunity presented by digital and big data technology. For example, a growing number of forces—not least Lincolnshire, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh)—now embrace mobile working. If all forces took advantage of mobile working like the best forces, that would mean that the average officer could spend an hour a day extra on the frontline, where hard-working officers want to be. It has the potential to free up the equivalent of 11,000 extra officers in England and Wales. That is the implication if best practice is extrapolated across the system.

More mobile working, better use of data and better connected systems are all critical to modern policing. That is why the Home Office is working closely with PCCs, chiefs and experts to shape a credible roadmap that can properly harness the power of digital technology to promote more effective policing. To give further support to that process of reform, we have ensured that police forces will benefit from the £175 million police transformation fund in 2018-2019. The fund, led by police, is delivering real results and enabling forces to invest in transformation and digitisation for the future.

When budgets are tight, we have to keep challenging inefficiency, so the Home Office is also working with the police leadership to develop plans to unlock an estimated £120 million-worth of efficiency savings from more collaborative procurement and shared systems. Finally, on behalf of the taxpayer we are pressing PCCs to provide much better information on how they are using their £1.6 billion of financial reserves to improve services to the public. These reserves have risen by over £250 million since 2011. It is public money, and the public deserve a proper explanation for how it is going to be used. That is why last week we published comparable national data on police reserves and new tougher guidance on the information PCCs must publish on their planned use of reserves. This is the shape of our proposed police funding settlement out to 2020.

What has been the reaction on the ground? Many PCCs have welcomed the funding settlement we set out in December. I am pleased to say that almost all PCCs in England have chosen to use this new council tax flexibility to determine how much local funding they can raise to deliver for their communities, and local people have shown their support. In Cumbria, 1,500 people responded to the consultation and over 70% of them indicated that they support the proposed precept increase. In Leicestershire, nearly three quarters of respondents voted for a £12 increase, and in Lancashire 78% supported increasing the police precept there by £12.

PCCs have been explaining to their communities why they have opted to make use of this ability to raise the extra funding. Most PCCs are intending to use this funding to protect or strengthen frontline policing in their force next year. For example, Matthew Scott, the PCC for Kent, announced that he will recruit up to 200 additional police officers next year, taking the total number of officers in Kent to its highest level since 2012. In Surrey, the PCC, David Munro, has proposed increasing the precept by £12 to protect local policing teams and respond to increasing threats such as cyber-crime and child abuse, while investing in efficiency programmes to give Surrey a police force fit for the future. In Humberside, PCC Keith Hunter has stated that by increasing the precept by £12 a month the force’s recruitment plans will take them from the planned 1,867 police officers next year up to 1,925 officers by 2020.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab) rose—

Mr Hurd: I am not going to take any more interventions.

In Nottinghamshire, PCC Paddy Tipping plans to increase police officer numbers up to 1,940, do more to tackle knife crime, and invest in a new custody facility capable of meeting current and future demands. These are just a few examples of how both Conservative and Labour PCCs are using this opportunity to improve the effectiveness of their service to the public.

We have listened to the police. We believe that, through the combination of the increased investment from this settlement, the scope for further efficiencies and productivity and the high level of reserves in the police system, the police have the resources they need to do the job. At the same time we are working with the police to lay the groundwork for the next spending review, which will include a final view on the fair funding formula. As I have said, we believe that the spending review is the right context for those decisions.

We are also supporting the police in other ways. We are ensuring that police have the full protection of the law when carrying out their duties. We are supporting the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, which will increase the penalties available to those who attack emergency service workers. We are also helping...
frontline officers to tackle crime by making sure that officers feel able to pursue suspected criminals where it is appropriate to do so by reviewing the legislation, guidance and practice around police pursuits.

The safety of the public is of course our first priority and we will continue to ensure that the police have the resource they need to cut crime, protect the public, and help victims to get justice quickly. I believe that what I am presenting today is a fair and comprehensive settlement within the constraints of the fiscal position we are in. It will see us raise our investment in policing to over £13 billion next year in England and Wales, an increase of over £1 billion since 2015-16.

I wish to end where I began: by recognising once more the exceptional attitude, hard work and determination of our brave police forces. I commend this motion to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I want to start, as the Minister did, by paying tribute to the men and women who serve in our police service. The counterpart to this debate took place a little under a year ago, and no one could have imagined the unspeakable series of attacks that would follow in 2017. Throughout, our police service officers have risen to the highest standards of bravery, dedication and duty, truly honouring the founding principles of policing in the process. Chief among that covenant is that our police service depends ultimately on public support. After a year in which we have seen officers run into danger to keep the public safe, the police can rarely have counted on such strong public support as they enjoy today.

But I know from speaking to those officers that they are tired of warm words, backed up with no action from politicians. Today they are under sustained pressure the like of which the service has rarely, if ever, encountered, and today we have heard that there is not to be a single extra penny from central Government for local police forces.

Before I go into the detail of the funding settlement before us, I want to deal with the demand that the Minister says he recognises the police are under. Between 2010 and 2017 the average number of 101 and 999 calls has rocketed; in South Yorkshire it has tripled. Just last year 999 calls increased by 15%. Forces such as the West Midlands police are receiving the number of calls on one day in June that they used to receive only on new year’s eve. In the last year overall crime has risen by 15%, the largest increase since records began, violent crime is up by 20%, robberies by 29% and sexual offences by 23%. Last year over 1.4 million more people than the year before experienced antisocial behaviour; while the number of orders handed out fell by a quarter. Yet those are only a tiny proportion of the issues our police have to deal with.

On becoming Home Secretary, the now Prime Minister told the police their only “mission” was “to cut crime. No more, and no less”, but 83% of calls to command and control centres are non-crime-related. They are calls associated with mental health—last year the Met took an average of one mental health call every five minutes—or with missing persons, a demand that has tripled for some forces over the last seven years. They are associated with a raft of vulnerabilities, because, as other services buckle, the police are relied upon more than ever as the social service of last resort.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, contrary to what the Minister has alleged, what Labour Members are doing today is standing up for their constituents and voting against cuts that are unsafe and putting our constituents at risk?

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Today we will be voting against a completely inappropriate police funding settlement that leaves our communities exposed and the public at risk.

On top of all the demand I have listed, there is the unprecedented terrorist threat our country now faces. It is frankly unbelievable that, as the National Police Chiefs’ Council has recognised, the report before us fails to meet those growing needs and exposes gaps in the protection of the public.

So we have no choice but to vote against the motion tonight. We do so for three key reasons. First, the report prescribes an eighth consecutive year of real-terms cuts in Home Office funding. Secondly, it pushes the burden on to hard-pressed local taxpayers, and the very areas that have seen the most substantial cuts will get the least, inevitably creating a lottery of winners and losers that has no place for public safety. Thirdly, it fails to meet the needs identified by police chiefs, first and foremost in the area of counter-terrorism but also in local policing.

Simon Hoare: I am sure the hon. Lady has done a lot of homework before today’s debate, as we all have. Therefore, given the backdrop to what she has just said, can she advise us how much money—how many pounds, shillings and pence—her party would be adding to the police grant this year?

Louise Haigh: As the hon. Gentleman will know, our manifesto spelled out very clearly that we would dedicate 10,000 additional neighbourhood policing officers. The settlement before us today does not dedicate any additional funding to local policing and in fact, as I will come on to, would be swallowed up almost completely by inflationary and cost pressures.

One of the chief jobs of Parliament is to hold the Government accountable for the promises they make to the public and for their record of action in office, so I want to briefly focus on the context for this year’s police settlement. In 2015, the current Prime Minister promised the public that after a period in which £2.3 billion had been taken from police budgets, the Conservatives would now “protect police funding”. On many occasions that promise has been repeated to the public and to this House. Indeed, it was repeated by the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions just today. In fact, the House
of Commons Library has shown that real-terms central Government funding to local forces has fallen by £400 million since 2015—the equivalent of more than 7,000 officers.

**Sandy Martin:** Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Conservatives say we are inventing the cuts, they are not taking into account the cuts to police officer numbers? Between 2010 and 2017, Suffolk has seen 150 fewer officers, 100 fewer specials, 86 fewer PCSOs—50% of the group—and 200 fewer support staff. That represents a 25% cut in personnel across the board, so it is not surprising that we have seen a concomitant increase in crime.

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Despite what the Government like to say, every single Member of this House will have seen frontline cuts to police forces. Two weeks ago, the Leader of the House insisted in this Chamber that “frontline policing throughout the country as a whole has not changed—it has, in fact, slightly increased since 2010.”—[Official Report, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 421.]

This has been a familiar refrain throughout the Government’s time in office: “Yes, we are making cuts, but they are having no real impact.”

**Gloria De Piero:** More than 36,000 101 calls went unanswered or were abandoned in Nottinghamshire last year, which is a 201% increase year on year. Those people needed genuine help, but they did not get it.

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The number of abandoned calls has increased as the number of calls to 101 and 999 has increased. We now have 21,000 fewer police officers on our streets than there were when Labour left office in 2010, 17,000 fewer police staff, who perform vital functions in investigations, and 6,000 fewer PCSOs. Neighbourhood policing—the absolute bedrock of our model of policing—has been decimated, which is an appalling legacy of this Government. Neighbourhood policing is not just a “nice to have”; it is vital to our policing system and underpins the police’s ability to police by consent. It is almost wholly responsible for building and maintaining relationships with communities, and if we reduce our police to nothing more than a blue light that arrives only when the absolute worst has happened, we risk rolling back all the progress that has been made in police accountability and trust over the last generation.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a compelling speech. Does she agree that the cuts to police numbers in areas such as mine mean that there simply are not enough police officers to attend crimes as they happen, such as burglaries that are in progress? Vans are continually broken into and people have their tools stolen and broken and it is not difficult to see why commissioners across the country are calling the settlement “smoke and mirrors.”

I turn to the precept, because it is not additional money from Government, as the Minister tried to claim. Any additional money will come if PCCs take the decision to increase their policing precept. Once again, the Government display the worst type of localism: passing all the blame on to local decision makers while refusing to fund the tough decisions that they have to make.

What is more, this method of funding the police is fundamentally unfair. The areas that have taken the biggest hit from funding cuts since 2010 stand to gain the least from the maximisation of the precept. For
example, the West Midlands, which has lost a staggering 2,000 officers since 2010, will raise a little over 2% from the precept. By contrast, Surrey, which has half the population, will raise almost the same in cash terms as the West Midlands, but by maximising the precept it will be able to raise 7.5% of its budget. When it comes to public safety, the settlement creates winners and losers based on postcode. The police funding formula at least made an attempt to fund forces based on need, but it seems to have been kicked into the long grass yet again. The alternative—funding the police through the precept—means that community safety depends on the ability of the local community to pay.

Before I conclude, I want to discuss reserves, which the Minister was keen to dwell on and which have been published with greater transparency this month. When the unfunded pay settlement was announced last year, police forces were lectured over their levels of reserves and were advised to use them for the 2% unconsolidated increase. The figure bandied about for the total amount of reserves is £1.6 billion, but the Minister knows full well that the vast majority of that figure is earmarked for capital projects or for known future spending. The real figure of usable reserves is £378 million, as the Minister’s own publication shows. Much of that is routinely being used for day-to-day policing as a result of cuts, and there is a danger that some forces will be put in the vulnerable position of not being able to respond to an emergency. In fact, the last available HMIC analysis revealed that only nine forces out of the 43 have more than the 5% level of reserves recommended by the Audit Commission, so the attempt to continue to distract us with the reserves is transparent, and the public and police leaders across the country will see right through it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly given the horrific events of the last year, I want to turn to counter-terrorism. Nobody who has read the report of David Anderson, QC’s review into the four fatal attacks in the spring and summer of 2017 can be in any doubt about the strain on counter-terror policing. In one chilling excerpt, he notes:

“On 21 March 2017, prior to the Westminster attack on the following day, investigation of Khuram Butt”—

one of the London Bridge attackers—

“was suspended. Investigation of the other SOIs”—

subjects of interest—

“investigated under the operation had been suspended the previous week, due to resourcing constraints brought on by a large number of P1 investigations”—

that is, priority one investigations.

Mark Rowley, the national lead for counter-terrorism policing, told the Home Affairs Committee in October that counter-terror policing was dealing with a 30% uptick in operations. He warned that

“dealing with this uplift in work at the moment is a real stretch”,

and that counter-terrorism had been put on an “emergency footing”. He continued:

“Given that we now have a growing number of subjects of interests we are investigating and a very big growth in the number of investigations...we have a bigger proportion of our investigations that are at the bottom of the pile and getting little or no work at the moment.”

I am certain that will horrify the public, as it horrifies me. I am equally certain that the public will wish the Government to give counter-terror policing the resources it needs to counter that threat. It is therefore staggering that Ministers have chosen, through this settlement, to give counter-terror policing just half of the resources it requested to keep the country safe.

Police chiefs are now openly warning, in an unprecedented way, of tough choices as a result of Ministers’ failure properly to resource their efforts in a threat climate described as “stratospheric.” If the first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens, the responsibility of the Opposition is to make sure the Government keep to that promise. The failure properly to resource the counter-terror effort alone would be justification enough for the Labour party to vote against the police grant today, but in fact this settlement fails to meet not only our security needs but the needs of local policing and of the communities that are most in need.

The Minister has said time and again that he will ensure the police have the resources they need to do the job. There will not be a single chief constable in this country who can tell him that he or she has the resources needed to fully protect the public and provide a professional service in the current climate. Under the Government’s watch, crime is soaring and the public are exposed. The Government must urgently think again.

2.21 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to listen to both the Minister, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who is rightly holding the Government to account. I take all her points on board.

We all know that there are clearly issues with police funding, but, if I may be so bold, not once did the shadow Minister suggest how the Labour party would deal with the huge hole in our public expenditure that, as I said in my earlier intervention, was to a large extent—along with the banking crisis—created by the Labour party before the coalition Government came into power. We inherited this terrible financial conundrum. We are trying to provide money for our public services, and when our economy improves, we will generate the income to pay for all the public services that so desperately need our money.

I thank Dorset police force and all its officers for doing an outstanding, courageous and dedicated job, and I am eternally grateful, as we all are in South Dorset—indeed, in the whole of Dorset, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) is here, too. I particularly praise our chief constable, Debbie Simpson, who is retiring after 35 years. She has been exemplary in her career, which proves how much can be achieved by a female officer. She has got to the very top, and all credit to her. I thank her for all the hard work she has done, and I look forward to many other female officers achieving the same rank.

I thank the Minister, for whom I have huge respect, for the extra £4.2 million. I also thank him for seeing me privately to go through my concerns. I am very grateful to him and to his Department.
I will quickly touch on three issues, and I will not take up much of the House’s time. First, I am grateful for the £12 precept flexibility, but there is still an outstanding deficit of £1.5 million. Dorset is considering a merger with Devon and Cornwall, which will aid the deficit. Work is under way on perhaps having one police force, and savings are being made. Unfortunately, that will optimise what we have, rather than growing the workforce, which in my humble opinion, and in the humble opinion of many others in Dorset, is what we should do.

Members on both sides of the House have mentioned reserves, and in 2017 Dorset’s reserves were 11% of our overall budget, compared with the national average of 15%. Dorset police force has managed to reduce its reserves by 26% since 2011, compared with all forces, which on average have increased their reserves by 19%.

Secondly, we need wholesale investment in policing. I totally accept that new crimes, such as modern slavery, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and cyber-crime, are now taking far more precedence and far more of our police officers’ time. What I regret is not the effort being made to combat those crimes but the fact that it is taking officers off the beat. I am a former soldier, and holding the land—or dominating it, in the case of Northern Ireland—and patrolling very troubled spots is where we gained information and intelligence. The deterrence was formed on the streets.

While we investigate all these other crimes—I give all credit to police officers—we must not lose sight of the fact that, in my humble opinion, we need more officers on the ground. Crimes are still being committed. A jewellery shop in Corfe Castle has now been hit three or four times. I believe the gangsters responsible come down from the midlands. They crash in, crash out and take their ill-gotten gains back to where they came from. Those crimes would not be committed if there were a police presence on the ground. I urge the Minister and the Government to think carefully about that point.

Finally, as the Minister has mentioned—I mentioned it to him in private, and I now do so in public—the grant is set in December and the police and crime commissioners then have until February to set their budgets. That is unlike local authorities, which have a four-year budget period that gives them much more time to plan ahead. I ask the Government to look at that.

What can be done to help Dorset police? I urge the Government to go back to the funding formula, which treats us unfairly for all kinds of reasons that I do not have time to go into now. This is an emotive subject for many, but I believe the overseas aid budget will balloon to some £20 billion in 2020. Do not get me wrong, because I have absolutely no objection to money going to overseas aid, but I object when at home—and charity starts at home—we are unable to provide enough money for all our public resources, not just the police service. I urge the Government and any right-minded person to consider the 0.7% overseas aid target. Yes, we should give money where it is needed and where we can afford it, but not before we look after all the needs of our own country.

2.27 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax). I feel very strongly about policing, law and order. We make the laws in this House, and we ask the police to enforce those laws out there. Between us, we make up the before and after of the legislative process. The fabric of a functioning society is based on collectively agreeing the laws that govern our country and then upholding those laws by deciding what happens to those who do not respect them. That is the essence of democracy, and those principles cut right across the different political parties, which is why I find it so difficult to comprehend what this Government are doing to policing and to policing budgets.

West Yorkshire police force has had a 35% reduction in funding since 2010, resulting in almost 2,000 fewer officers and members of staff—a 20% reduction of the force. The force has risen to the challenge set by this Government and has rationalised its estate, modernised to deliver efficiencies and reformed by investing in digital policing. The force has delivered £140 million in savings to get to where we are now. However, I am afraid to say that those deceptive words simply mask the fact that West Yorkshire police are now able to do less with less.

West Yorkshire has the fourth-largest force in the country and, to set the context, it takes in the busy cities of Wakefield, Leeds and Bradford, yet it also covers many Pennine towns extending up to the Lancashire border. We have diverse communities, with black and minority ethnic populations making up more than 50% of 14 of our wards. Although that is a welcome part of our diverse heritage, the House will appreciate that it also presents challenges. International events, terrorist incidents and extremist acts can all undermine community cohesion.

On any one day in West Yorkshire, one police officer is on duty for every 2,097 members of the public. On average, the force makes 136 arrests a day, with a staggering 43 of those arrests related to domestic abuse. The force will attend 38 house burglaries, 44 thefts from vehicles, 16 thefts of vehicles, four serious violent crimes, seven robberies, 57 assaults, 17 sexual offences and 159 incidents of anti-social behaviour, and it will deal with 141 incidents of domestic abuse in total.

We keep being told that crime is falling, that it is changing and that new crimes are emerging, but the lion’s share of criminal activity within this mix is all thefts and violence—there is nothing new in this at all. Yet layered on top of all that are these new and emerging types of crime. Non-recent child sexual exploitation and abuse investigations now account for 33% of all West Yorkshire police investigations—33% of that investigative capacity is taken up by non-recent CSE cases. There were 184 offences relating to modern-day slavery in 2016, which compares with just 19 three years ago. Technology is enabling types of crime such as the grooming of young people for sexual exploitation, human trafficking or radicalisation, and people are most likely to be the victim of fraud than any other crime, with this often being enabled by online activity.

There has been a particularly disturbing increase in firearms discharges in West Yorkshire over the past two years, with firearms predominantly used by organised criminal gangs as a means of resolving disputes. Hon. Members will not need me to remind them that the highest-profile discharge of a firearm in West Yorkshire resulted from the extreme actions of Thomas Mair, who, motivated by right-wing ideology, took the life of our friend and colleague Jo Cox. Sadly, we are
no strangers to extremism in West Yorkshire, with several Prevent priority areas presenting a continually evolving threat for the police to assess and manage.

In addition, I want to raise the issue of mission creep within policing, especially in relation to safeguarding and mental health, a point excellently made by the shadow Minister. Some 20% of all incidents reported to West Yorkshire police now relate to safeguarding. More than 20,000 missing people investigations were recorded in 2016, an increase of 258% compared with the 2013 figure. Of those, 2,500 were people who have gone missing on more than one occasion within the past 12 months. The percentage of children reported missing who have gone missing on more than one occasion was 37%. Every day, on average, West Yorkshire police will investigate 65 missing people, with 53 of these cases being graded as “high risk” or “medium risk”, where we are into “drop everything else” territory. The police will also be called to 43 separate incidents associated with mental health.

I have spent time with the out-of-hours mental health team in Halifax and seen the massive challenge that falls to the police outside the normal working hours of other agencies. I was horrified to see that although concerted efforts have been made to keep people detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 out of police cells, there is a crippling lack of alternative and more suitable assessment space. So people in the midst of a mental health crisis are being bounced from pillar to post, until an assessment suite or bed becomes available, often in the back of a police vehicle, but they are predominantly the responsibility of the police for as long as that takes, because of the shortcomings of mental health services to really meet the demand.

On Halloween weekend in Halifax I witnessed four officers tied up with mental health cases for most of the night. That involved two double-crewed units, which probably represented about a quarter of the officers on shift that evening. So I ask the Minister: have we ever really taken a decision about the role of the police in relation to mental health, vulnerability and safeguarding and said that we want to take on these additional responsibilities? I am not sure that we have, and we have allowed this mission creep to occur.

There will always be a role for the police in these matters, but given that the budget for West Yorkshire police has been cut by 35% since 2010, that the police are not the best agency to take a lead on some of these challenges where there is no criminality, just vulnerability, and that resources are as stretched as they are, we have drastically expanded the responsibilities of the police at the time when our forces can least cope with this. How can we look to empower the right people within social services, care homes, hospitals and the mental health profession, so that they take the lead on addressing these societal problems, rather than have it falling to the police by default, rather than by design, and certainly not motivated by any sense of best practice? Bearing in mind that safeguarding alone accounts for 20% of the workload of West Yorkshire police, the resources that would be released back into neighbourhood policing and back on to the frontline by making this shift could be significant.

I heard the Minister’s opening remarks and the Prime Minister’s comments about funding at Prime Minister’s questions earlier. West Yorkshire’s PCC, Mark Burns-Williamson will be increasing the precept, which is anticipated to generate in the region of £4.5 million. To give that some context, I should say that the 1% pay bonus, which is long overdue for officers but has to be found from existing budgets, will cost about £4 million. To be crystal clear, the pay bonus almost cancels out the precept, leaving a flat cash settlement without inflationary increases, so the settlement pays for less and less year on year and only further cuts within West Yorkshire police will square that circle. That is the reality of the budget before us, which is why we are so concerned about it.

To balance the books, West Yorkshire police will need to find another nearly £13 million over the next four years. This Government have made a lot about reserves, which we have heard again today. Beyond the force’s legal obligation to hold contingency moneys, this year alone the PCC has had to find £11 million from reserves to fund everyday frontline policing. By 2022, most of West Yorkshire’s reserves will have been spent or committed to existing obligations, including capital build programmes and further technology investment. The reserves are being spent year on year just to keep officers on the streets. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) articulated earlier, this money can be spent only once.

Before closing, I want to extend my thanks to Sabina Yasin of the Met police, as well as to Assistant Chief Constable Angela Williams and Police Sergeant Alex Macleod of West Yorkshire police, who have been co-ordinating my participation in the police parliamentary scheme. It has been brilliant and I recommend it to all colleagues. Every MP will no doubt have a good working relationship with local officers, but having the chance to get a real overview of the local force in detail and to spend time with specialist units that we would not otherwise come into contact with has been an eye-opening and incredibly useful experience, not least because it has helped me to feed into the Protect the Protectors campaign and the related work on the safety of emergency service workers.

With that in mind, I wonder whether the Minister can update the House about when we might see the “Protect the Protectors” Bill return to the Chamber on Report and Third Reading. Its return is eagerly anticipated by colleagues. Can he respond to the inquiries made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on the vision of the Bill always having been about having a tough deterrent, so that people reflect on the seriousness of these actions and do not assault emergency services workers in the first place? Although we are incredibly pleased and grateful that the Government have worked with us on extending the six-month sentence for assaulting a police officer to 12 months, we are continually receiving representations from people who are concerned that that will not be the ultimate deterrent that we had hoped for with the Bill. Can the Minister update the House and respond to the letter from my lion. Friend about the Government’s appetite for pushing the sentence to 24 months? I would be grateful if he updated us on that.

2.37 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who has spoken this afternoon, as she has done on a
number of occasions, with great passion and clarity on the type of policing we want to see in our country and how it is delivered. Conservative Members are clear that there is a widening gulf in the Labour party on this issue. I am convinced that the vast majority of Labour Members, like all Conservative Members, support our police and policing. We follow up our speeches and words with our actions in that sort of support.

I am not sure I will take lessons from some Labour Front Benchers—I exclude the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heely. (Louise Haigh) from that, because she spoke with great force and passion. We have a shadow Chancellor who believes that M15 should be disbanded and the police should be disarmed. We have a shadow Home Secretary who has just left her place but who has, over the years, with her party leader, supported and revelled in IRA terrorism. We have also had the police berated by some for policing, quite properly, industrial action. When I asked the question, which again got no answer, about what the Labour party would do differently on this grant, we were reminded of the manifesto pledge of 10,000 extra police, yet even with all the months that have elapsed since that general election, Labour still has no idea how they would be funded and how much it would cost.

I will, though, take some lessons from my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister. Until the most recent reshuffle, it was my pleasure and honour to serve both him and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime as their Parliamentary Private Secretary. Both are men of complete integrity and are dedicated to combating crime in this country. They are, one might say, the Batman and Robin of the Home Office. I will not say which is which; I shall leave that to the hon. Gentleman to decide. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), performed a balancing act with the often competing and rather tense environment of the civil service, it was my pleasure and honour to serve both him and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), performed a balancing act with the often competing and rather tense environment of the civil libertarians on one side and the civil lawyers on the other, and a political imperative to keep the country safe. That is always kept under review. We all know the figures—I am not going to bombard the House with the figures—but I do not think that anybody could seriously question the commitment of Conservative Members and the Government to combating terrorism in all its forms and to ensuring that our law enforcement agencies and the laws under which they prosecute are always fit for purpose, with an element of flexibility to meet new challenges.

I urge my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister to look favourably on the proposal to merge Devon and Cornwall police with the Dorset constabulary. They are collaborating hugely well at the moment and that is clearly the next stage. It will deliver savings that can be focused on frontline policing in the great county of Dorset, to the benefit and safety of my constituents.

2.45 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I should say at the outset that I might have to leave before the end of the debate as I have to take the Chair in Westminster Hall.

As the Minister would not do so, let me begin by acknowledging that the cash freeze in this settlement is, when we take inflation into account, actually a real-terms
cut for West Midlands police. That is what the Government are doing to policing in the west midlands. It is in addition to the 2,091 officers we have already lost and the £1.45 million that has been cut from the budget since this lot came to power.

The West Midlands police and crime panel has agreed to the commissioner’s request to add an extra £12 to the precept paid by already hard-pressed council tax payers—had it not, the situation would be even worse—but given the high number of band A and B properties in our area, the west midlands simply does not have the same revenue-raising capacity as places such as Surrey or Hampshire, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said. Hampshire’s population is almost 1 million smaller than that of the west midlands, but Hampshire will raise more through its precept, meaning it will experience budget growth as a result of the settlement, whereas even after a £12 council tax increase, West Midlands police will still be £12.5 million short of the money needed just to stand still.

Today’s settlement is a ministerial announcement of a further cut to policing for the people of the west midlands. It will mean fewer officers, even less neighbourhood policing, slower response times and the closure of 28 police stations. We have heard a lot of talk about reserves, so let me be clear: other than the basic requirements for insurance and emergencies, West Midlands police’s reserves will be exhausted by 2020. We spent what was in the kitty on making up for the earlier cuts; there is no secret hoard at Lloyd House. Of course, the Government are quick to argue that they have given extra money for counter-terrorism, but the Minister needs to recognise that £47 million of the £50 million received by West Midlands police has already been spent. Such policing costs £100,000 a day when the threat level is critical, and neighbourhood policing, which is already virtually non-existent in many of the communities that I represent, ceases to function altogether.

Our chief constable says that given the challenges his force faces, he cannot understand why, as the largest force in the country apart from the Met, we are spending below the national average per capita on policing. Basically, there is not enough money to provide a properly resourced police service in the west midlands. The public can no longer expect police protection when they need it. The 101 phone service is a joke, routine burglaries do not get a response, the clear-up rate is falling and public confidence is at an all-time low.

Some 92% of my constituents who responded to my recent crime survey said that the Government’s reduction in the number of police officers had proved to be a false economy. Why will the Government not admit that they have got it wrong? How long will we have to put up with the “emperor’s new clothes” farce we witnessed at Prime Minister’s questions today? The Prime Minister must be the only person in this country who thinks that crime is falling, just as she was the only one who thought that stop-and-search powers were a bad idea. Well, try telling that to the parents of a knife crime victim.

The simple truth is that we cannot rely on the Government to keep dangerous rapists and violent criminals in prison after they are caught. We cannot rely on them to provide a properly resourced probation service to supervise criminals on the outside, and now we cannot rely on them to provide enough money to police our towns and cities. Their record is one of total failure. The Minister should be apologising; he should be ashamed of himself.

2.50 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Setting police budgets for 2018-19 has been a real challenge both for the Government and for local forces such as Suffolk constabulary. I recognise the significant amount of background work that my right hon. Friend the Minister carried out ahead of presenting his provisional proposals before Christmas. He visited and spoke to every police force in England and Wales so that he could obtain a better understanding of the demands that they face and how those can be best managed. I am grateful to him for the time that he spent with Suffolk colleagues, the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk, Tim Passmore, and me so that we could provide him with a full insight into the challenges faced by Suffolk police.

I understand that the Government, in arriving at their funding proposals, have identified national challenges to which it is important to give some priority, including complex and hidden crimes such as child exploitation and slavery, and the terrorism threat. It is right that additional funding has been allocated to address those national issues. That said, both the history and the future of good policing is local and community-based. It is important that the Government recognise the significant pressures that preparing a budget has presented to the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk.

Suffolk constabulary is the force with the highest caseload per officer in the country, at 150 per year, yet it receives one of the lowest funding settlements. A disproportionately high percentage of the county’s funding is received through the council tax precept. At 42.6%, its figure is one of the highest in the country, and that compares with the national average for England of 32%.

While Suffolk constabulary is a well-run and efficient force, it has to contend with a significant number of modern-day pressures. To meet them, the police and crime commissioner is increasing the precept by 6.8%. The budget of the office of the commissioner, out of which important support services such as domestic violence support have been funded, has been reduced from £1.3 million to £936,000.

Suffolk is an efficient force that has produced a higher proportion of savings compared with its overall budget than any other constabulary in England and Wales. A collaboration with Norfolk is generating internal savings of £26 million a year. Eight buildings are now being shared with the fire service, and five more such arrangements are proposed. The PCC is starting work to refinance the private finance initiative contract that he inherited, which was agreed before 2010 at an original interest rate of a punitive 13%.

Suffolk constabulary is under significant pressure. It faces a significant increase in demand: emergency incidents are up 14%; domestic abuse is up 40% against a three-year average; serious sexual offences are up 50% on the same basis; cyber-crime is up, with 943 online crimes reported last year; and the number of missing people is up 12%. Against that backdrop, there is an urgent need to review the police funding formula. I welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment to do so, but I urge him to come up with a timetable for starting the review as soon as practicable.
The current system, in which a disproportionately high level of funding is derived from the council tax precept, is unsustainable. Suffolk has to contend with a wide variety of modern pressures, including the county lines drugs and organised crime challenge, and a significant increase in its elderly population. Some 13,000 Suffolk citizens have been diagnosed with dementia, and that figure is predicted to rise by a further 40% by 2025. That places additional demands on police officers.

Police budgeting is a very difficult science, as events that can never be predicted will take place. One of those is the tragic case of Airman Corrie McKeague, who disappeared after a night out in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). Quite rightly, Suffolk constabulary has carried out an extensive search for Corrie, but very sadly it has not yet shed any light on his disappearance. The search has cost £2.15 million so far. An application has been made to the Home Office for the repayment of those costs, and I urge the Minister to process that application and to reimburse Suffolk constabulary as soon as practically possible.

A further unforeseen cost that Suffolk constabulary might have to bear arises out of its court case with Ipswich Town Football Club regarding the policing of roads around the ground on match days. Madam Deputy Speaker, I should declare that I am a lifetime supporter of Ipswich Town and a season ticket holder. Last week, the Supreme Court ruled that Suffolk police could not appeal the case and that it should cover the costs of such policing. That could well result in significant back payments to the football club for the period between 2008 to 2013. Personally, I do not agree with the decision, and I believe that it was wrong of the football club to pursue the case. On match days, the two roads—Portman Road and Sir Alf Ramsey Way—that surround the stadium are closed to traffic, and in my opinion they then become part of the stadium. I question whether it is morally right for the public and the taxpayer ultimately to pay for the policing of sporting and leisure events, which can generate significant revenues for the clubs or organisations involved. We are all aware of the enormous salaries paid to footballers, particularly those in the Premier League.

Last month, additional tickets were sold to away supporters for the match against Leeds United, for which Ipswich Town no doubt received additional revenue. There were some incidents, and an additional police presence was required close to the junction of Portman Road and Sir Alf Ramsey Way. It is wrong that the taxpayer has to pick up the bill. The Court’s decision could have ramifications for police forces across the country, and I urge the Home Office to introduce legislation to address the problem as quickly as possible.

Producing police budgets for 2018-19 has been a major challenge for both the Government and Suffolk’s police and crime commissioner. I recognise the pressures that the Government are under, but the system is very nearly at breaking point. Suffolk is traditionally a well-run rural force, but it is now having to deal with a wide variety of 21st century metropolitan challenges on an increasingly stretched budget. The unique nature of Suffolk, with the challenge of county lines and the demographics of an ageing population, means that policing in the county is under increased pressure. It is no longer reasonable for such a high percentage of the policing budget to come from Suffolk council tax payers. The situation needs to change as soon as possible, so I urge the Government to instigate the funding review without further delay and as quickly as possible.

2.58 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. The debate has already touched on several very wide-ranging challenges that our police forces must face, but I will confine my remarks to three main issues. First, I wish to speak about how the settlement does little to address the struggles faced by the already underfunded and stretched police forces in Wales. I will then briefly reiterate the case for devolving policing to the Welsh Parliament in Cardiff. Finally, I want to raise an issue of which the Minister is, I hope, already aware: the complications that the apprenticeship levy is causing for Welsh police forces.

Members of the Government seem to have a problem with figures, whether that is £350 million for the NHS or £440 million extra for our police forces. Neither figure quite adds up, as the irreplaceable North Wales police and crime commissioner, Arfon Jones, has made quite clear. This has already been discussed this afternoon, but it is worth reiterating that around £270 million of the £450 million supposed increase is accounted for by the Government allowing forces to levy higher precepts on council tax payers. The remaining £180 million is accounted for by the Home Office increasing central allocations. For North Wales police, the settlement means a real-terms cut of about £2 million. The police now face hard decisions on whether to implement further—and perhaps dangerous—budget reductions, or to increase the council tax precept, which hits constituents who are already feeling the pressure on their finances.

The police and crime commissioner for Dyfed-Powys police, Dafydd Llywelyn, has done an excellent job of retaining the number of police officers in his force in recent years, despite budgetary pressures and the growing demands that the police now face. We have already heard a lot about the new and changing challenges that our police forces must address, and he has employed an innovative approach in an attempt to cater for those new challenges. He has invested in such things as body cameras and better mobile technology, and established one of the best cyber-crime teams in the United Kingdom. However, I am told that keeping his budget in the black and maintaining the number of officers on the beat is becoming an impossible task.

The settlement subtly shifts the burden of funding from central Government to the local taxpayer, forcing PCCs to make an unenviable choice of cutting police numbers and putting their constituents at risk, or increasing council tax in already hard-pressed communities. It is patently clear that this is not a sustainable or fair settlement.

Of course, the police forces of Wales have been underfunded for years. There are now 750 fewer police officers in Wales than there were in 2010, which represents a drop of about 10% since the Conservatives took office. I would be hard pressed to find residents or communities across Wales, particularly in rural Wales, who have not witnessed the closure of either a local police station or the station desk. Central Wales, and particularly my area of Ceredigion, suffers the unique challenges of rural policing.
Responsibility for our policing policy is still retained here in Westminster, hundreds of miles away from the police forces that are carrying out their duties. Unlike in Scotland or Northern Ireland, our underpowered Welsh Parliament does not even have a semblance of the control required to deliver the policing that our communities need. It is not just those powers that would be boosted by the devolution of policing. Figures provided by Welsh police forces indicate that if policing was devolved and funded on a population basis, as is the case for other services, police forces in Wales would be better off to the tune of around £25 million a year.

The failure to comprehend the current devolution settlement is exemplified by my final point. My hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) has exposed a potentially devastating funding dispute that is born of confusion surrounding Welsh devolution and the apprenticeship levy. The apprenticeship levy, which Welsh police forces are of course subject to, is one of the main sources of funding to train the next generation of police officers, but despite having to pay millions into the levy, Welsh police forces are yet to receive a penny from it. This is down to a dispute between the Welsh and UK Governments. The Government at this end of the M4 claim that as training is devolved, the Welsh Government are responsible for the funding of training and apprenticeships. The Welsh Government, on the other hand, claim that the funding of officers’ training and apprenticeships is a matter for Westminster because policing is a reserved matter.

As I have noted, Welsh police forces are already under significant financial pressure. Whether this impasse is a product of incompetence or error, or a consequence of some political gamesmanship, it will mean fewer police officers on Welsh streets. We desperately need to overcome this impasse, so I would be most grateful if the Minister would update the House on the matter, particularly regarding what progress has been made to overcome this problem.

PCCs of all political colours have expressed their dismay with the police grant. Westminster’s apathy for Wales has never been more evident than when it comes to our police forces. My final request is that the Minister again considers the case for devolving policing to the Welsh Parliament and giving Wales the power to address its own policing needs. With our Welsh Parliament powerless to change things and central funding falling short of a level that could reasonably be considered fair, Welsh police forces face a difficult future indeed.

3.4 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

It goes without saying that the work of the police in keeping us all safe and secure is so incredibly important. They deserve our thanks for all their work. One of the cornerstones of our way of life and our society is that our police forces are independent, professional and do their job in line with their duties. We should all be proud of what they do. I support the work of the police in dealing with the threats that face the nation, including their counter-terrorism work. We should support and praise the work of special branch and MI5. It is important, on occasion, that some of our officers are armed and able to protect us from the most serious and grave threats. I hope that the whole House will unite in thanking all arms of the police for their important work. Having been under attack here ourselves, we know very well the importance of their work.

I will particularly talk about the work of Kent police and Kent’s police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott. He has been in office since the last police and crime commissioner elections, and has been successful in increasing the number of police officers. Since his election in May 2016, he has worked hard with the funding available to get 80 extra police officers and has protected PCSO numbers at 300, when other police forces have sadly seen fit to reduce them. And he has managed to do this despite having only 12% in reserves.

Now, when I was listening to the discussion about reserves, I thought of a parable. I do not know whether anyone else in this place went to Sunday school, but I did, and that is where I heard the parable of the talents. In that story, the master goes away and leaves his servants with some talents. One of the servants spends the talents wisely and uses them productively to further the important work of the master. Another buries them in the ground and leaves them there to do nothing. The discussion about reserves is a bit like that; reserves do not exist just to sit there for a rainy day, on the off chance that something happens. Reserves are to be used. They ensure that we have the money to spend to help keep us safe and secure. Kent’s PCC has been assiduous in doing that. Kent police only have about 10% in reserves, but he has been spending money to get more officers on the beat and on the frontline to keep our towns, villages and communities safe and secure. Money should be spent on the frontline of policing, not just left to rot in a bank.

It is important that we celebrate the ambitions of the police and crime commissioner of Kent to get a further 200 officers on the beat. He is not unrealistic. He told me that this cannot go on forever, saying, “We can’t keep digging into our reserves because we basically don’t have any left.” He knows that the police will need further funding in the future, but for now the settlement is a good one that he is happy to support. I take his advice because he knows best how to spend money efficiently, wisely and well, he knows how to get the best out of the frontline, and he has ambitions to improve the safety and security of Kent. In our discussions, I have told him how important it is that we have more police on the frontline in Dover and Deal, especially when it comes to these 200 officers who he has the ambition to recruit. I have made a particularly strong case that we should have more police officers in the town of Deal.

At various points in this debate we have heard about the accessibility of the police. We had an unfortunate situation in the past, which came into being under the independent police and crime commissioner that we had for a while in Kent. At that point, there were just two hours of desk time for the residents of Deal to be able to see the police in the local police station. I have been making the case that the funding the commissioner will have should be used to increase the amount of desk time from two hours to four or five hours each day, and ideally for six days a week, rather than five. People would then be able to discuss their concerns with police personnel and would feel that the police were much more in the heart of the community and more accessible—
face to face, not just over a telephone. I have been making this case to the commissioner and I hope he will take heed.

I am pleased that Kent has seen an increase in its allocation from £279.3 million to £288 million, which is a £8.7 million increase. And I am pleased that Kent police are not like the wasteful servants that we hear about so much—pleaded for by the Opposition, who like to bury their reserves. Kent’s police and crime commissioner spends his reserves to ensure that we are doing things on the frontline.

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Charlie Elphicke: I will finish in a moment, but I will first give way to the hon. Gentleman. I cannot resist giving way in order to listen to the points he makes.

Mr Jones: The recommended level is 5%. The hon. Gentleman has already told us that his own authority has 10%, so what is he doing with his 5% buried away somewhere?

Charlie Elphicke: I am, as ever, very tempted by the hon. Gentleman. I think that 10% is pretty much at the bottom of the table. [Hon. Members: “No, it’s not.”] It pretty much is. Places like Gwent, at about 42%, are very high up. Indeed, Durham is at 12%.

Mr Jones rose—

Charlie Elphicke: I will not take a further intervention, but I will say that Kent has been dealing with its reserves and is minded to continue to be very efficient in that way.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Charlie Elphicke: I will take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Bailey: I have difficulty in following the logic of the hon. Gentleman’s argument. Having praised his local police authority and said that police authorities should be spending their reserves, can he explain how his authority is keeping 10%, which is double what the National Audit Office says is the appropriate recommended level?

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I gently point out to him that the average reserve level is 15% overall, so Kent is well below the average. The PCC is saying that he can continue to manage as things are for the next year, but that in due course this opportunity is going to be exhausted and there will need to be greater scope—and of course there will. That is important, but it is also important that we do not just bury our talents in the soil but use them effectively, wisely, and well.

The Minister and the Government were right to reject representations from Labour Members at various points that the police budget should be cut by 10%, and right to reject unfunded spending commitments. We hear about how 10,000 police people can just be magic’d out of the ground with no basis on which to fund that spending. There are two important elements. First, we must have a sense of reality. Secondly, we must make sure that we support the police in what they do; give them adequate resources; do not just have reserves mouldering away in the bank; and concentrate resources on the frontline, with more officers on the beat in Dover, Deal, across Kent, and across the nation.

3.12 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), although I found it hard to understand how he could be praising his police authority for not practising what he was preaching.

I will try to take a consensual approach.

Mr Kevan Jones: Why?

Mr Bailey: Well, in common with other Members on both sides of the House, I have taken part in the police service parliamentary scheme, and, having done that, I would have thought that we would all be united in our admiration for the sheer professionalism, dedication, commitment, skill and expertise of our police forces.

Having started on that consensual note, I will move on. I make no apologies whatsoever for standing up, in line with other west midlands Members of Parliament, to criticise this settlement in the context of what West Midlands police are going to get and what their needs are going to be. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) outlined some of the key statistics, and I will not repeat them. What it amounts to is that, following this cash-plus precept settlement, there will be a £12.5 million gap in what is needed to sustain the current level of service. It could lead to the closure of 18 police stations. West Midlands police force has lost over 2,000 officers, and it is difficult to see how it could go on without losing more.

The key issue is the funding model that the Government are developing for the police in areas such as the west midlands. If there is an annual flat grant, which effectively means that we lose the real value of that grant by a certain percentage every year, allied with a maximum on the precept, then the areas with the lowest-value property profiles—nearly always urban areas with lower-income people and often higher crime rates—will become disproportionately disadvantaged year on year. That is the situation that is developing in the west midlands. A rise in council tax in the west midlands will raise £3.35 per person. In Surrey, it raises £6.42 per person. That is why we see other anomalies such as Hampshire, which, with almost 1 million fewer residents, has a larger increase in its settlement arising from the precept than areas such as the west midlands.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that a reserve can be spent only once. More importantly, all the West Midlands police divisions have gone now, including in Coventry, so nobody really knows who to point the finger at. I have had meetings with the police on this. The public in Coventry, and in the rest of the west midlands, are becoming very concerned about the fact that there is a lack of policemen, but, more importantly, that the funding formula is grossly unfair to the west midlands.

Mr Bailey: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend says. Indeed, he leads me on to my next point.
We can bandy statistics around, but what matters in the end is the perception of the people who work in the police force and the perception of the public who experience the service it provides. Find me an area in the west midlands policing zone where local people will not complain of a reduction in the frontline neighbourhood policing in their area. Find me an area in the west midlands that has not seen an increase in crime rates and a lowering in satisfaction with the service.

For me, that was reinforced when, six months ago, a middle-ranking policeman asked to come and see me. He explained that he had joined the force over 10 years ago, risen in the ranks, and found it incredibly satisfying, but was going to have to leave. The strains on him, the public expectations of what he could deliver, and how demoralised he was feeling because he knew that he could not deliver were such that he could face it no more. That may be a one-off, but I am worried by the fact that the chief constable and the police commissioner reiterate to me everything that officer cited as his reasons for leaving when they describe the overall funding statistics for their service.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): If the West Midlands force is like Gloucestershire’s, at weekends it is almost held together with specials. Without those specials, the police could not do nearly as much as they try to do on a normal weekend. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mr Bailey: Yes. My hon. Friend raises an important point. Increasingly, the police are becoming dependent on the activities of specials and others. Again, I pay enormous tribute to them, but obviously there comes a critical balance when one thinks, “Is this the correct way forward?”

Another aspect of the West Midlands police budget is funding for counter-terrorism. The force has been particularly hard hit over the past year. It had to freeze neighbourhood policing during that time, for the very good reason that it has had to devote resources to counter-terrorism. With depleted numbers of officers and huge additional burdens being placed on the service, for very good and strategic reasons—the protection of the public—something has to give. That is worrying, because there should not be a choice between counter-terrorism policing and neighbourhood policing; the one is complementary to the other.

I would like to give a very good example of that in the west midlands that is of particular significance to me. Only a few years ago, the Ukrainian terrorist Pavlo Lapshyn was arrested and tried after he had killed Mohammed Saleem in Walsall. That same terrorist placed a nail bomb outside a mosque in my constituency. It went off, and had it not been for the fact that the worshippers at the mosque had changed the time of their service, the casualty numbers could have been enormous. That case highlights the significance of neighbourhood policing, because it was the information provided to local police forces by local people that enabled the man to be arrested and brought to justice. One wonders whether that would happen today, given the current level of neighbourhood policing. In any case, it underlines the point that without frontline neighbourhood policing—people engaging every day with the communities in their local areas—the efforts of the counter-terrorist police will be blunted. They need the work of neighbourhood police.

I conclude by emphasising that I am sticking up for the West Midlands police. They do a fantastic job in a multicultural area with a lot of low-income people and great challenges. The people of the west midlands and the police that look after them deserve a funding formula that will give them the resources necessary to adequately meet the expectations of local people, so that they can live in the security that they are entitled to expect.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I, too, would certainly like to pay tribute to my local force, Devon and Cornwall, which does a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances. Rural constituencies have the extra challenges of distance and a lack of good infrastructure, particularly broadband. If hon. Members looked at the roads there, they would understand why there is a real challenge.

I have talked to my PCC, Alison Hernandez, and she would like me to say thank you to the Government, for two reasons. First, she is pleased that they have listened specifically to a request for flexibility. As a consequence, the police precept will go up by 6.8%—the maximum—but I would take issue with those who say that it is inappropriate that the increase will come out of the taxpayers’ pockets. After all, mainstream tax also comes out of all taxpayers’ pockets. This at least ensures that we know the precept money will be spent on policing.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am very interested by that. Will the hon. Lady put out leaflets in her constituency to tell her constituents that tonight she has voted for her local council’s policing precept to go up?

Anne Marie Morris: Absolutely, and I shall tell the hon. Gentleman why—although I am not going to put it in a leaflet. The point is that people on the streets are saying that they are prepared to pay for health and social care, education and policing. What they do not like is non-specific tax rises that they think will be spent on things that they do not really value.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne Marie Morris: No; I have taken one intervention and, given the time and how many Members wish to speak, I will carry on.

My PCC was also pleased that, this time, the final settlement took account of the increase in housing numbers. In the past, that has not been done and that has meant a lower settlement. However, it is clear that many challenges are ongoing because, as the Minister rightly said, the nature of crime has changed. We have increased terrorism and cyber-crime—indeed, even in Devon, someone is more likely to be the victim of cyber-crime than of a physical violent crime—so it is right that we increase our investment in those areas.

When I talk to schoolteachers and my local police force, however, I learn that there has been a subtle change—again—and that violent crime is increasing, although it is of a different nature. Burglaries were going down, but are now going back up again. More
worrying is street crime. A gang culture is growing, and if it is growing in Devon I am sure it is also growing everywhere else. To deal with that, we need more bobbies on the beat. The police also need greater resources. One of the tools for dealing with the issue is dispersal orders, but these days they are for a relatively short time—a matter of 24 or 48 hours—whereas they used to be for days, weeks or, in some cases, months. The police tell me that it is difficult to deal with gang culture because they do not have the tools that they need. That is an issue that the Minister might look at.

In my surgeries, it is clear that one of the biggest growing issues is antisocial behaviour, which Opposition Members have also mentioned. We will have to think long and hard about how we deal with that, because at the moment it is not seen as a crime per se, so it is batted between local authorities and the police and nobody really deals with it.

One of the new crimes that most certainly requires more bobbies on the beat is modern-day slavery. It is of particular interest to me, because the police lead on it is in Devon. For us, sorting out modern-day slavery is very important. Members might ask, “Does that really happen in Devon?” Yes, it does. We have significant levels of prostitution, as well as people enslaved in processing factories and in agriculture. Most research suggests that the number of people in slavery is significantly under-recognised and under-reported, but the only way we will find many of the individuals suffering from this horrendous crime is through bobbies on the beat who know what is going on in their local area. We need to think again about how we can be clever and get more bobbies on the beat.

I am sure that the proposed merger between Dorset police and Devon and Cornwall police will make a big difference. They already work closely together, and the proposal has my support. I hope that the Government will also support it. One point that my PCC would like the Government to consider is how we might find additional funding for the police. Her suggestion is that the Minister might look at business rates. At the moment other emergency services, especially fire, get a share of the business rates, but the police do not. That is particularly relevant in my constituency, because we were lucky enough to get into the pilot for local authorities to retain 100% of rates.

I shall summarise by saying, “Overall, in the circumstances, well done.” The local police do a fantastic job, and they are pleased by the greater flexibility. However, I think they would echo the comments made by Opposition Members that the funding formula has to be reviewed. Whatever it is like in the west midlands, in rural areas of Devon there are real challenges that the current funding formula simply does not meet. A review is needed that recognises that the challenges of today are very different from those of 20 years ago.

3.28 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), although I am not sure I quite agree with all her points. I would like to begin by thanking Lancashire’s police and crime commissioner, Lancashire’s chief constable, and the policemen and policewomen who serve so diligently and professionally to keep us all safe. The work they do is essential. On behalf of them and the people of my constituency, I would like to challenge a couple of assertions that the Government continue to make.

The first assertion is that crime is falling. In Lancashire, the number of police officers is certainly falling: we have 1,200 fewer police officers than there were in 2010. As for Government Members’ comments on what Labour would do, actions speak louder than words. When we left government, Lancashire had 1,200 more police officers—the Government’s action has been to reduce the number of police officers in Lancashire by 1,200. At the same time, crime is increasing. In Lancashire, hate crime increased by 22% last year, fraud by 15%, knife crime by 32%, domestic abuse-related crime by 20% and theft by 18.9%, and senior police officers have commented on the tsunami of cyber-crime that is currently only part-measured. The number of police officers is falling and crime is rising.

The second assertion I would like to challenge is that police funding is protected and rising. That is incorrect. To come anywhere close to existing budgets by applying the full allowable precept would raise only £6.1 million but amount to a 7.25% increase in precept for the taxpayers in my constituency and across Lancashire. The fact is that since 2010, Lancashire constabulary has been required to make savings of £72 million, with an additional £17 million to come by 2020. The only way it can anywhere near continue to function is by asking people in my constituency to accept higher levels of crime and to pay for the privilege.

Mention has been made of reserves. I really am flabbergasted to hear the comments of Conservative Members about burying reserves. Burying their heads in the sand would be a more appropriate assessment of what is going on. Am I really hearing correctly that those on the Government Benches want us to run a service as important as the police on reserves? That is no responsible way to plan for a vital service. In Lancashire, earmarked reserves are kept for the modernisation of the force, so that it can attempt, in the face of so many challenges, to keep one step ahead of the criminals and adapt to the changing nature of crime. General reserves remain just below the required 5%. It is a good job that the Lancashire constabulary has been so prudent, because in the past 12 months it has been required to foot the £5.9 million bill for policing fracking in Lancashire. Goodness knows where the funding would have come from to pay for that had Lancashire not been so prudent.

Chief constables across the country, including in Lancashire, are saying that it is more difficult now to keep the public safe. The recently retired chief constable of Lancashire said that he could not guarantee keeping people safe on current budgets. People in my constituency of Burnley have the second-highest level of crime in Lancashire, and crime is rising across all areas of my constituency. My constituents will now be faced with paying more in council tax. They are taxpayers, and I value taxpayers’ money, as do they, but I question the service they are getting for their contribution.

If the Government, as is their right, no longer prioritise police forces and the safety of the people, they ought at the very least to be honest about it, instead of trying to delude the British public.
3.33 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who in her magnificent speech spoke up for our police service, spoke up for our country, and spoke up for the safety and security of our citizens. She was absolutely right to do that, because the first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens. That was a responsibility we took deadly seriously when we were in government. The development, with the police, of the British model of policing—neighbourhood policing, 17,000 extra police officers and 16,000 police community support officers—saw crime fall by 43%. That progress has now been slammed into reverse, with 21,000 gone nationally and 2,000 in the west midlands. If we look at the most recent statistics in the west midlands, we see that there has been a 14% overall increase in crime, with increases of 15% in gun crime, 17% in knife crime, 31% in serious acquisitive crime and 8% in domestic violence.

What planet do Conservative Members live on? Do they not hear from their communities the concerns that we hear? I remember a packed public meeting I called on 24 November, with our admirable police and crime commissioner David Jamieson, together with the leadership of our police service. There was complete dismay among local people about rising crime. There had been eight serious incidents in a matter of months involving knife crime, gun crime and machetes, and there were concerns that we never see our police any longer. One after the other, people said, “We are frightened,” and older people in particular said, “We are frightened to go out after night falls.”

Mr Jim Cunningham: I will give my hon. Friend an example. Last week there was a public meeting in the Willenhall area of Coventry, and the police more or less said that there was a shortage of policemen in that area. That is a typical example. The public are seriously concerned about rising crime in that area and other parts of my constituency, and they want something done. They want more policemen and no more alibis from the Government.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend puts it well—more police officers, not more alibis. I will come to that in one moment.

The consequences being felt by the British public are ever more serious. One police officer said to me, “Jack, I hate to say this, but increasingly some criminals feel free rein, because there just aren’t enough of us any longer to keep the community safe.” In terms of response times, domestic violence victims are having to wait from four hours until the following day for the police to turn up, when they are desperate for the safety that the police bring.

The hollowing out of neighbourhood policing—that great British model of policing celebrated worldwide, which Labour built in government—is having increasingly serious consequences. On the one hand, neighbourhood policing is about not just the detection of crime but working with the community to prevent crime in the first place. On the other hand, it is crucial to counter-terrorism, as it is the eyes and ears of the counter-terrorist effort. We face the most serious threat to our country in a generation, from terrorism inspired by ISIS and al-Qaeda and from far-right terrorism, which now accounts for 15% of terrorist threats. Time and again, the heads of counter-terrorism units right across the country say the same thing: neighbourhood policing is vital to keeping the public safe and stopping the terrorist threat.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) was right when he said that such are the demands upon the West Midlands police service, including surge capacity after terrorist attacks, that it had to suspend neighbourhood policing for an entire month. It is little wonder that the people in the communities concerned express utter dismay and ask, “Where are our police officers?”

We heard a series of assertions from Conservative Members. In essence, their mantra is, “We have cut police, but we have cut crime and protected police budgets, and ours has been a fair approach.” The assertion about cutting crime is not true. The stats on recorded crime have been substantially cleaned up, but the Office for National Statistics has intervened to ensure that in future, we also take account of cyber-criminality, which was not previously included in the statistics. Incidentally, cyber-crime has a low level of reporting, but if we included the estimates for it, we would see the crime figures go up by in excess of 25%. That is all the more serious now, because a person is more likely to be mugged online than on the street.

The assertion about protecting police budgets is not true. West Midlands police has suffered £140 million of cuts to its budget. It needed £22 million this year just to stand still. Instead, all it has been able to get is the £9.5 million thrown up by the precept. That means a real-terms cut of £12.5 million. It is little wonder that Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary has estimated that 359 more police officers will go in the west midlands. Our PCC has said that 28 police stations have already closed and more are likely to close.

As for this nonsense about a fair approach, I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). In his powerful speech, he argued that if we compare the treatment of the west midlands to that of the leafy shires of Surrey and Hampshire, nothing could be further from the truth than the idea of a fair approach.

Turning to the police service itself, as the thin blue line is stretched ever thinner, our police officers are paying the price. I want to pay tribute to them for the work they do and the heroism of their approach. I remember police officers chasing an armed robber who had hijacked a car and driven off with two young children in the back seat. Putting their lives at risk to keep those kids safe and recover them for their mum and dad, they ran towards danger. That is the nature of their job and the nature of their heroism.

Police officers pay a price in their own physical security—a police officer in Birmingham was stabbed in the neck as he effected an arrest on 12 December—but also in stress, sickness and despair. The statistics on the impact on the police service of their having to do ever more with ever less resource are profoundly depressing.

So many police officers have paid the price with their own jobs. Some of the most heartbreaking occasions I remember were when the West Midlands police had to use regulation A19 to retire police officers aged 51, 52 or 53 who had 30 years of service. Some of the finest
police officers one would ever want to meet—they were doing an outstanding job and they loved their job—were forced to retire because of Government cuts. Let us hear no more about “We have cut crime” or “We have protected budgets”, because nothing could be further from the truth.

May I say in conclusion that I listened in disbelief to the cavalier disregard not of the Minister, although I fundamentally disagree with what he has said, but of the Prime Minister earlier? I have to ask: does she not hear the same concerns that we hear? As a senior police officer put it to me, is she deaf to reason? Does she ever meet local people and listen to their concerns? If she did, she would hear about the same experiences that I and everyone else on the Opposition Benches has heard about. I remember a woman who has lived in Perry Common for 44 years saying, “I don’t go out after dark any longer”. Local shopkeepers who have been robbed at knife point told me, “People are afraid to come out after dark, and it’s affecting our business”. A woman from the Slade Road area said, “I’ve lived here for 60 years, and I love the area, which I was brought up in, but I no longer feel safe”.

I must say in all frankness that it is simply not good enough to hear Conservative Members praise the police service and then preside over the biggest cuts in policing history. Forgive me if I put this bluntly, but the consequences are that, ultimately, people will die who might otherwise have lived, people will suffer injury who might otherwise have walked in safety and people will have their house burgled who might otherwise have enjoyed security in their home. The consequences could not be more serious. The Government have got it fundamentally wrong, and Opposition Members are absolutely determined to stand up for that first duty—the safety and security of the British people—and stand up for our police service.

3.43 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Can we be clear what is being done with this settlement this afternoon? We are seeing a fundamental change in the way our police in this country are funded—moving funding from central Government to local taxpayers. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) quite rightly said that what the Government have announced today is a cut in central Government funding. It is a flat cash settlement, if we look at and take into account inflation and other things.

This is the first time I have ever seen such a parade of Conservative MPs with the duo from Dorset—the hon. Members for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for North Dorset (Simon Hoare)—saying how they welcomed the settlement, and with the remarkable statement from the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) that she will say on a leaflet to her constituents that she is voting to put up their taxes. It is the first time I have ever heard a Conservative MP say they were going to put up taxes, but that is what we are actually doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) is correct that this is not just about what is happening now; it is about what has been happening over the past seven years. The Prime Minister’s crime sheet, when she was Home Secretary, speaks for itself: a 5% reduction in the central Government grant for policing every single year, aided and abetted by the Liberal Democrats. In Durham, that has meant 350 fewer officers and 150 fewer support officers.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Cleveland police, who share many services with the neighbouring Durham constabulary, have also seen such cuts. Does my hon. Friend agree that 500 fewer police officers—the boots on the ground—over the past seven years is intolerable?

Mr Jones: Yes, but that is what is happening on the ground. We hear all this guff and rhetoric from the Government about how they are somehow protecting frontline policing, but it is frontline officers who we are losing, and it is frontline officers who my constituents want to see on the streets.

We are told that local people will be quite happy to have their council tax increased. The proposal is for a flat increase in the precept of £12 a year across band D properties. The Government argue that that is fair, but for Durham it is completely unfair. Durham relies on central Government grant for 75% of its funding, so because of the makeup of council tax bands for properties in Durham, a £1 increase would increase expenditure by £46 per head of population. In Thames Valley, the figure would be £60, and in Surrey, it would be nearly £90. If the system is reliant on local council tax bands, the local precept that the police and crime commissioner can raise in some areas is severely limited. The Minister said that police and crime commissioners are welcoming this. Well, they have to be, because it is the only way they will plug the funding gap that is being created by the Government.

The other thing that is unfair is how this actually falls. In Durham, for example, 55% of properties are in band A, so if the police and crime commissioner increases the precept by the maximum, which he will have to do, that will raise £2 million, £800,000 of which will come from band A properties, and just £62,000 of which will come from band H properties. That is fundamentally unfair. The system means that those who are least able to pay will end up paying more. It is no good the Minister saying that he is protecting funding, because he is pushing that on to local taxpayers and in some cases on to the poorest in our society, who cannot afford to pay.

We have been promised a review of police funding, which clearly has been kicked well into the long grass. What we have tonight is a start, because no doubt next year we will have the same: flat cash again and more being pushed on to local taxpayers, and no doubt we will be told that the police budget is increasing.

A lot of nonsense has been talked about reserves. I thought that this crime had been ditched when George Osborne left this place, because he often criticised local councils for having reserves. He made the fundamental mistake—I learnt this many years ago in local government—of mixing capital and revenue, as this lot on the Government Benches seem to do willy-nilly. The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) used a biblical reference, but I did not quite understand what he was talking about. Let me put the record straight on Durham. Durham has £5.7 million in general reserves, which is about 5% of the budget, so exactly what it should have.
We also have to consider earmarked reserves, which are for things that will increase efficiency. For example, Durham has another £5.6 million that it will be investing in modernising the force. In the recent period, the force has spent £10 million of its reserve paying off its pension liability, saving it some £850,000 a year. It has also had to use some reserves for the £4 million cost of the Medomsley inquiry, which is a very serious investigation that the force is undertaking. If reserves are used, they should be used cleverly and to make efficiencies. As hon. Members have said, when they are gone, they are gone. They cannot just be reinvented. What we are seeing today is a fundamental change. No doubt, the same situation will come back next year.

Let me come to counter-terrorism. It is right to put more money into counter-terrorism, but as hon. Members said, if we cut back on neighbourhood policing, that will have a direct effect on the police’s ability to counter the radicalisation that is taking place in some communities. I welcome the £50 million that is being brought forward, but I hasten to add that the request was for double that—£104 million—and I am interested to know why the Government are not meeting that requirement. I would like to know how the money is being used for regional forces. Durham, for example, has had to use some of its budget to fill the gap on the demand for counter-terrorism work. It would be interesting to hear how the £50 million will be spread across forces.

Although this is a terrible settlement, I think that my Front Benchers have given the Conservative party a great weapon to beat us with by deciding to vote against the entire settlement. The only thing that Conservative Members will use is that we voted against the £50 million for counter-terrorism. A lot of things in the settlement are fundamentally wrong for our communities. Forces such as Durham—one of the few forces that is not only outstanding, but outstanding in terms of efficiencies—have made the efficiencies that they can make and cannot cut back any more. If the settlement process continues, as I suspect it will, and each year the central Government grant is cut and more is put on local forces, places such as Durham will be completely disadvantaged. Promises have been made about reviewing the funding formula, but we are yet to see that. Without it, places such as Durham will find it more difficult to put in place not the policing that someone has arbitrarily decided is needed, but the policing that local people demand of their local police.

I pay tribute to the men and women of our police force. They do an extraordinary job and do things that many of us would not even dream of doing. In Durham, I congratulate the police and crime commissioner Ron Hogg on his leadership, as well as the chief constable, the men and women of the force on their work that they do, and the support staff behind them.

Let us be clear about what is being done: local people are being asked to pay for this increase. The Minister says that we have an increase in police funding. Yes, we have, but people will pay more tax locally. The Conservatives will vote later to increase the taxes of many poor people across the country to pay for policing. That is a fundamental change, and it is about time that the Government were honest about what they have been doing with policing and the cuts—[ Interruption. ] Does the Minister want to intervene?
Our London Borough of Redbridge has one of the highest burglary rates in London. Tonight, Redbridge Council enforcement officers will be out patrolling the streets, on foot and by car; doing the job that the police should be doing, so I ask the Minister the question that residents asked on Sunday afternoon: where are our police? I can tell the residents where they are. Many will be unemployed or seeking other work. Police numbers are now at their lowest levels in three decades. In London, we have lost 2,600 officers and 3,000 PCSOs and £700 million has been lost from the Metropolitan police budget.

We can see the impact on crime. It is up almost 16% in Redbridge. Violent crime and knife crime are up in my community and right across London. In spite of the nakedly party political attempts by the Conservative party to lay the blame at the door of the Mayor of London, people know, from this debate and from police and crime statistics from across the country, that violent crime and knife crime are rising not only in London but in cities right across our country. Those cities have one thing in common: the level of cuts inflicted on them by the Home Office. It is an absolute disgrace. As one Conservative councillor said on Sunday afternoon, “I expected our lot to make cuts, but I never believed they would cut the Army and the police.” Is that not the truth? Whether people vote Conservative or Labour or for another party, they do not expect to see the Conservative party inflicting real-terms cuts on the police service. Perhaps that is why barely half a dozen Back-Bench Conservative MPs could be found this afternoon to come in and support the Minister. The great amassed numbers on the Conservative Benches know that what the Government are doing to policing in our country is wrong, and we are seeing the consequences, with rising crime in our communities.

What does that mean in practice for victims of burglary? As residents said on Sunday afternoon, it means that when they dial 999, no one comes; that although forensics turn up a few days later, they never actually see the copper they think will be investigating the crime; that when they dial 111 to report back intelligence, no one answers; that people are smoking and dealing drugs with impunity on street corners in broad daylight; that boy racers can tear down Woodford Avenue knowing that there will not be a police car to pursue them; and that burglars have the front to break into people’s homes while they are in knowing that, even if they or their neighbours dial 999, the chances are they will be in and out before a police officer responds.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Why doesn’t he speak to Sadiq Khan?

Wes Streeting: And how dare Ministers talk about Labour's record on crime and counter-terrorism? Members should look at our record in government of funding the police adequately and then look at this shambles of a police grant, which provides barely 50% of what the Metropolitan police asked for to tackle terrorism. We are facing an unprecedented terror threat. We saw it last year with the attacks on this place, across London and in Greater Manchester, and we know that the nature of the terror threat evolves all the time. How on earth can the Minister stand at that Dispatch Box and defend a police grant that would fund barely half of what the Metropolitan police asked for?

The fact is that the Conservative Government are presenting a proposal that no one should support. We should send them back to the drawing board and tell them to come back with a proper plan to protect our communities with adequate funding that does not leave my constituents paying high levels of council tax for a service that is not as good as the one that they had before.

Neil Coyle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am grateful to the idiot Minister for suggesting that he needs to talk to Sadiq Khan. Does he agree—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman does not expect to see the Conservative party vote Conservative or Labour or for another party, but he knows that their cuts are ultimately responsible for the rising crime in our communities. Why doesn’t he speak to Sadiq Khan. Does he agree—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will not make a point in this Chamber by using language that is unsuitable for this Chamber.

Neil Coyle: And I have said that I withdraw it.

Does my hon. Friend agree with me, with Sadiq Khan and with the Home Office’s expert panel that London should receive its full share of the national and international capital city grant, which would deliver an extra £280 million to the Met?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Conservative Members constantly attack the Mayor of London, but, as I have said, it is clear from the crime profile throughout the country that it is not individual police and crime commissioners who are responsible; it is the central Government cuts that are being heaped on them by the Home Office. It is a total disgrace.

People see through the spin, not because politicians like us have arguments in this place, but because they have listened to what the Metropolitan Police Commissioner has said. They have listened to what was said to the Home Affairs Committee by Mark Rowley, the outgoing head of UK counter-terrorism policing. They have heard what police constables have had to say. The Government can blame the Mayor of London as much as they like, but they know that their cuts are ultimately responsible for the rising crime across the country, and they need to redress the situation as a matter of urgency.

I have absolutely no intention of voting through a police grant proposal that will lead to real-terms cuts in policing, taxpayers paying higher taxes for a poorer service and a disgraceful position that leaves local government enforcement officers doing the job that the police ought to be doing. The fact that the Minister has come here today and quoted those statistics with a straight face reflects poorly on him, but it reflects even more poorly on a Government who should be cutting crime rather than cutting police.
4.3 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful and passionate speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

I pay tribute to the dedication and professionalism of police officers and staff in my constituency and throughout Merseyside. I also thank our chief constable, Andy Cooke, and our excellent police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy, for their leadership during what has been a very challenging period. Since 2011, Merseyside police has been asked to make sizeable cuts to its budget. The force had already slashed £82 million from its annual budget, and it expects to have to make a further £18 million in cuts by 2021. Last year our chief constable warned that Merseyside police was reaching breaking point as budgets were “stretched to the limits”. He also issued a stark warning that further cuts in our police budget could result in some offences not being responded to at all. Merseyside has lost 1,700 police officers and staff since 2010. At the same time, the fire and rescue service in Merseyside has had its budget cut in half by the Government, and Liverpool City Council has faced some of the most savage funding cuts of any local authority.

Merseyside Police Federation tells me that the decreasing number of officers has led to an increase in single crewing, meaning that officers are forced to attend call-outs on their own. It tells me that three quarters of officers are “often or always” single crewed. This has an obvious and significant impact when dealing with certain categories of crime, as it affects the police’s ability to break up gangs or to arrest people in large groups.

The combination of budget cuts and rising crime has serious implications for my constituency. In just six months last year, there had already been more gun-related violence in Liverpool than during the whole of the previous year. Last weekend in my constituency, armed gangs broke into three separate properties and threatened residents with a shotgun, a machete and a hammer. The number of shootings has increased, with nine gun-related numbers across Merseyside since 2014. Merseyside police has long been recognised around the country as one of the best police forces for tackling gun crime, but it says that it is stretched to the limit. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition rightly quoted our chief constable’s comments about this issue at today’s Prime Minister’s questions.

I want to speak briefly about an issue on which the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), has truly led: the scourge of scrambler bikes. It affects my constituency and others across Merseyside, and I have been working with our police and crime commissioner and the local force to try to tackle the problem. I welcome what the Minister said about the Home Office review, and I was pleased before Christmas to support the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), which seeks to give greater legal protections to emergency service workers, including police officers, who pursue people on scrambler bikes. I am pleased to report that yesterday Merseyside police crushed 300 confiscated or stolen scrambler bikes. However, the force and Jane Kennedy tell me that they need both the resources and the powers to do more to tackle this appalling scourge.

I want to finish by addressing what I think is a fundamental issue of social justice, and I apologise that in some ways I am repeating points that colleagues have made. Merseyside police relies on central Government to provide 81% of its funding. It raises just 19% of its funding through council tax. That is a major part of the reason why police forces in poorer areas such as Merseyside have been hit the hardest by funding cuts. We have some of the most deprived communities in the country, which not only brings particular policing challenges, but means that it is harder to raise extra money through the local precept.

Like other colleagues, I shall make the contrast with Surrey, because it is so stark. Surrey’s cuts to its central Government grant have been similar to those of Merseyside, but last year Surrey police was the only force in the country that raised more money locally than it received from Government. As it has a more affluent council tax base, Surrey loses less funding, even though it probably faces far fewer complex crimes than we on Merseyside. There is an inherent unfairness about this, as that fundamental issue affects areas with high levels of deprivation.

That brings me to the question of the precept for Merseyside police and the Minister’s announcement in December that Jane Kennedy, our police and crime commissioner, will be able to raise additional funding through the council tax. There will be no additional money from central Government, but money from Merseyside council tax payers. Jane has been consulting on this, and I expect to hear an announcement from her soon. I should make it clear that I support her proposed increase in the council tax.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that his police and crime commissioner, like the PCC in Durham, has no choice in this?

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend anticipates my point. My PCC has no choice, and of course similar challenges are facing the local authority, so my constituents, if the increase goes ahead, will pay not just 2% for the police, but 4% for the local authority, so there will be a 6% increase in council tax. That is no criticism of either the police and crime commissioner or the local authority, because it is the only way in which they can get the money that they need for policing, social care and other crucial local services.

To return to a point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has raised, putting £12 on the council tax of band D properties raises more in some parts of the country than in others. The ability to raise more locally is regressive, as it compounds the existing inequality that I have described. Merseyside police has already had to make huge cuts, and that has undoubtedly affected its operational capability, as the chief constable has told us. I implore the Minister to work with Jane Kennedy and our chief constable to address this fundamental issue of social justice, because my constituents worry about crime and antisocial behaviour, especially when we are sadly seeing the return of significant levels of gun violence across Merseyside. The police desperately need additional resources, so I finish by echoing my hon. Friend the shadow Minister in urging the Minister to think again.
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): As MPs, we are all aware of the importance of effective policing in our constituencies. We have a duty to speak out when we believe that there is a problem, and we have a serious problem at the moment, which is a direct result of funding cuts. Since 2010, we have lost 21,000 police officers nationally and more than 6,000 police community support officers. In fact, police numbers are at their lowest in three decades, which is having a real impact on policing. Last March, HMIC’s annual report highlighted a shortage of detectives and suggested that serious crimes were being investigated by junior staff. Other concerns included a downgrading of emergency calls to justify slower response times.

We know that police work can be demanding and dangerous at times. I pay tribute to the hard work of Merseyside’s police officers and PCSOs, its police and crime commissioner, its chief constable and all the support staff for their dedication and sheer hard work. We owe them a debt of gratitude. However, they are being let down by this Government, as they were by the previous coalition Government.

Merseyside police’s budget has been cut by £82 million since 2011-12, and the force must make a further £18 million in savings between now and 2021-22. There has been a net reduction of 1,726 staff, including the loss of over 1,000 police officers—that is a 22% reduction in police officers alone. It is impossible for the public not to feel the effects of cuts on that scale, and police officers are feeling the effects, too, given the increased stress that comes from working in an under-resourced service when demand—in other words, crime—is on the rise. People have the right to feel safe in their communities, but this Government are sadly letting them down. Crime increased in Merseyside by 15% between 2016 and 2017. Emergency calls increased by 9.5%. Burglaries went up by 22% and robbery was up by 31%. The number of domestic violence cases increased by 18.5% and rape cases increased by 33%. That last figure is alarming, but it reflects changes in how things are recorded and victims’ increased willingness to come forward. It also includes a number of historical offences, but the police must still address such crimes.

Other issues include the serious problem of scrambler bikes, which are a scourge on our communities, and antisocial behaviour, which causes anxiety and instability. In Wirral West, I am hearing reports of such activity in areas that have never had any problems before. Such is the Government’s failure to protect them, some residents who have lived in an area for 10 years say that they want to move house. The first responsibility of any Government is to keep their citizens safe, but this Government are failing. It is both reckless and irresponsible that the Government know the impact that cuts in police funding are having on victims and communities, yet they continue to make them, so I ask them to pause and reconsider their approach. Austerity is not working, and when it is applied to policing, it is a high-risk strategy that puts our communities, police officers and PCSOs at risk. I ask the Government to think carefully about the impact of their actions on victims of crime and about the profound trauma that people often experience.

There is no doubt that some of the increase in crime is a result of other austerity measures being pursued by this Government. Cuts to local authorities are leading to the closure of the very services that should be there to support communities, such as the youth services that have such an important role to play in providing young people with constructive ways of being actively involved in their communities. Those services do invaluable work by drawing young people away from getting involved in low-level crime purely because of boredom and a lack of anything else to do. Almost 40% of calls to Merseyside police are connected to mental health issues. The Government are clearly failing to fulfil the commitment made in 2013 to achieve a parity of esteem between physical and mental health in the NHS, and they are failing to provide the services that are so desperately needed.

An analysis by the King’s Fund that was published in January showed that, between 2012-13 and 2016-17, the funding gap between NHS mental health and acute providers actually widened. It revealed a 13% reduction in full-time equivalent mental health nurses between September 2009 and August 2017. The number of nurses providing in-patient care declined by almost 25%, and the total number of nursing support staff in the community fell by 18% over almost exactly the same period. The report also found high sickness rates. Trusts are finding it extremely difficult to recruit, so staff turnover is currently leaving 4% fewer mental health nurses employed each year.

The Government’s obsession with austerity is creating real problems for our overstretched police services, and officers are having to respond to that failure. We are also seeing reports of private police forces appearing in our country. The chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation has warned of the creation of a two-tier system, highlighting the need for public scrutiny of private forces. That is an extremely worrying development, and it suggests that communities buying such services have lost faith in the Government’s ability to provide an effective police force altogether. I do not believe that to be the case, but I do think that there is an urgent need for increased funding.

None of us wants to live in a country in which some areas hire private police forces because of a lack of policing, while other areas are left with an under-resourced service. That is an extremely dangerous route to go down. The Government need to take stock, rethink and give police forces across the country the funding they need. The public expect nothing less.

Mr Hurd: With the leave of the House, I will respond to some of the contributions from Back Benchers. Given how many interventions I took at the start of the debate, and in the interest of time, I do not propose to take any now. It has been good to hear so many Members on both sides of the House paying tribute to the hard work, bravery and dedication of their local police forces.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) has spoken to me regularly about fair funding for Dorset. He wants more officers on the ground, and I am sure he will make representations to Dorset’s police and crime commissioner about what the PCC proposes to do with the additional £4.2 million he should receive from the settlement.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) made the extremely important point that as crime is changing, the police have to change, too. That
point was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris). We never hear Labour talk about this, but the Government are committing £1.9 billion for cyber-security, for example. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset asked me to look seriously at merger proposals, and we will do so once we see a business case.

My old friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), has been a long and passionate advocate for fairer funding for Suffolk, as have other Suffolk MPs, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). My hon. Friends the Members for Waveney and for Newton Abbot have my assurance that we will look seriously at concluding the fair funding review in the context of the next comprehensive spending review, and I noted the representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney about the emergency grant. He made a very important point about the precedent of Ipswich Town in the policing of football.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) inevitably raised the tone of the debate by speaking about the parable of the talents. He is right about reserves, and I note his desire to see more officers in Dover and Deal. I know he will make representations to Matthew Scott, who now has more resources to deliver just that.

Various Labour Members offered variations on the same theme. A number of Labour west midlands MPs, including the hon. Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), talked about cuts and depleted reserves. The fact is that West Midlands police will receive an additional £9.5 million next year, which the police and crime commissioner says he will use to recruit a further 100 officers. Not unlike many other forces, West Midlands police has increased its reserves by £26.9 million since 2011.

The hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) again talked about cuts and depleted reserves, but Lancashire police will get an additional £6.1 million and has increased its reserves by £26.6 million since 2011. I am sure that she will be as curious as I am about how it intends to use that money.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) made a typically thoughtful and well-informed speech on police matters. Again, however, her local force will receive an additional £8.9 million, and has increased its reserves by £60 million since 2011. I am sure that she will make representations about how that money is spent. She is rightly thoughtful about the issue of mental health, and there is a common theme across the system that police are spending more of their time dealing with people on the mental health spectrum. In many cases, that is entirely legitimate, as the police might be pursuing criminal activity or being deployed for public safety, but we are actively working with the police to get a better evidence base on exactly what is happening. Obviously, we want people on the mental health spectrum to be dealt with by qualified people and we want our police officers to be focused on their core job. The hon. Lady asked me about the date for the next stage of the “Protect the Protectors” Bill, and I can tell her that this will be on 27 April. I can also assure her that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will get an answer to his letter.

Given the various themes that came out of the speeches made by Labour Members, I am disappointed by Labour’s approach to this. Policing is one of our most important public services. These are very serious and demanding times for the police, so a serious response is required. I have to say that it sounds as though Labour is now very much in the scaremongering, fake news business, totally detached from reality. For example, Labour continues to use the mantra that crime is rising, even though the independent statisticians show that it is falling. The bottom line is that, as the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, Labour Members will vote against £450 million of increased funding for policing, including a £70 million uplift for counter-terrorism in the face of the worst terrorist threat for a generation. That is the position of the modern Labour party. On this side of the House—

Louise Haigh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I will not give way. The Government will continue to invest in policing, meaning that this country will invest £1.9 billion next year in policing. We will do the right thing to make sure that the police have the resources they need, and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.
The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I remind the House that this motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House, and of those representing constituencies in England and Wales.

The House having divided:

Ayes 295, Noes 239.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 275, Noes 229.

Division No. 116] [4.21 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter

Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davis, Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docheyer, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunn, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evannett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Gaie, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Mrs Jo
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, John
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegam, rh Andrew
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leasman, rh Andrew
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lever, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills,igel
Milton, rh Mr Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Pattel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Prentis, Victor Boris
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Sir Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhyston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurh, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr James
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Amanda Milling and
Nigel Adams

NOES
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cardbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2018-19 (HC 745), which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Chris Elmore
Local Government Finance

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We come now to the three motions on local government finance, which will be debated together.

I must inform the House that Mr Speaker has today certified the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) as relating exclusively to England and within devolved legislative competence. All three motions are therefore subject to double majority voting: whole House and those representing constituencies in England only.

4.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I beg to move,

That the Report on Local Government Finance (England) 2018–19 (HC 791), which was laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) 2018–19 (HC 792), which was laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2018–19 (HC 790), which was laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.

Sajid Javid: Every day, local government delivers vital services for the communities they serve—services that many of us take for granted, provided by dedicated, often unsung councillors and officers in places that we are all proud to call home. As such, as I have said before, local government is the frontline of our democracy and deserves the resources it needs to do its job and to deliver truly world-class services. To that end, late last year we published a provisional settlement for funding of local authorities in England. We invited people to give their views on this via a formal consultation to which we have received almost 160 responses.

My Ministers and I have engaged extensively with the sector, with individual councils, with Members of Parliament, and with the Local Government Association and other representative groups, ensuring that we were available to speak to anyone who wanted to raise particular issues or to ask any questions. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who recently joined the Department, for picking up the baton.

I am immensely grateful to everyone who has contributed to this consultation and our wider engagements with the sector.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): After all the consultations and discussions that the Secretary of State has held, is he in a position to revise his view that Liverpool City Council should lose 68% of its budget and have to face a crisis in children’s social care as well as in adult social care?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady should be assured that Liverpool City Council, like almost every other council, is seeing an increase in its spending power from last year going into this year. She points out the challenges that the council has had in trying to bring about efficiencies. That, as I will come on to explain, has been a theme for many councils, but she should be assured that over the next two years there is a real increase in the core spending power of all councils, taken together.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Set against Coventry City Council’s needs, the so-called increase that the Secretary of State is talking about is delusional and derisory, to say the least. It does not meet the council’s needs.

Sajid Javid: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can draw some comfort from my words in due course.

This work, with the feedback that we have received over the past few weeks, has informed the final settlement that we are unveiling today. It is part of a four-year settlement that gives English councils access to over £200 billion in funding in the five years to 2020. It gives them greater freedom and flexibility over the money that they raise, in recognition of the fact that no one knows their local areas, and the opportunities, challenges and pressures that they face, better than the councils who serve them. It strikes a balance between relieving growing pressure on local government while ensuring that hard-pressed taxpayers do not face ever-increasing bills.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Secretary of State explain why Stroud District Council is the only council in Gloucestershire that has no revenue support grant promised under these proposals? Worse than that, the other three district councils in Gloucestershire get some money under the rural services delivery grant, yet Stroud gets nothing. Why does he think that is fair, and how can he defend it?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman, like many colleagues in the Chamber, is served both by district councils and county councils, all providing services for his constituents. The whole picture should be taken together. He will know that his county is seeing, for example, an increase of some £10.8 million to provide some very important services. Also importantly for Gloucestershire, including the district councils as much as the county council, the Gloucester business rates pool is part of the 100% pilot, which it estimates will lead to further additional funding this year of about £10 million. I hope that that helps to reassure him.

The settlement comes in the third year of a four-year deal that was accepted by 97% of councils in return for publishing efficiency plans. This gives the certainty and stability that they need to plan for the future. Many local authorities have done impressive work to deliver better value for money and are setting an example for other parts of the public sector. We are keen to continue to work with the sector to increase transparency and to share best practice so that councils can deliver increased efficiency over the coming years and transform services.

In all, the settlement answers calls from councils over many years for greater control over the money that they raise and the tools to make this money go further. This is the approach that we have taken across the board, listening to local authorities and responding to what we hear.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Secretary of State explain why Stroud District Council is the only council in Gloucestershire that has no revenue support grant promised under these proposals? Worse than that, the other three district councils in Gloucestershire get some money under the rural services delivery grant, yet Stroud gets nothing. Why does he think that is fair, and how can he defend it?
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about core funding. I think the average for county councils—[Interruption.] Mine is Durham, by the way, for the Parliamentary Private Secretary who is looking it up. [Laughter] The average is a 2.1% increase, but for Durham it is only 1.4%. The reason for that—[Interruption.] Durham County Council—the PPS has got the wrong one! [Laughter.] The reason is the low council tax base, as 55% of properties in County Durham are in band A, which affects the council’s funds—County Durham, if the PPS has still not got it.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is obviously familiar with the numbers for his own council, which is good to see, and his council is getting an increase. As I have said, and this will be a theme throughout the settlement, we have to always make sure that we are striking the right balance between providing increased resources and keeping any burden on taxpayers to an absolute minimum. I hope that the hon. Gentleman would support that.

We are creating a whole system of local government that is fit for the future. The current formula for financial allocations has served local areas well over the years.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): North Yorkshire is doing its best to make ends meet despite a difficult and tight spending round. Can it be right that spending power in North Yorkshire is £770 a head, when in many other areas, especially in London, it is around £1,100 a head per year? Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need a fairer funding review that delivers fairness for North Yorkshire and other rural areas?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the point that my hon. Friend makes about looking at the fairness of the distribution, and I know that he has spoken powerfully about that in the past. We are looking at it, and I will come to it shortly in my speech.

A world of constant change, involving big shifts in demographics, lifestyles and technology, demands an updated and more responsive way of distributing funding. That means that we have to question the fairness of the current system, which is why I was pleased to launch a formal consultation on a review of councils’ relative needs and resources in December. This is not just a paper exercise. We have an unparalleled opportunity to be really bold and ambitious, and to consider with the sector where the most up-to-date evidence and data lead on drivers of local authority costs and to create a whole new system that gives councils the confidence to face the opportunities and challenges of the future.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): That is an excellent idea. Can the Secretary of State reassure the unitaries in my part of Berkshire that he does not envisage them going into negative grant, as it is called—in other words, getting no help at all?

Sajid Javid: I can give my right hon. Friend some reassurance on that matter. I will come to it in more detail in a moment, and I hope that he will be genuinely reassured.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): When the fairer funding formula comes into being, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will work with other Ministers to really understand the huge gulf that is starting to appear between city metropolitan areas and rural shire counties. We are becoming second-class citizens in rural areas because of the lack of funding in comparison to socialist metropolitan areas.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about ensuring full co-operation throughout all Government Departments working jointly with our local authorities on fairness and distribution. One way we have tried to make the settlement fair is by recognising the special factors that affect rural areas, including Shropshire. My hon. Friend’s council in Shropshire will benefit from £6.6 million in rural services delivery grant.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Conservative portfolio holder for finance on Stoke-on-Trent City Council says that it will lose £15 million of central Government grant over the next two years—that is Stoke-on-Trent with hyphens for the Secretary of State’s PPS, as he diligently searches his folder—but the Secretary of State will tell me that our revenue spending will be going up. Who is not telling me the truth? It cannot be the case that spending is going up when the portfolio holder tells me that the grant is being cut.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Secretary of State answers, I must say that interventions have to be short. A lot of people want to speak. What is unfair is if people make interventions and then leave, and other people have to sit for three hours waiting to speak. That is just not honourable. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is going to be here, but I just make the point about short interventions.

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the core spending power for Stoke-on-Trent— with hyphens—is increasing by £3.5 million in the settlement. Indeed, the core spending power per dwelling for Stoke-on-Trent is higher than the average for the class. I hope he welcomes that.

The consultation on fairer funding closes on 12 March and I urge all those with a stake in the system to make their voices heard. We aim to introduce this new approach from 2020-21.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I applaud my right hon. Friend for launching the consultation on fairer funding. Will he be able to reassure the House that, in contrast to some of his predecessors who have said nice words about fairer funding but have not reflected the significant changes that were introduced under the previous Labour Administration, the consultation will inform the next spending review so we will actually see it put into practice?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. Friend that reassurance and I take this opportunity to thank him for the strong representations he has made on behalf of Shropshire, which have fed into the settlement.

The business rates retention programme will also be introduced in 2020-21. It will give local authorities powerful incentives to grow their local economies. So far, this has been a resounding success. Under the current scheme, local authorities estimate that they will receive about £1.3 billion in business rates growth in 2017-18, a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding that is set to continue into 2018-19.
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I welcome the 10 county-wide pilots. Will the Secretary of State consider extending the pilots to include small unitaries such as Southend and Thurrock or areas of the county such as south Essex, if the whole Essex plan does not work?

Sajid Javid: There will be further pilots and I will come on to that in just a moment.

It is right that we will be going further. It is our aim for local authorities to retain 75% of business rates from 2020-21. This will be achieved by incorporating existing grants into business rates retention, including the revenue support grant and the public health grant. Local authorities will be able to retain 75% of the growth in their business rates from the new base lines in 2020-21, when the system is re-set.

The long-term plan is to allow local government to keep 100% of its business rates. With that in mind, I announced an expansion of the 100% retention pilots that proved so popular in December. As a result, we will be taking forward 10 new pilots covering 89 authorities, instead of the five we originally planned. A further pilot will begin in London in 2018-19, and existing devolution pilots will continue in 2018-19.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My local authority in Hartlepool finds it increasingly difficult to establish a business rates base but will participate in the programme. However, its departments face 40% cuts, and it has a £6 million shortfall. How fair is that?

Sajid Javid: For the hon. Gentleman’s local council in Hartlepool, there will be an increase in the core spending power of 1.9%, which is £1.5 million. He talks about fairness. It is worth pointing out that the core spending power per dwelling in his local authority is £1,931, which is significantly higher than the average for the class. I hope that that reassures him that his local authority is getting a significant amount of spending power, particularly from a per-dwelling point of view.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I understand the thinking, which is that councils that say they are doing well in terms of business should be rewarded and retain their business rates. However, how will councils in deprived areas be compensated for the fact that they cannot do so well in terms of business? I was a councillor in a deprived local area—it happens to be the Secretary of State’s birthplace—and we tried for many years to encourage more business and enterprise, but it was incredibly difficult.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady’s local authority, Bath and North East Somerset, was part of a business rates pilot in 2017-18. As I said, we have extended that pilot, which gives the local authority the ability to take advantage of that and put in place incentives for local businesses to see growth. The council estimates that it can see millions of pounds of extra income from that, which I would have thought she would support for her local community.

The business rates pilots will help to test the system, to see how well it works in different areas and different circumstances. The purpose of the pilots was to have a broad distribution across north and south, urban and rural, and small and large. The pilot areas will keep 100% of the growth in their business rates if they expand their local economies, which is double what they can keep now. I can confirm that I will open a further bidding round for pilots in 2019-20 in due course. In expanding those pilots, we have responded to what councils have told us, and we are doing the same in other areas.

Rural councils express concern about the fairness of the current system, with the rural services delivery grant due to be reduced next year. In response, I can confirm today that we will increase that grant by 5% in 2018-19. That is £16 million more than was proposed in the provisional settlement, taking the total figure to £81 million—the highest amount ever paid in rural grant, at a little over the sum paid in 2016-17.

We recognise that the so-called negative revenue support grant is causing concern. Changes in revenue support grant have led to a downward adjustment to councils’ grants in 2018-19. That is £16 million more than was proposed in the provisional settlement, taking the total figure to £81 million—the highest amount ever paid in rural grant, at a little over the sum paid in 2016-17.

We know we must address that problem, and we will consult formally on a fair and affordable set of options for doing so, with plenty of time to reflect on the findings before next year’s settlement.

Following discussions with the sector, we are continuing with the capital receipts flexibility programme for a further three years. That scheme gives local authorities continued freedom to use capital receipts from the sale of their own assets, to help fund the transformation of services and to release savings.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State about the negative revenue support grant? He has not actually said expressly that there will no longer be a negative revenue support grant. My local councils are saying that the Government cannot be trusted on this, and unless and until the Government commit themselves to saying there will not be a negative revenue support grant, they will have to budget on the basis that there may be one.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Such certainty is of course very important for many local authorities, including his own, and I hope I can now make the situation clearer. It is our intention to deal with the problem of the negative RSG, but we have yet to determine exactly the best way of doing so and providing support to the local authorities affected, and that is why it is right to consult on it. I absolutely commit to him that we will do so, and when we do I hope the Secretary of State will make an input to make sure that we get it right and really deal with this problem for his authority and many others.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State reflect on the issue of the transitional grant? It may be important to some authorities, but will he confirm the figures Sheffield City Council has given me showing that the authorities that have had the biggest cuts to their core spending—cuts of over 30%—have between them benefited in the first year of the grant to the tune of £10,000? That is the total figure for the authorities that have had the biggest cuts in grant over the past few years.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I welcome the 10 county-wide pilots. Will the Secretary of State consider extending the pilots to include small unitaries such as Southend and Thurrock or areas of the county such as south Essex, if the whole Essex plan does not work?
Sajid Javid: My remarks a moment ago were about not the transitional grant but the problem of the negative RSG. I will come on to other grants in a moment.

We have responded to concerns about proposed changes to the new homes bonus. By the end of 2018-19, we will have paid out £7 billion under the scheme to reward the building of some 1.4 million homes, including £947.5 million for the year 2018-19. When we consulted last year on proposals to link NHB payments to the number of successful planning appeals, it was clear that the sector wanted continuity and certainty. That is what we have delivered, with no new changes to the NHB this year and the baseline being maintained at 0.4%. Furthermore, as we set out in our housing White Paper, we are enabling local authorities to increase planning fees by 20% where they commit to investing the extra income in their planning services. That should provide a welcome boost to local planning authorities and address concerns about under-resourcing.

The final settlement includes small adjustments to top-ups and tariffs for authorities based on corrected Valuation Office Agency data. I know that my opposite number—that is, the opposite number I have today, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne)—has been trying to make some mischief on this point, so let me spell it out very clearly for him. If his departmental officials knew that the data were incorrect, was it not incumbent on him, as Secretary of State, to have known that and made it clear to the House when he presented the provisional settlement that the data were likely to be changed? The fact is that infrastructure. It is clear that we must raise our game to match our ambitions, which is why last July we set up the housing infrastructure fund to support local authorities to provide infrastructure and build more homes. In the end, we received a staggering 430 bids, worth almost £14 billion, to deliver 1.5 million homes, demonstrating the incredible ambition that is out there to tackle the housing crisis—an ambition that we are keen to get behind and back fully. Hence our move to more than double the housing infrastructure fund in the autumn Budget, dedicating an additional £2.7 billion to it, bringing the total funding to £5 billion.

Last week I was delighted to announce the first funding allocation: £866 million for 133 successful projects, involving 110 councils, that will help unlock up to 200,000 homes. Those projects promise to deliver a strong pipeline of homes at pace and scale, and represent another important step towards meeting one of the defining challenges of our time.

I will now turn to another major challenge: social care. I am under no illusions about the pressures that councils face in addressing one of the biggest challenges we face as a country, which is why we have put billions of pounds of extra funding into the sector over the past 12 months. I can today announce a further £150 million for adult social care support grant in 2018-19. This will be allocated according to relative needs and will help councils to build on their work and support sustainable local care. It comes on top of the additional £2 billion for adult social care over the next three years announced at the spring Budget. With the freedom to raise more money more quickly through the use of the social care precept, which I announced this time last year, we have given councils access to £9.4 billion more dedicated funding for adult social care over three years.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The problem with putting up council tax in order to pay for social care is that some of the most disadvantaged areas have a very low council tax base. In Hull, for example, what we can raise through that increase in the precept is very small compared with the needs we have. Are we not moving back to the days when the poor were keeping the poorest, about which George Lansbury protested in Poplar nearly 100 years ago, by putting the onus back on local authorities in very disadvantaged areas?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady suggests that the only way councils can access funds to provide social care is through council tax, which is absolutely not the case, as she knows. It is an important way to raise some of the funding, but an increasing amount is coming from central resources. For example, the £2 billion that was allocated in the spring Budget takes into account the ability of local authorities, including the hon. Lady’s, to raise money locally. It is right that we have that balanced approach, but I know that there is more to do on adult social care, and that funding alone will not help to fix the challenges. This long-term challenge requires a long-term systemic change. The publication of a Green Paper this summer on future challenges in adult social care will help set us on a path to secure that.
Finally, we are responding to calls for more flexibility over setting council tax. Local authorities will be able to increase their council tax by an additional 1% without a referendum, bringing the core principle in line with inflation. This will enable them to raise revenue and meet growing demand for their services while keeping taxes low. Having done away with Whitehall capping, we have enshrined these checks and balances into the system. Under the Localism Act 2011, local government can increase council tax as it wishes, but excessive rises need to be approved by local residents in a referendum.

In addition, directly elected Mayors will decide the required level of precept by agreement with their combined authorities, and it will be easier for police and crime commissioners to meet local demand pressure under measures that I have agreed with the Home Secretary. They will allow for a £12 council tax flexibility for police services, raising an additional £130 million next year. We will, however, defer the setting of referendum principles for town and parish councils for three years, and we will keep that under review. In all, I want to see the sector doing everything possible to limit council tax increases and show restraint. I am keen to ensure that these freedoms are not abused, and I am sure voters are too.

My Department’s name recently changed to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. That underlines our focus on fixing our broken housing market and getting Britain building, but I remain absolutely committed to the community and local government elements of our work. They are the foundations on which everything else stands. It is not enough to build more homes; we need to build better and stronger communities. Councils acting truly as local government and not local administration will help us to achieve that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On the point about local government, will the Secretary of State confirm that this settlement will see real-terms increases for local government over the two-year period?

Sajid Javid: I can confirm that there will be a real-terms increase in resources for local government over a two-year period, rising from £44.3 billion in 2017-18 to £45.6 billion in 2019-20. I should clarify, however, that due to the additional £166 million that was announced this year, that is a real-terms increase over the two-year period rather than year on year.

We have listened to local authorities, and through this settlement we have delivered what they asked for, while at the same time keeping spending in check. We have delivered a real-terms increase in resources over the next two years, more freedoms and fairness, and greater stability and certainty for local authorities to plan and drive value for money. They, and the communities they serve, deserve no less. I commend the settlement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Opposition spokesman, I warn hon. Members that, as is obvious, a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and there is limited time, so there will be an immediate time limit on Back-Bench speeches of seven minutes. Of course, that does not apply to Mr Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Well, what on earth was all that about? We have been waiting since December to get this detail. We were told that discussions were taking place and that there were journeys over to No. 11 to make sure that we secured money for housing and public services such as adult social care. To see just crumbs off the table being provided is depressing.

On my way here, I often walk past the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I imagine the Secretary of State, when he was in that Department, being fulfilled, happy, contented and enthusiastic about his brief. What a contrast with now! He clearly does not have the energy for this brief and does not understand the detail, to the extent that incorrect information was presented to the House during the December debate. Probably more telling is how little attention the Secretary of State got from the Chancellor. The social care crisis ought to have been addressed in the autumn statement, but because it was not, he now has to work within the departmental budget.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman seems to have completely ignored the £2 billion given to adult social care in the March 2017 Budget. What is his response to that?

Jim McMahon: I am pleased the hon. Gentleman asks that question. At that time, there was already an in-built deficit in the Budget because of the increase in the national living wage and employers’ national insurance contributions, so even within the £2 billion allocated there was a £1.3 billion in-year deficit, because of the need to make sure that the provider market could be sustained. That is my response. It is just not enough money. Everybody in the House and our communities knows that. It is just a shame that the Secretary of State does not carry the weight in the Treasury to get the money into the Department and out to councils and into our communities.

Mr Betts: The Local Government Association has calculated that there will be a £2.3 billion gap in social care funding by 2020, having taken account of the 2017 Budget increases, and there are similar figures from the King’s Fund. The National Audit Office did a report for the Communities and Local Government Committee looking at these figures and basically confirmed their accuracy. There is a real problem here that cannot be disguised and that will not go away without extra funding being delivered.

Jim McMahon: Those figures are absolutely right. The analysis from Age UK shows that 1.2 million people who would have been entitled to social care in 2010 are no longer receiving social care because of cuts to the eligibility criteria by councils.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Coventry City Council has probably lost about £90 million over the past few years. The Government are playing a very clever game: they are shifting the cost of local government on to the local taxpayer, so that they can boast of keeping taxes low. It is really just a double-edged sword.

Jim McMahon: I agree with that. We are here debating work carried out by people outside this place—local councillors and local government workers—and it is
right in this place to thank them for their hard work, their dedication and their grit and determination to make sure that services are provided in the face of severe austerity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jim McMahon: I want to make some progress, because I am conscious of the number of people down to speak.

We need to ask a number of questions when faced with the settlement. First, does it step up to meet the scale of the challenges facing local public services in England today? Does it meet the challenge of 1.2 million older people who would have been entitled to social care in 2010 who no longer get the care they need? Does it meet the challenge of huge increases in the number of child protection and looked-after children cases reported by the LGA? After nearly a decade of Tory-dominated Government, does it begin to rebuild the essential community infrastructure that was taken away after the financial crash?

My view is that it fails on every one of those counts. The funding settlement today is little more than an insult. I want to put this into context—after all, we can have a party political debate about it and attribute blame, but that makes no difference to the day-to-day experiences of local councils.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I want to lay out the case, and then there will be a long time for debate—but only if I rush through this to allow time for people to speak.

Central Government funding of local services has reduced by 40%—less money when demand is increasing—and we all know that it has not been distributed evenly. The overall reduction has hit local authorities with lower tax bases hardest because they are more dependent on central Government grant. The UK Government’s total spending on local government, as a share of the economy, has fallen sharply. In 2010, it accounted for 8.4% of the economy; by 2022, the figure will be down to 5.7%, which constitutes a 60-year low. Yet councils in England still have 1,200 statutory obligations. They have less money, but the same is required of them. That has had an impact on people, in that 811 fewer people now work in local government. The local government workforce today is the lowest since comparable records began, when the central Government workforce is the highest that it has been since comparable records began. Moreover, the figures are not fairly distributed across government, let alone geographically.

If austerity had not kicked in and affected our local council base, councils today would have £14 billion more than they have. That would be sufficient to deal with the crisis in social care and the crisis in children’s services.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): I have listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has been saying, and it seems to me that his answer to every question is, “Send more money.” My question to him is: where is the money going to come from?

Jim McMahon: I will come to that a little later. [Interruption] There is absolutely no such thing as “no cost effect” when it comes to not providing vital services for people. We know that because older people are not being looked after after the way that they need to be looked after. We know because social care is not being provided in the home. More than 3 million delayed-discharge days have been attributed to a lack of social care. More than 120,000 hospital beds have been blocked, so there is a cost involved.

Most people who understand public services would say that it is far better to have joined-up public services that are unified at local level, so that money is spent to best effect and spending is tailored to the circumstances of the individuals who are using the services, than for people to have to navigate the ridiculous silos in which money is held. However, we must also accept that people are living longer, which has health and social care consequences that carry a cost.

As a society, we must make up our minds about the type of country in which we want to live. Are we the country that ignores older people who need care because we can ignore them? They are not visible in the same way as ambulances queuing up at A&E. The truth is that 1.2 million people who are in their homes are being ignored by central Government, and by the Treasury in particular. I think that they deserve better.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingtonborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a serious point about adult social care. Would the Labour party work with other parties to bring about a bipartisan approach? Everyone knows that there is a problem, but we should all work together to find a solution.

Jim McMahon: The problem with health and social care is that so many reports have been commissioned, but by the time a commission has met, considered the evidence put before it and reached a conclusion that can be accepted across partisan divides, the world has moved on and the challenges have changed. Some of this is not difficult, but any idea that it does not come down to pounds and pence is nonsense. Of course we can be more efficient with the money that we have, and we ought to ensure that that happens. We can work better across Departments, and we should do that as well. Ultimately, however, there has to be enough money in the system to meet the demand.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I will give way once more, but then I must move on.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is talking about a very important challenge that we face as a nation. Will he confirm that the Labour party would double council tax to deal with this crisis, as other members of it have suggested? Our voters would need to know that.

Jim McMahon: Council tax has an important role to play, as have business rates, but it also has significant limitations. I shall explain why a little later.

Any idea that the social care and safeguarding crises—we should talk about safeguarding as much as we talk about social care and the NHS, because it is all-important—that can be addressed through council tax,
through a property-based system that is now 27 years out of date, completely misses the scale of the challenge that faces public services.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Jim McMahon: I need to make progress.

I want to touch on what the 1% additional council tax means. When we seek to raise money through council tax—through a property-based tax—that takes account of the property values in an area, but it bears no relation at all to local needs or the cost of delivering services in that area. Therefore, the more pressure that gets added to councils to provide that from council tax, the more inequality we are going to see through council tax.

In Richmond, 1% for social care would raise £36 per person over the age of 65, but in Rochdale it raises just £18, because the tax base just is not there to support an equal increase in cash being taken. So if all we do every year is come back and say that we are going to allow another 1% and another 1%—and perhaps, if things get even worse, allow another 2%—that will just take even more from people who can afford it even less, because although council tax is important, it is regressive; it takes far more from lower income families than any other form of direct taxation in this country. So as much as it is important, we ought to always have an eye on the impact on those who actually pay the bill. After all, as we often hear from Government Members, there is no such thing as Government money; it is all the public’s money. That is right, but we are quicker to take the money from some people than from others it seems. We should focus on that, too.

We know that social care and children’s services are in crisis, and we know the complexities of social care will mean there is greater demand on the public purse. The difficulty is that the Government’s approach has been completely underwhelming and has completely missed the opportunity to set the record straight. Aside from the massive increase in looked-after children and children in receipt of reviews, we also know the way that has been funded is completely unsustainable.

The transition grant and the rural service delivery grant were introduced on the basis of two concepts. First, those who were hit hardest by the reduction in revenue support grant would get greater support to help them in a temporary period of two years to adjust their baseline budgets and organise efficiencies to eventually deliver a balanced budget. Secondly, there was a recognition through the second grant that it costs more to deliver services in rural areas than in urban areas because of sparsity. I am afraid the evidence base for both of those does not hold water and has not even passed the test the Government have set. So the transition grant that was meant to be there for two years has now been extended, and the rural service delivery grant has been completely undermined by a report the Government themselves commissioned by LG Futures in 2014 to assess the additional costs of delivering services in rural as opposed to urban areas.

The report said there were differences in the cost of delivering some services in rural as opposed to urban areas but the net cost in terms of the impact on councils’ overall budgets was felt harder by urban areas as the costs in those areas were far higher. [ Interruption. ] That is not my report; it is a Government report published on their website that supports the revenue support grant. Given that the evidence base has been decried by the Government’s research, I am staggered that they are putting even more money into a system where the evidence base is completely contrary to the position the Government seem to be taking.

The report found that 11 service areas were affected in rural areas and that accounted for about 15% of the council spend in those areas, but when it looked at the 15 service areas that were not affected, it found that they accounted for 31% of local urban authority budgets, so there was a 15% additional cost because of sparsity in rural areas versus 31% of additional cost in urban areas for service delivery. Therefore, if there was going to be a grant designed to help councils deal with the additional cost of delivering public services, on an evidence base the Government have commissioned, accepted and published on their website, that ought to be directed to urban authorities where the costs have been demonstrated to be much higher. Yet we continue with this farce.

I find it interesting that the Secretary of State does not have the Chancellor’s ear. When he knocks on the door of No. 11 and asks for more money, the Chancellor is not particularly interested in banking that support for the future as much as the Secretary of State is determined to bank the support of Conservative Back Benchers for whatever reason. Perhaps it is to face off a rebellion today or to buy off Conservative shires—a purpose that has not yet been declared. He should be honest about why the money has been allocated.

I do not resent the argument being made by areas with service delivery costs relating to sparsity that that ought to be reflected in their settlement. I do not disagree with that at all, and I commend the MPs who have made that case and have managed to secure progress from the Secretary of State, who on most measures does not seem to understand his brief. However, he certainly understands the need to appeal to Back Benchers and to bank their support for the future.

I resent the view, however, that some councils in some areas can be funded in a fairer way—although still not fair—while others have to sink or swim depending on their council tax base 27 years ago. That is not a fair or sustainable way to fund council services. I have no confidence that the fair funding review will deliver what most reasonable people would consider to be a reasonable and fair funding formula, which would be one based on need that would take into account urban deprivation, rural sparsity, demographics and demographic change, and the difference in unit costs for delivering public services. A fair formula would take all that into account and arrive at a number, but that is not what is on the table today.

The Conservatives who will go through the Lobby later to support the motions should bear this in mind: there is no new money. Money has been moved around from departmental budgets that were set before Christmas. The money in the transition fund and the rural service delivery grant is a one-off that has been taken from the business rate safety net—the Government will not say how that will be funded in future—and from other departmental reserves. How will councils be funded between now and 2022? Do Conservative Back Benchers really want this charade at this point in the calendar year? We know that there is not enough money to fund public services, but they hold their nose because they have been bought off with a couple of pounds.
They absolutely understand, in the way that all Opposition Members do, that the cuts have gone too far and that our communities deserve better.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. To accommodate the level of interest in this debate, the time limit on Back-Bench speeches, which the Chair had previously notified would be seven minutes, now needs to be six minutes.

5.32 pm

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to lead the debate from the Back Benches today, and I will start by agreeing with one point made by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon): his congratulations and applause for the work of local government staff up and down the country in delivering services for local residents day in, day out, with a resource base that is diminishing overall. However, I disagreed with almost everything else that he said.

The hon. Gentleman seems to have a limited recall of local government finance, which may not be his fault, as he has not been in the House for very long. Those who were Members between 1997 and 2010, under the previous Labour Administration, will recall that there was a significant shift of local government resource from rural to urban areas. The hon. Gentleman referred to a piece of research undertaken in 2014, but I encourage him to read more widely. In particular, he should look at the work done by the Rural Services Network, which has carried out considerable research into the additional cost, which it acknowledges, of the delivery of services.

Mr Speaker: Interruption. The hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position that that is not the evidence, but it is the evidence provided by the RSN. I should declare that I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on rural services, which is supported by the RSN.

I do not have very long to speak—you have given us a tight time limit, Mr Speaker—so I will confine my remarks to a few points. I will give the shadow Minister one example of the unfairness, as I and other Conservative Members see it, between rural and urban areas. The proportion of spending power funded by council tax in rural areas for the coming year, 2018-19, is 69%, whereas the proportion of spending power funded by council tax in urban areas is 55%. The burden on council tax payers in rural areas is significantly higher, which can be illustrated by comparing almost any urban authority with any rural authority that I care to mention.

My rural authority is Shropshire, which I will compare with Coventry, an urban area not that far away that has a similar population base. Shropshire’s spending power in the provisional settlement, before the additional measures announced this week, is £1,623 per dwelling, whereas Coventry’s spending power is £1,780, so there is £157 more spending power per dwelling in Coventry. Coventry generates £21.5 million more than Shropshire, and as £21.5 million is close to 9% of Shropshire’s total spending power, it represents a significant divergence in capacity at a time when the costs of delivery in rural areas are going up disproportionately.

One of the reasons why the costs of delivery are increasing disproportionately is the rapid acceleration in the age profile of our residents in rural areas. I have been surprised to discover that my constituency of Ludlow now has the 11th oldest population in the country, so there are only 10 constituencies in which more than 28.2% of residents are aged over 65. The situation is leading to considerable cost pressures on the delivery of adult social care in rural areas. The cost in Shropshire is going up by roughly £10 million a year, so the increase in core spending that will result from this settlement will be more than absorbed by the increasing cost pressure on delivering services to our increasing elderly population.

I welcome the measures announced by the Secretary of State this week, and I welcome the fact that the Government will publish a Green Paper in the summer on the cost of social care. It behoves us all to get involved, and I am sure that many all-party groups and interested groups outside the House will make representations. The all-party group on rural services, which I have the pleasure of chairing, will certainly make a representation.

My final point, in my last minute, will be to welcome yesterday’s announcement of a £16 million increase in the rural services delivery grant. I am pleased that £900,000 of that will come to Shropshire to reflect the costs I have mentioned. I also welcome the extra £150 million for the adult social care support grant, on top of the £2 billion announced in the past 12 months, about which the Opposition spokesman was so grudging. This reflects the Government’s recognition of the challenge in social care, and we are doing the right thing by trying to meet that challenge.

I also welcome the announcement about the retention of capital receipts for an additional three years, which will be of great help to authorities such as Shropshire Council. I am particularly pleased that the Secretary of State confirmed in response to my earlier question that the current review will be taken forward into the spending review.

5.38 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): This debate has to be seen against the background of a 79% cut in direct funding to local authorities between 2010 and 2020—those figures are from the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Local government has faced bigger cuts than virtually any other part of the public sector, and how well local government has dealt with that is to the great credit of councils across the country of all political persuasions. There have been real cuts to services, and if central Government were as good at managing their resources as local government, we would probably see much better services being delivered by central Government Departments. The reality, however, is that the councils with the biggest needs, such as Sheffield City Council, have faced the biggest cuts. There have been more than £300 million of cuts in grants to my local authority, and we have seen the problems in Northamptonshire only too starkly in the past few days.

On Monday, as we looked at business rates and local government finance, the Communities and Local Government Committee heard from witnesses including Councillor David Simmonds from the Local Government Association and Councillor Paul Carter from the County Councils Network, both of whom are respected Conservative leaders. When we asked them whether other councils were likely to follow Northamptonshire,
they said, “Not this year, but unless attention is paid to the growing pressures of adult social care and children’s services, which are becoming an even bigger problem in some authorities, there is a cliff edge that other authorities are going to fall over at some point.” Those Conservative leaders are not going off half-cocked or at a tangent; they are facing up to the real problems that local authorities are having to address daily.

The £150 million extra for social care is of course welcome. We are now somewhat used to having sticking plasters every year to address the social care problem, but it is just that the sticking plaster has got a bit small this year; it is £150 million rather than the billions we had perhaps come to expect. The LGA has said in its assessment that by 2020, the gap for social care will be £2.3 billion. That figure has been confirmed by the King’s Fund and by the National Audit Office in a report for the Select Committee. It is there for everyone to read, so this problem is coming at us—it is here and now, and it is growing. Conservative leaders of local authorities are saying this just as strongly as Labour leaders, and we are talking about a total funding gap of nearly £4.6 billion. That is the reality, and I have not heard Ministers challenge it in any way. These are the problems that local authorities are facing up to, and without extra resources, they will not be able to deliver the services that our constituents need.

I wish to pay particular attention to two issues, the first of which is business rates retention. Council leaders told us on Monday that there is a great deal of uncertainty. The four-year funding settlement that we are now in the middle of was welcomed by local councils, as they saw a degree of certainty, but they are now uncertain about what will happen in 2020. The Government’s intention is to have 75% business rate retention, which will give an extra £5 billion to the financing of local councils, but the Government intend to offset that by making the money pay for public health grants, rural delivery grants and other grants, so there will not actually be any net new money for local councils as a result. The leaders told us that when the move is made to 100% business rates retention, it will deliver another £5 billion, but local councils need that money to deal with the pressures on them now, and they will grow by 2020. The policy cannot be used to provide a reason for giving even more powers to local government in order to absorb that £5 billion, which is the Treasury’s intention. Ministers really have to think about that. There is a way to solve the funding problems in 2020: use this extra £5 billion from 100% business rate retention to fund dealing with the pressures that local government can identify.

Finally, I wish to talk about the fair funding review, which is a wonderful form of words to keep Conservative Back Benchers happy, is it not? Everyone smiles and says, “Fair funding means we are going to get more,” but one person’s fair funding is, of course, another person’s unfair funding, as we have seen over the years. Local government cannot agree among itself how fair funding should be sorted out. Of course it is right to review needs assessments every so often, and the Select Committee has put forward some evidence, following research we had commissioned on that review. But in the middle of a zero-sum game, one council gains from the review, another will lose. What came out clearly from our evidence session on Monday—I believe that this was said by the Conservative leaders—is that if the cake is not large enough, the fair funding review will probably end up being seen by no one as fair at all. That is the real problem. If additional funding is not identified, the growing crisis in social care will mean that there will be an even worse failure to deliver for some of the most needy in our communities, with the risk that some local authorities will be so financially strapped that they will follow Northamptonshire. That is a warning of which we should all be aware, and we have to bear it clearly in mind in the next few months.

5.44 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Shrewsbury is one of the most popular places to which to retire in the whole United Kingdom. The beauty of our historic town and the Shropshire countryside attracts a lot of senior citizens to come to live in our community. We celebrate their contribution to our constituencies and to the county, but with that increase in the number of senior citizens comes, of course, additional adult social care costs. I have become interested in the local government finance settlement because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) said, our local council has faced increases of £10 million per annum in its attempt to grapple with the spiralling costs of adult social care.

When previously the Labour party ran the local council, it increased council tax by 16.6% in one year. That caused a great deal of distress and concern to people on fixed incomes, especially senior citizens, which is why we have encouraged the council to freeze council tax and do everything possible to limit the increases that local people will have to pay. I am proud that the council has managed to do that.

Shropshire Council has reduced some of the operating costs, as we have asked it to do since we came into office, and a lot of the fat has been cut away. In fact, the council is one of the most efficient in the whole United Kingdom. However, having made the efficiency savings, it is now really struggling to meet additional costs, which is why my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow and I have spent so much time in discussions with the council leader, Peter Nutting, and the chief executive, Clive Wright, to hear at first hand about some of the difficulties they face.

As a result of those discussions, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), along with other Conservative MPs from rural shire counties, decided to meet the Secretary of State and the Chancellor over the past few weeks to highlight the difficulties that rural shire counties face. I wish to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). My right hon. Friend is not able to join us today because unfortunately he is in hospital after an accident but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow will acknowledge, my right hon. Friend has played an important part in the campaign for funding for Shropshire Council.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): May I reciprocate by thanking my hon. Friend for the leadership he has shown in those meetings and for his determination, which has meant that rural counties have got a better deal? Equally, I thank the Front-Bench team for listening to us and being so helpful to people who need their help so badly.
Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Of course, we almost think of Herefordshire as part of our area.

Bill Wiggin: Love thy neighbour.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend is not quite Salopian, but he is certainly our neighbour, and I thank him.

Whether we look at funding for local government, education or, indeed, health, we can see, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) will acknowledge, large gaps in funding—a disparity between rural and inner-city areas.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That rural sparsity and above-average ageing populations, such as Wiltshire’s, do increase costs. Does he agree that deprivation is not confined to urban areas, as the Opposition believe, but can actually be found in rural areas such as our constituencies?

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend makes a critical point. When Labour were in government, I brought Labour Ministers to parts of Shrewsbury, including Harlescott, Ditherington and Sundorne, where there are some of the highest levels of deprivation throughout our county and the region. They were amazed. The Opposition just think of Shrewsbury as a quiet, sleepy, beautiful little historic town. They do not understand that there are significant levels of deprivation in rural shire counties.

I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, and to his colleagues in the Department for treating us with a great deal of civility and decency and for listening so attentively to our representations. I thank him for the additional £166 million, as a result of which Shropshire gets an additional £2.5 million. However, the taskforce that we have created will continue its work until we get a fairer funding settlement. I am very grateful to him for taking the first step in ensuring that the fair funding settlement is implemented. He has announced the start of a public consultation process, which is something that none of his predecessors did, so we can now acknowledge that he is taking our concerns seriously and is putting forward the mechanics to ensure that we finally have a fairer funding settlement between rural and inner city areas.

When the dust settles on this local finance settlement, I will continue to lobby my right hon. Friend, as will my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire, to ask for Shropshire to be considered for the next tranche of business rate retention pilot schemes, because that is a very good initiative and something from which our county could benefit significantly.

I will end by inviting the Secretary of State to Shropshire. He has been there before—he represents a constituency not far from us—and we have been very grateful for those visits. None the less, I invite him again to come to spend a day looking at how services are provided across a rural county, and how there are huge additional costs in providing those services. I say to the hon. Member for providing West and Royton (Jim McMahon) that, in contrast to what he attempted to say in his contribution, those additional costs do exist. In dealing with a lot of very small schools in rural villages, meals on wheels and getting support to remote rural villages, there are, of course, additional costs, and until they are taken into consideration, we, in the shire counties, will continue to lobby strenuously on this matter.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I know that I will not be alone in observing that the level of casework coming through my constituency office these days has never been so high. The reason it is so high reflects a number of things. It certainly reflects the fact that 7,500 people used just one of our local food banks, the B30 food bank, last year alone; it reflects the changes in the benefits system; it reflects the persistent problem of low pay; and it reflects real problems of crime and antisocial behaviour that was covered in the previous debate.

The reality, though, is that so many of the cases that I take up today relate to services provided by Birmingham City Council. Yes, Birmingham does not always get things right, but then neither does any other local authority. However, as a council under Labour, it has continued to prioritise children’s services; kept most libraries open when many other authorities have closed theirs; and taken an active role in boosting jobs and skills for young people, leading to initiatives to manage and reduce the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training. It is also leading in the co-ordination of the response to the collapse of Carillion locally. It is building homes and has a programme to improve fire safety in tower blocks—we are waiting for a Government response on this—which needs and deserves help from the Government.

The truth is that so many of the problems that I see at my advice desk are down to the fact that Birmingham City Council is simply not allowed the resources by Government that it needs to provide the services that my constituents deserve. Figures in the provisional local government finance settlement show that Birmingham’s core spending power will drop by 2% over the period between 2015-16 and 2019-20, even if Birmingham City Council raises its council tax by the maximum 3% each year. In comparison, over the same period, Hampshire’s spending power will increase by 4.8%, Surrey’s by 4.7% and Warwickshire’s by 7.5%. Government funding to Birmingham City Council has been cut by almost £650 million since 2010. That is more than 75% of the current net budget. It has lost 40% of its workforce, and adult social care, which has rightly attracted a lot of attention in this debate already, has had to be cut by 48%. We all see the consequences of that.

Fairways, a day care centre in my constituency, is under threat of closure. In proposing that closure, Birmingham City Council has got it wrong. I hope that service users and I will persuade them to change course. However, the council has been put in this position and is on the brink of making the wrong decision due to the 48% cut in the budget for adult social care.

But the point I really want to make is not just that Birmingham needs more support, but that it deserves a fair deal in the formula used by the Government. The Government have failed to correct an historical error in the funding formula, which means that Birmingham is £100 million worse off today than it should be. Why? Because the Government cut grant allocations to local authorities in 2014-15 and 2015-16, pro-rated to the
level of grant received, and they disregarded the ability to raise council tax income. The result was that the authorities receiving more Government grant because they were least able to raise council tax income—because of the generally higher levels of deprivation—received the largest cuts proportionately.

Birmingham City Council met the Government to discuss changes in approach to the distribution of the cuts made to local government, so that the cuts would take account of the ability to raise council tax. I am pleased to say that the Government did change their approach to allocating cuts from 2016–2017 in order to take that into account. However, the inherent unfairness of the first two years’ cuts remains. Based on the latest local government finance settlement, Birmingham City Council estimates that it will receive £100 million less funding in 2018–19 than if the cuts were made fairly.

Like all local authorities—particularly those with the highest levels of deprivation—Birmingham needs greater support from the Government. But I am not just making a special case for Birmingham because of that. I am asking that all local authorities are treated equally in the level of cuts made annually. And if they are to be treated equally, Birmingham City Council should receive £100 million of extra funding. The Government have not agreed to that. My question is, why not?

5.55 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): What we get in our local government grant is key to delivering the standard of living that all our constituents want. I thank the Minister, because we have been fortunate in Devon, where core spending has gone up 3.3% to £537.8 million. We have an additional social care grant of £2.2 million and a rural services delivery grant of £7.5 million, although the business rates pilot money of £10 million has perhaps been the most valuable to us, as it has doubled what we might otherwise have received. Members might be expecting me to say, “Thank you—that’s enough.” And I do thank the Minister. But, in a sense, the case has largely been made by my Shropshire colleagues: even that money is not enough, because we have a shire county with an ageing population and infrastructure challenges. I will not repeat the valuable case that has already been made.

This debate is not just about how much money authorities receive, it is also about how it is spent. I have a real concern that some of the money sent to local authorities by the Government will not actually be spent on what the Government imagine. That happened with the last chunk of additional money for social care funding. My local authority is—forgive me—strapped for cash, so it decided to reduce what it was going to spend itself, and instead included the extra chunk that came from the Government. The bottom line is that it was not actually social care providers, and particularly care homes, that saw the benefit. That does not seem right.

There is no oversight of the commissioning of social care or, indeed, of many other commissioning functions of local government, so the level of service provided is a postcode lottery. My constituency has some really good private providers, but they do not take any patients or inmates from the public sector because they simply do not offer sufficient rates. Nursing care homes in my constituency—the ones actually provide nursing care—have largely gone because they simply cannot be paid enough to provide support. It is those nursing care homes that we need, almost more than the standard care homes. I would suggest that the Government think not just about how much is spent, but how we supervise and have some oversight of how local authorities spend that money.

Children’s services are in an equally dire position. The department is overspent in Devon and the weighting has been inadequate, yet to try to save even more money, the council is looking not at outsourcing, which is what it did before, but at bringing in-house its provision of public health services for children. I am concerned that what the Government are doing, while well intended, is not delivering the right result.

In education, I certainly welcome the increase, and indeed the new funding formula, but it is not delivering what we need. Yes, it is more, but for the same reasons of sparsity, it is not enough. As a result of the formula, some schools will actually be worse off now than they were before the formula was introduced. The formula is opaque and unfair, and it is not designed to re-address the situation when, hopefully, the good times roll again. I urge the Minister, working with the Department for Education, to look again at how we can make the funding formula really fair.

My real concern, however, is special educational needs. Devon has one of the most critical situations in this regard. Much of the provision is out of area and consequently very expensive. We need a hub, which requires initial capital investment from Government. Something that has rather surprised and horrified me is that when any child is what we used to call statemented—that is, needing support, usually about £10,000, which is about what is needed to pay for a teaching assistant—the local council gives the school only £2,000 and the school is expected to find the difference. The school is not a business; it is there to provide a public service. That does not seem right, but I am sure that the Department could fix it if it wanted to.

Mental health provision is also inadequate—we know that; there are no surprises. We welcome the offer of a person specifically focused on mental health within schools. However, this must about providing an additional person, not just trying to retrain somebody who is already fully employed.

The funding settlement for education does not cover costs such as salary increases, pension increases or the apprentice levy, nor the extra cost of children having to be supported up to the age of 26—well, they are not children any more. It seems to me that there is still a lot more work to be done.

The Government and the Department have made a good start. I believe that their intention is in the right place, and the financial support offered is welcome, but they absolutely have to address the underlying unfairness and challenges for rural areas, which are not understood in any formula that I have seen in any of the spending areas. It is critical to get this right before—if the Government have what they want—the system whereby all funding is generated locally is put in place. If we do not understand the need in rural areas, we will never be able to ensure that whatever we do locally is going to meet that need.

6.2 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I came to this place having represented my community on Nottingham City Council for six years—something that
[Alex Norris]

I enjoyed greatly and that was a real privilege. However, being a councillor between 2011 and 2017 was quite a difficult proposition. We saw massive real-terms decreases in our funding every year as the Government downscaled their commitment to our city. That meant service cuts, council tax increases, and business rates being increasingly vital. It meant local people paying more so that the national Government could pay less. All this in pursuit of an austerity agenda that decimated demand in our local economy, leading to a historically slow economic recovery, and now to pay for tax cuts of little social value.

I am afraid that is the picture we see again this year: spending cuts. I used to think—I do not know if it was a naive or an optimistic view of the world—that Ministers did not understand local government and that that was why there were cuts of such a scale. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is not in his place, said that local government has been targeted as much as anywhere else in the public sector. I thought that it was because Ministers did not understand it, and thought that the services were unimportant and wasteful. Actually, it is quite the reverse. Ministers target local government because they know exactly how it works. They know that hard-pressed councils like mine in Nottingham have to set balanced budgets, so if they pull a lever and say what the reduction is, they will get that reduction, to the penny, from local government, and they can go to their Treasury colleagues having done their job. They will have had none of the responsibility and will get all the benefit. What an easy cut to make!

That would be bad enough, but these spending cuts have been incredibly unevenly distributed. Between 2014 and 2016—around the transition grant period—Nottingham households lost 250 quid each in spending power, while those in Windsor, to pick one area out of dozens that would fit into this category, lost just £34. But it was those very communities such as Windsor that benefited from the £300 million transition grant to help them to deal with the cuts. In Nottingham? Not a bean.

Inevitably—what else could it do?—that has led to council tax rises in my community. One of the poorest communities in the country, with the lowest discretionary spend, we will now again receive a near 6% increase in our council tax. We have a small council tax base, as others have mentioned, so that will be less helpful for us than it will be for other communities. Our gap in Nottingham starts at £33 million. The Secretary of State talks about increased spending, but the reality of the situation—I suspect it is the same for all hon. Members here today—is that my council will have to make reductions. If I tell my council leader that he has more money, he will tell me that he has to make a £33 million reduction in services. If he gets £6 million in council tax, that is still £27 million that has to come from elsewhere as we deal with the toxic combination of losing grant and having significant increases in demand.

We have heard a lot about demands in adult social care, which are important, but we should not forget children’s social care and the extraordinary pressures it creates. So forth, our community has the lowest discretionary spend. Last people think that this is an efficiency issue, I want to share with the House the proposals in Nottingham—[Interruption.] I am glad the Chancellor has joined us: I will be able to make a personal plea. The proposals in Nottingham include job cuts in adult social care; reducing funding for weight management, smoking cessation and drug and alcohol services; reductions in youth services; reducing funding for the careers service; reviewing transport services for vulnerable adults; reviewing fees and charges for leisure centres and bereavement services; and increasing fares and reducing frequency on the Link bus services. We have our political differences, but I doubt that anyone would say that those are “nice to have”.

More importantly, as well as being vital services in my community, those are all stitches in time that save nine. Every single one of those reductions will lead to an increase in spending in public services elsewhere, and that is why this settlement is an act of vandalism. It is short-sighted and ill-judged. But as we all know—and I suggest this is why the Secretary of State is so attached to the idea—my council will receive all the blame. It should not; it is doing an excellent job in impossible circumstances. The fault lies at the door of the Secretary of State.

As for the fair funding review, I have no problem with systems that are a generation old being looked at, but we should be clear when we talk about fairness. I know there is an enthusiasm for capitation, but we should be clear what that would mean for communities such as mine. I am happy to accept, and I almost hoped I would get, an intervention on that point.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that areas of high social deprivation end up bearing the brunt of cuts? In particular, in my constituency, the council has had to contend with £54 million in cuts, £12.4 million of which is to schools, thereby hampering the education of the next generation.

Alex Norris: I share my hon. Friend’s perspective. I know that he will work with his council to try to mitigate those cuts, but there is a point at which that becomes impossible. I am sure that in Slough, as in Nottingham—and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), in his area—they have received reductions that are significantly over the national average. The reductions are not just ill conceived, they are unfairly distributed. When we look at the fair funding formula, we must look at that.

I have heard persuasive cases from Shropshire about the needs there. That is why we should look at hard deprivation indices to make our judgments, not special pleading or bartering for votes. We need hard figures that say where the need is greatest, because that is where the funding should go.

I have not been here very long, but I have noticed a couple of curiosities that have been in full force today. Earlier in the day, at Prime Minister’s questions, the Government Back Benches erupted with stories of how great things are going in Members’ constituencies and what a wonderful job the Government are doing. Fast-forward a couple of hours to this debate and suddenly we hear how hard-pressed those communities are and how much more money they need—and need now. As I have said, this is a zero-sum game, and the money would come from poorer communities such as mine. That is one of the odd spectacles.
We also often hear from Ministers at the Dispatch Box that the answer to public service issues is not more money, and councils should not just ask for more money. But then we have had a series of speeches this afternoon asking for just that. When the challenges are in better-off communities, the answer is always more money, but it is always less money for us. I come from Robin Hood country, and it is a sort of reverse Robin Hood. It is particularly galling to have lectures on the state of local public finances from communities that never put their council tax up, use that as a political article of faith and then say, “Look at the shortfall we’ve got.” We have always had to put our council tax up, because that is the only way we can hope to stay anywhere near in line with our demands. Those are our challenges. As we move to the fairer funding review, let us use fairness in its proper and most evidence-based form.

6.10 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who made a passionate case for his area and touched on the issue of fairer funding. He is absolutely right that a fairer funding review has to be done after a period of time. I can remember making that argument to Labour Governments. The problem is that when a fairer funding review is done people then say, “Gosh, that area needs more money, but we’ve got to cap somewhere else” and Governments are not very keen on cutting elsewhere. So while I think the fairer funding formula is essential, and it is clear that county councils that he says are outside the clique and ready to save Northamptonshire County Council must have voted for it, either thinking that the budget was a good one or thinking that it was not a good one but doing so out of party loyalty. Either way, would that not disqualify them from leadership as well?

Alex Norris: I am sorry to stop the hon. Gentleman in full flow, but I have heard him say that a few times now. For the budget to have passed, the very same councils that he says are outside the clique and ready to save Northamptonshire County Council must have voted for it, either thinking that the budget was a good one or thinking that it was not a good one but doing so out of party loyalty. Either way, would that not disqualify them from leadership as well?

Mr Bone: In this particular case, the budget was passed on the assurances that were given by the cabinet, and those assurances were given to the local MPs. We said, “Are you sure you’ve got the money to do this? We’re worried,” and they said, “Oh no, everything’s rosy. The budget is fine.” They produced a budget and passed it. In year, it was clear that the savings they had suggested were not happening, and they had to take emergency measures. The budget will have to be set in February or not, and that is a dilemma for the council at this very moment.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend hits on a key concern that I have about the cabinet system in local government. When I was a councillor, we had committee chairs, and we had all parties round the table, having to justify what action they were going to take. There was immediate accountability. The cabinet system has taken that away too much.

Mr Bone: I could not agree more. I was a councillor for seven years, and there was a committee system. It was a Conservative-controlled council, and I have to say, I was as much of a pain then as I am now. I remember persuading the leader of the council to take back the proposed budget because it was wrong. Nothing has changed there, I suppose.

Michelle Donelan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Bone: I will not. I apologise, but other Members have to speak.

The cabinet system per se is not wrong, but it can go wrong, and it has gone terribly wrong in this case because the information just was not there. The vast majority of officers at the county council are superb, as are the vast majority of members, but the fact that the information was not there meant that the scrutiny did not occur. Had there been a committee system, there is no way that the council could have got into this mess.

We are in a situation now where drastic measures have to be taken. I do not see any solution except Lords Commissioners. There will have to be a restructuring of local government in Northamptonshire. I hope that that can be done as quickly as possible, but whatever future local government system we have in Northamptonshire, it must have a committee system, not a cabinet system.
6.17 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for his speech. The simple answer in his case is that the Conservative councillors on Northamptonshire County Council could find the fortitude simply to no-confidence the existing leader, rather than trying to get the Lords Commissioners to do the dirty work for them, but it seems that they would rather abdicate responsibility in that sense as well.

While I am on my feet, I wish to draw attention to the comments made earlier by the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, Local Government and other subjects—the list seems to be growing every day.

Jim McMahon: Don’t forget bins.

Gareth Snell: Yes, obviously he is the Minister for Bins.

The Secretary of State said that Stoke-on-Trent City Council would see an increase in its funding abilities. I have just double-checked the figures published by the Conservative portfolio holder for finance on Stoke-on-Trent City Council, and they say that £32 million needs to be cut over the next two years. Either the Conservative Minister in this place was misinformed or the Conservative deputy leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council is providing misinformation to the public. Those two statements cannot be reconciled without someone saying they are wrong. That is the nub of today’s debate. Conservative Members are quite happy to throw around terminology and certain figures simply to prove a point that they are not cutting local government, but anybody in this place who has been involved in local government knows that they are.

I apologise, Mr Speaker. I should have drawn attention at the beginning of my speech to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I am a serving district councillor in a shire county, so I understand the points made by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) about the deprivation that exists in shire counties. However, I represent Stoke-on-Trent, and what he fails to understand is that this is not necessarily about the absolute level of deprivation, but the number of people for whom those services are needed—the number of children in care and the number of older people requiring complex social care. That simply cannot be compared in a city and a county as though it is apples and apples, because it is not; it is apples and pears at best.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), not least because he, like me, has local government experience in a shire county setting.

Rather like my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), it would be impossible for me not to speak about the situation at Northamptonshire County Council. It has been a very difficult week for local government in the county. I want to preface my remarks by saying that the vast majority of the staff at

2019-20. If, as the Secretary of State says, there is more money coming into Stoke-on-Trent, I do not understand why such political choices are being made.

It is not only Labour councillors and Labour Members who are saying this; Lord Porter, the chair of the Local Government Association, has said:

‘Years of unprecedented central government funding cuts have left many councils beyond the point where council tax income can be expected to plug the...gaps...’

If Conservative Members will not listen to Labour Members, perhaps they will listen to their own peers who are experts in this field. Quite frankly, if Lord Porter is saying that there is a problem with local government funding, we should all sit up and listen because he knows what he is talking about.

I want to touch briefly not on the funding arrangements in Stoke-on-Trent, but, although the Secretary of State is no longer in his place, on the issues in Bromsgrove. It is one thing for the Secretary of State to tell me that my council has no problems, but another for his own council in Bromsgrove to predict a £1 million shortfall over the next three years and to have to put up council tax by 3% and for the county council to predict a £32 million deficit over the next year and to have to put up council tax by 4.94%. The leader of the county council said in a cabinet report:

“The current...financial year has faced significant financial challenges”.

This is not scaremongering by Labour councils or Labour Members. Tory councils with Tory MPs are making it quite clear that Tory Government cuts are affecting the provision of local government in their own communities.

I am not entirely convinced that the report, for all its fancy words and funny fudging of figures, will actually deliver anything to give the necessary help and support to councils that need it. I will now finish to leave some time for others, but my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North said that he is from Robin Hood country. The motion does not give us the redistributive politics of Robin Hood; it is more about robbing the cities and robbing the poor.

The report is about taking money out of areas of deprivation to make sure that rebellious Back Benchers do not decide to sit on their hands and cause the Government a problem this evening. I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham, who is not in his place, has been able to succeed in getting additional funding for his council on a one-off basis, but that is not a long-term solution for the problems faced by local government. As more and more services are pushed by this Government towards local government, it is incumbent on us all to make sure that local government is funded properly and fairly.

6.22 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), not least because he, like me, has local government experience in a shire county setting.

Rather like my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), it would be impossible for me not to speak about the situation at Northamptonshire County Council. It has been a very difficult week for local government in the county. I want to preface my remarks by saying that the vast majority of the staff at
Northamptonshire County Council works tirelessly—day in, day out—on behalf of local people to deliver key public services, and no blame whatsoever lies with them for the situation in which we find ourselves.

It is no secret that we, as the seven Northamptonshire MPs, have been exceptionally concerned about the situation at Northamptonshire County Council for some time, and I appreciate the steps that the Secretary of State has taken to try to address those concerns. For example, there is the appointment of the inspector, who is currently conducting a thorough piece of work looking at what has gone wrong. As I said in the urgent question yesterday, I would welcome an interim recommendation from the inspector as quickly as possible, so that we can try to provide certainty for local people.

What is so frustrating is that, time after time, when Members of Parliament asked whether the county council would be able to balance its books, we were told, “Absolutely. You have nothing to worry about.” Such requests for clarification were made as early as last March and April and as recently as December. The responses were unequivocal—senior cabinet members at the county council were unequivocal in giving such guarantees—but we are where we are.

I believe that the concerns we have raised have been vindicated by the issuing of the section 114 notice. It is not just Members of Parliament who have raised concerns; 21 back-bench councillors now say that they have no confidence in the leadership. The independent LGA report is damning. It states that “there is a very short-term focus on solving the financial problems of today... There is no financial strategy to deliver a sustainable position for the Council... The Council has a poor record of delivering its approved budget... Key decisions are not always taken in the understanding of the financial implications, risks and options... Financial information is not presented clearly and transparently... Decisions taken by the Cabinet need greater transparency... Some portfolio holders readily accept the information they are given without systematic and robust challenge.”

Those are damning findings. It is no secret that the inspector who is currently carrying out the thorough inspection of the county council is equally concerned.

Michelle Donelan: I echo my hon. Friend’s point about the governance of councils being important. Does he agree that structure is also important and that unitary authorities such as Wiltshire Council can prove very efficient?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am keen to return to that point later in my remarks.

It is not good enough for cabinet members simply to shrug off all responsibility and try to apportion blame elsewhere, because there has to be accountability. The question we have to ask is this: why is it that many local authorities in similar circumstances—with similar settlements and populations—have managed to handle the challenges of recent years much more effectively than Northamptonshire County Council has? It would also be wrong to suggest that Members of Parliament and members of the Government have not tried to do our bit to help with those challenges, but being able to help relies upon the frank exchange of information and an honest dialogue. What has happened suggests that that has not been the case. At every opportunity, we have tried to help.

I welcome the commitment to a fairer funding review. It is a little rich for Opposition Members to talk down a fairer funding review, because we did not have one in 13 years of Labour government. Actually, Northamptonshire County Council has been chronically underfunded, in local government terms, under Governments from both sides; we do not do well out of funding formulas relative to more metropolitan areas. I hope that the local government finance review will help address some of those anomalies.

I have talked regularly in the House about the cost pressures created for Northamptonshire County Council by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement in December of an additional £18 million to tackle those cost pressures, and I hope that the county council will bid for some of the money; it will be entitled to some of it, because the cost pressures are acute.

It is also vital to note that the core spending power in the period up to 2020 is up by 7.6%, which is worth £31.1 million more. Members of Parliament have raised concerns, but the Government have also taken steps to help tackle directly some of the challenges. It is clear to me, as night follows day, that a fairer funding review in itself will not solve Northamptonshire County Council’s problems. I take absolutely no pleasure in saying any of this, but I will not moderate my remarks for party political convenience, because my primary concern in all this is continuity of service for the most vulnerable of my constituents.

Where do we go from here? We obviously need to wait for the inspector’s findings. I would like to see an interim report as soon as possible, because we need that certainty. I suspect that commissioners may well need to be appointed, because the failures are systemic and need to be dealt with robustly. We need to have a serious conversation in the county about the future structure of local government. To me, it seems clear that a two-tier model just is not financially viable in the current climate.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. He will know that we have very good district and borough councils—in fact, we share one. They have reserves and if we move to a unitary system—I think that is what will happen with two unitary authorities—what does he think should happen to those reserves?

Tom Pursglove: I suspect that my hon. Friend’s assessment of what the future structure might look like is correct. The reserves are very important. I am frustrated on behalf of the district and borough councils in the county that have managed their affairs properly, budgeted responsibly and put reserves away. I would like to see a model that protects those reserves for the individual communities in question. In my constituency, I think it right that the reserves that Corby Borough Council has responsibly accrued are spent on Corby and services there, and the same should happen in East Northamptonshire. That is exactly the sort of thing that we need to factor in.

I hope that councillors will engage proactively in the process of helping to shape the system. I do not want to see Government having to step in and impose a model. I want us in our communities to shape the system of local government for the future and councillors to take a very active lead in doing that. I agree that a committee structure would be the best way forward. I worked
under a committee structure system. I always found it a good, constructive way to do business. It was good to have the input of opposition members and backbench members into the democratic decision-making process.

As I said, absolutely no gloss can be applied to any of this: the situation at Northamptonshire County Council is an absolute disaster. I welcome the Government’s commitments in the local government finance settlement. More can always be done and we should always keep the support that we provide under review. I look forward to hearing more about the support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, but in the county, we now have to focus on getting our local government back on a sustainable footing.

6.31 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Since 2010, Durham County Council has had its expenditure cut by £224 million, although after hearing the Secretary of State speak today, we might think that local government is somehow in a strong position. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) was right: the root cause of this is the austerity during the last seven years. I will not let the Liberal Democrats off the hook for their responsibility for that, because they were in government and agreed to it.

This year alone, Durham County Council faces pay inflation of £4.8 million and general inflation of £3.2 million. The impact of the national living wage increase of 4.4% means another £3 million. There is a £3 million cost relating to the demographics of elderly people, and an additional £5 million due to pressures on children’s services, which has been mentioned. That means that, in 2018-19, Durham County Council will have to make further savings of £15.3 million.

Much reference has been made to the fairer funding formula, but I think it should get done under the Trade Descriptions Act, because the Government are doing what they have been doing for the last seven years. This is about the pork barrel—they put the money where they can get the votes. That is why, for example, it is not surprising that rural sparsity funding is going to Conservative-controlled areas. Lo and behold, even though Durham is a beautifully rural county, it does not get any of that funding.

If we look at core spending power, the average increase for county councils for 2018-19 is 2.1%; for County Durham, it is 1.4%. The reason for that is what we heard in our debate on police funding: it comes back to Conservative-controlled areas. Lo and behold, even though Durham is a beautifully rural county, it does not get any of that funding.

If we look at core spending power, the average increase for county councils for 2018-19 is 2.1%; for County Durham, it is 1.4%. The reason for that is what we heard in our debate on police funding: it comes back to areas with a low council tax base. If we look, for example, at the effect of a 1% increase in council tax, it is not surprising that the ones that score for core spending on that are Wokingham, with 0.8%, and Buckinghamshire, Surrey and Dorset. It was interesting to listen to the hon. Member for Welliborough (Mr Bone) and for Corby (Tom Pursglove) talking about Northamptonshire, because under the system that is being brought in, their core expenditure will rise by 3.8%, compared with County Durham’s at 0.5%.

The root cause lies in the clamour for so-called fairer funding back when the coalition Government entered office. I hear what people say about need, but the needs assessment was taken out of the formula, and that has continued under this Government. As a result, the formula does not recognise that areas have particular needs, such as in relation to looked-after children or growing demand for elderly care. Instead, the Government are rewarding their own areas. I do not accept the idea that there is no poverty in rural areas—there is—but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, the evidence does not prove that it is more costly to deliver services in those areas than in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for example, or some other urban conurbations.

Government Members are comparing apples and oranges, and we should think about the pressures in urban areas such as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) was right: the situation at Northamptonshire County Council is an absolute disaster. I welcome the announcement that Dorset will receive an extra £1.2 million to deal with adult social care and that our total rural services delivery grant, which is hugely important, will be £1.5 million. I agreed very much with what the shadow Opposition spokesman said—I appreciate that he was not quoting his own commissioned report—but whichever idiot came up with the answer that the cost of delivering services in a
rural area was equal to that of delivering them in an
urban area needs to be certified, because we all know
that geography and population sparsity lead to increased
costs. I also welcome last week’s announcement by the
Department of a successful bid to the housing infrastructure
fund of £4.1 million, so it was not too bad a week of
news for Dorset. I agreed with the hon. Member for
Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) when he pointed to the
huge debt of thanks that we parliamentarians owe to
our councillors for the work they do, against the backdrop
of a challenging financial position, in continuing to
deliver services and to keep the wheels on the bus—if
Members will forgive that analogy—at a time when
incomes have been falling and savings have had to be
made.

My constituency is served by three councils: East
Dorset District Council, North Dorset District Council,
and Dorset County Council. Although we have a two-tier
authority, the county council provides, on average, 85% of
the services enjoyed by the county. Over the last few
years, my postbag, my inbox and visitors to my
surgeries—as well as the leader and the chief executive
of the county council—have made it clear that there is
real, serious pressure on the delivery of adult social
services, services for children with special educational
needs, and wider children’s services, as well as, of course,
rural transport.

All the Dorset councils, district and county, have
made great strides in reducing their costs and making
themselves more efficient, and the tri-partnership between
West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland, and North Dorset
District Councils has made huge savings. The councils
have cut through the fat and the flesh, have gone through
the sinew and the muscle, have been chipping into the
bone, and are now starting to suck out the marrow.
They are trying to author the next steps of their future
in order to deliver the services that hard-working council
tax payers demand and need, taking account of the
demographics, as 65% of my constituents are over the
age of 70.

Those councils have submitted a proposal for the
reorganisation of local government. They recognise
that it is a question of not just trying to demand extra
income, but of trying to deal with what they receive in a
smarter and better way. The “two-unitary” solution for
the county that we are seeking, which is with the
Department at the moment, commands 62% of public
support. It is supported by seven of the eight Dorset
MPs and eight of our nine councils, as well as Bournemouth
University, Poole Harbour Commissioners, the local
township partnership, Dorset chamber of commerce
and industry, the clinical commissioning group, the
police and crime commissioner, and the Dorset Association
of Parish and Town Councils.

I plead with the Government. I entirely accept the
need to reduce expenditure and to balance the books. I
entirely understand why local government has shouldered
a very large proportion of central Government savings.
I support the Government absolutely in that endeavour:
what Conservative who understands the importance of
proper control of public money would not? However, I
cannot stand by, and will not stand by, if the proposal
that was submitted to the Government is delayed still
further, or rejected out of hand. The continued provision
of services for children and elderly people in my constituency
is now solely reliant on this change, so it needs to be
delivered.

6.43 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I represent beautiful
Bath. Obviously not everyone in Bath is wealthy, but on
the whole it is a wealthy area. I am, perhaps, unusual, in
that I lived in the north-west for 25 years, and for
10 years represented a local council area that was very
deprived. I can tell Conservative Members that that was
a real eye-opener. Anyone who wants to see real deprivation
should visit the post-industrial towns of the north.

It is disappointing that such a partisan approach has
been taken today. Yes, we should represent our own
areas—I do that—but we should also make decisions in
the round and look at fairness in the round, and we
should make the right decisions for the whole country.
The proposal we are discussing today is simply not fair.
It will disadvantage the disadvantaged further, and it
will increase the gap that already exists. I urge Conservative
Members to think again and, if necessary, to spend a
few years in local government in one of our northern
towns.

I want to make a separate point about the overall
proposal. The finance of local government and the way
we deliver local services have changed beyond recognition
in recent years, and that matters for democracy. We talk
so much about taking back control these days, but the
clearest evidence of democracy in action is at a local
level. We deliver so much of what matters in people’s
lives through local government, from bin collections
and street cleaning, to planning, housing and adult care
services.

Until 2014, as I said, I was a councillor for 10 years in
a unitary authority. We had clear spending and decision-
making powers, and there was a clear line of accountability,
but even then our council budgets were dominated by
two pressures: efficiency savings and ballooning adult
care costs. No Government have properly addressed the
problem, but this Government have led a relentless
crusade to destroy local government and local democracy.
Most schools have been forced to become academies
and are now overseen by Whitehall, our local facilities
are run under PFI contracts, and more than half of our
councils no longer own any social housing stock.
Meanwhile, regulatory functions such as trading standards
and building regulation control services are outsourced,
which is a polite word for privatisation.

Where is the commitment to new resources for social
care funding following yet another NHS winter crisis?
The figure announced today will not cover the annual
£2.3 billion funding gap that is expected by 2020. As
homelessness increases and one in 111 children spend
Christmas in temporary accommodation or bed and
breakfasts, where is the commitment to new social
housing so that people have a home to go to? The net
cost to councils of providing temporary accommodation
has tripled in the past three years. Rising homelessness
is costing local government more and more in the long
term. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 increases
the demands on local authorities, but does not provide
adequate resources. Even in Bath and North East Somerset,
an affluent area, the council’s estimated shortfall will be
over £16 million by 2020. Most of the council’s budget—
75%—is spent on adult social care services. Just a small
increase in that bill will mean that my council faces a
financial crisis, and that is in my affluent council area.
The situation at Northamptonshire County Council is
just the tip of the iceberg.
As with most of what the Government do, their approach is driven not by pragmatic policy, but by small-state ideology. The public sector is to be weakened and replaced at every opportunity by private providers. Local decision making is becoming increasingly powerless.

There is an alternative, and it is rooted in the belief that the public sector can provide good services for local people. Bin collections, schools and care services can be run by councils. A service that is run by local people for local people is normally better than a service managed from many hundreds of miles away. A service that is run for the public interest has different values from a service run for maximum profit.

The debate is yet another dismal display of the Government’s deliberate destruction of local government, and that will continue until crisis after crisis, and tragedy after tragedy, force the Government to rethink. My party is the champion of local government. We believe in local democracy and delivering the best possible services locally.

Gareth Snell: I have enjoyed the hon. Lady’s merry dance around the history of her party in government, but her party was relentless in cutting local government to the bone when it was part of the coalition. For her to say now that her party is suddenly the salvation is frankly beyond the pale.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I was a councillor in local government. As he knows, when any party is in national government, its members include people on the ground who need to agree to the decisions it makes. Many of us often pointed out how difficult things were for us at the local level, and our party listened and did not support the cuts beyond 2013.

My party is the champion of local government; I am a champion of local government. We believe in local democracy. We believe in delivering the best possible services locally. We believe that local government should be properly and openly funded. Today’s funding proposals leave a gaping hole of £5.8 billion by 2020. This is another terrible settlement for local government, and it does not have the Liberal Democrats’ support.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I will not detain the House for long. The local government finance settlement is of particular interest to me due to the significant challenges that councils face in areas such as Suffolk in delivering services, particularly adult social care and children’s services. I am the chairman of the county all-party parliamentary group and in that role, along with many colleagues, I have made my concerns known to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. I am grateful to both of them for listening to those concerns and to the Secretary of State for providing an additional £150 million of funding for adult social care and an extra £16 million for the rural services delivery grant. From all that, £87.4 million will go to counties to help in the delivery of vital services. For Suffolk, there is an additional £2 million for the additional social care grant and £500,000 for the rural services delivery grant. The additional funds are welcome, as is the business rates retention pilot, which should provide Suffolk with an additional £10.5 million for economic growth-related projects.

However, additional money only goes some way towards meeting the rising costs of social care, both in Suffolk and other counties across England and Wales. Such areas face unique pressures as they are home to the largest and fastest-growing elderly populations. It is vital that the Government deliver a properly resourced, long-term, sustainable fair funding system to meet the estimated £2.54 billion county funding gap in 2021. I acknowledge the Secretary of State’s firm commitment to the fair funding review, which must result in a properly and fully researched, up-to-date, evidence-based solution that recognises both the demographic pressures of an ageing population and the actual cost of providing services in county areas. I sense a real strength of feeling among colleagues on both sides of the Chamber representing constituencies in county areas about the need for additional funding to plug the £2.54 billion gap, and I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), will confirm when he sums up that the fair funding review will take full account both of need and of the actual cost of providing vital services in counties such as Suffolk.

In some ways, I find it sad that we appear to be dividing counties and metropolitan areas with a “them and us” attitude. My constituency of Waveney is in a county area—north Suffolk—and believe me, Lowestoft is not a wealthy place and, looking at the current figures, I do not believe that we get the resources we need to tackle the deep-seated pockets of deprivation. We need to do something in a sensible and, dare I say it, collegiate way.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let us bring the debate back to where it needs to be. I do not think that this is about “us and them” or counties versus metropolitan areas; this is about the sheer unfair nature of the cuts. The 10 most deprived councils see the highest cuts while the wealthiest councils do not. Will the hon. Gentleman at least accept that?

Peter Aldous: As I said, I do not represent a wealthy area, and many sacrifices have had to be made on all sides, but we need to consider things in a calm and rational way to try to come up with a solution that is fair to all. That may well involve putting additional funding into the Budget, which may be the only way to find a solution that gets approval from the majority, if not everyone.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The financing of local authorities and local government has caused problems for many Governments over the years. It arises from the fact that parts of the country with a lot of businesses or a lot of rich people are able to raise quite a lot of money locally for some of the services that have to be provided. However, there are many constituencies and many parts of the country where that is not the case, where there are issues of deprivation and where
there are issues that require money, and where local authorities are unable to raise the money from their constituents or from the local area. When national Governments decide how much money to give to different areas, it is therefore important that those issues are properly considered and addressed.

My constituency of Bolton South East is high up on the indices that judge poverty and health and education issues. The mortality rate is higher in my constituency than in the rest of the country. The number of people with a university degree is not in proportion with the rest of the country. The number of people who own their home is not equivalent to the rest of the country. On many issues and in many areas, the local council is not able to fulfil its obligations.

Having said all that, Bolton Council has been run by Labour for many years, and it is regarded as an incredibly sensible and financially prudent council—it has even received four-star ratings in the past. Despite that, there has been a 54% cut to Government funding since 2010. Those cuts are not acceptable. My local council is basically spending all its resources on its statutory obligations such as social care and services for the elderly and the young, including children in care, looked-after children and protected children.

Mr Dhesi: Does my hon. Friend agree that austerity just does not work? When we compound cuts to our councils and to the services that our residents do deserve and need with police cuts and cuts to other services, it leads to a bad situation becoming even worse.

Yasmin Qureshi: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I was going to make this point later, but I will make it now. I am not being party political, but I find it appalling and galling that the Tory councillors of Bolton complain that the council is not doing some of the things it needs to do—the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), a Conservative, recently complained to the local newspaper that the council has not filled the potholes. Well, the council cannot do those things because its grant has been cut by 54% since 2010. The council has to spend the money it has on vital services such as looking after our elderly and our children.

There is no money left for potholes or for environmental services. In some parts of my constituency young people cause a lot of social nuisance and a lot of problems, such as breaking car windows and breaking people’s doors and windows. The local authority is being blamed for all of that, and people are saying, “You are not doing anything.” The political parties, especially the Conservative opposition, try to put it on the council. But, again, the council does not have the resources. It is doing everything it can. Where it can find some money, it is spending on the local area to try to improve the roads, get street lighting and help look after those communities affected by crime. The council is spending its money, but it does not have enough to give. When the hon. Member for Bolton West complains about things, I always say that he should be going to his own Government and Ministers. He should be asking them for that money.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I help the hon. Lady a little? We did have the police debate before. I presume that as you were going to name the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) in the way that you have and quote the newspaper, you made him aware that you were going to speak about him. Did you do that? I am just a bit concerned that he has not been notified.

Yasmin Qureshi: My apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will let the hon. Gentleman know after this debate that I have referred to him.

Let me get back to the facts. Certain parts of the country need extra resources, and any funding formula that is created must take account of that. Many areas are unable to raise the money that they need and it is a big challenge for local authorities. While I am on my feet, may I ask for some extra money to fix the potholes in Bolton? May I also ask about an application that the council has made in respect of a mill on Crescent Road and a brownfield site being turned into housing? We still have not heard any response from Ministers about whether they are giving permission for building to take place. Finally, on housing, when the Labour Government came to power in 1997 they spent £18 billion on repairing homes. They did that in their first few years in office. So when people say we did not look after the issue of housing, I say that we did. We then also started building homes as well. We need more of those.

7.2 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): It is great to have you in the Chair, once again, Mr Deputy Speaker. The contributions to this debate on both sides of the House have been interesting and wide-ranging. On one level there is the political aspect, and I challenged the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), the shadow Minister, to say whether there was any question to which his answer was not more money. I also asked him where the money is going to come from. That provoked the most interesting discussion in the debate: it is not always just about more money; it is also about how we organise the fundamentals of government. I sometimes wish that we were not shackled in this place by constant debates where the Opposition say that we should spend more money and we say we have to generate it first. We should look at how we organise government best and most effectively.

Let us examine the case of social care. We all know that the health service sits in one place and social services sit in another, and that, broadly, the overlap is huge and the potential efficiency savings are massive if we are able to bring them together successfully. We should all be working on that together, on a cross-party basis, to the extent that it is possible to do so within our partisan political system. We should be working on how to get the best deal for an ageing population and we should rework our public services. We need to navigate the Scylla of the trade unions and the Charybdis of public spending restraints and pressures in order to come up with ways of reworking the systems—the NHS, social services and county council systems—to make sure that we can deliver, particularly for older people where we are facing challenges.

I welcome the fact that more money was found for social care in Kent. Kent MPs were deeply concerned at the situation and the leader of the county council was
concerned about the funding settlement. As a team we all worked together and met the Minister to make a strong case for Kent. I welcome the extra £166 million for social care, some £3.9 million of which will go to Kent. The increase in core spending power is also really welcome.

When we talk about local government finance, we tend just to look at core funding or the amount of money for social care, but we need to look at it in the round, because a whole load of it comes from, say, the Department for Education. I am concerned about Home Office funding. In terms of the local government finance settlement, the Home Office does a fantastic job for Calais. Over the years it has handed out £200 million, but it does not give quite the level of funding we need at the frontline in Kent and in Dover, where we take a lot of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The county council has been making a powerful case that it does not get the kind of funding compensation from the Home Office that it should get for the fact that Kent is bearing the brunt in terms of the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers.

Let me set out the issues and challenges. The total cost of net funding from the Home Office is £25.4 million. In the current year, the shortfall is £4.6 million. If there are no changes to the financing arrangements, the coming year will see a further deficit of £3.9 million. That affects public services for the residents of Kent, because services have to be provided to people who have come to this country who are not from Kent or normal residents of Kent. That is challenging.

There is a challenge with care leavers, with a funding gap of £3.1 million. If someone turns 18, the amount of money given to the county council falls dramatically, yet the costs on the council stay very high indeed. We should remember the cost of the Millbank reception centre near Ashford in Kent. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking children there is a gap of £0.6 million, because the regulations entitle all children living in foster care at their 16th birthday to remain living with their carers, if they so choose. There is also £300,000 of ineligble costs.

There is a large funding gap. I know that there is always pressure to hand out another cheque to Calais and to France—the amount over the past two years now totals £200 million—but I put it to the Home Office that we also need to fund the frontline in Kent and Dover. We need to make sure that we get a decent and fair settlement for the residents of Kent to cover the costs of the county having stepped up to the plate by caring for and doing the right thing by vulnerable unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, many of whom are children fleeing war zones who are in fear for their lives. They are not fakes—children who are really economic refugees—as has been a concern.

We need to make sure that proper funding is in place for the county council so that there is not an impact on public services that means others lose out. I very much hope that the Home Office will take those points on board and recalibrate the funding to ensure that Kent does not lose out.

7.7 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke).

I shall make an extremely short contribution on behalf of the people of Redditch, which is quite a unique place. It is a semi-urban area in the middle of a rural county, Worcestershire. It shares many of the characteristics of neighbouring Birmingham, yet it is in a rural area. I wish to make the point strongly to the Front-Bench team that they must take that into account in their work on fair funding for areas such as Redditch and Worcestershire. I know that the Minister will do that.

I thank the Minister for listening to my representations and my lobbying on behalf of the people of Redditch. I welcome the increased funding for Worcestershire, which is equivalent to a 3.1% increase in the core spending power and could total £14.8 million if all the flexibilities are taken into account.

Like many colleagues, I have raised the issue of adult social care. My local council colleagues, who do a fantastic job in Worcestershire for the people of Redditch, are happy that they are going to receive an additional £1.5 million, on top of the £2 billion in the Budget. We urge the Government, in their future discussions, to think carefully about the pressures of the living wage on the delivery of services to the most vulnerable people in our population.

I thank the Government for the good news on the revenue support grant. I find it astonishing when I hear Opposition Members talk about crumbs from the table. How is £2 billion and the billions and millions of pounds that are put into local communities crumbs from the table? Of course we would all like to see more money spent, but the reason we cannot spend it is the dire economic situation that was left to us by the Labour party. That is a real shame. We should welcome the hard work that our local councillors do. I thank the Government for this settlement and ask them to look carefully at the people of Redditch.
council, should send shivers down the spines of Ministers, because they know that this is a crisis caused in part by them and their actions. The warning signs at Northamptonshire had been obvious for some time, but only in this Government would the Secretary of State toddle along formally to open the council’s new £53 million headquarters that it is now being told it may have to sell off. Perhaps that was the fault of his officials, too.

Northamptonshire completely overshadowed the Secretary of State’s big announcement yesterday of an additional £150 million found from the magic money tree of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. When local government budgets have been slashed by £5.8 billion since 2010, it seems that the Secretary of State cannot even shake that tree effectively. We all know from reports in the media and from Tory MPs’ tweets on Monday night that this is solely about trying to prevent a rebellion on his own Back Benches.

The £150 million extra going into social care this year is still a cut. The Secretary of State, with his banking background, might be able to kid his Back Benches with this sop, but this year, additional Government spending on social care, even with this sum, is still facing a cut of £177 million. It is not the first time that this Government have tried this trick, because two years ago the transitional grant scheme provided an additional £300 million of funding, and what happened? Eighty per cent. of it went to Conservative-controlled councils, 70% of which were county councils. In contrast, metropolitan districts got only an additional 2% of additional funding, despite the fact that many of them were among the hardest hit. Places such as Nottingham, Knowsley and Liverpool received no additional money. When the Government talk about fair funding, they must mean funding for all councils, irrespective of their political persuasions and none, based on the services they need to provide to the communities they represent.

Let me provide Members with a few quotes:

“Councils in England face an overall funding gap that will exceed £5 billion by 2020.”

Then there is

“£1.3 billion…needed right now…to stabilise the…care provider market”.

and:

“Councils also face an unprecedented surge in demand for children’s services and homelessness support.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of Conservative peer and head of the LGA, Lord Porter. How out of touch can this Government be? How long can the Secretary of State bury his head in the sand, telling himself, “Yes, we’re making cuts, but they’re having no real impact on the ground”? He should speak to Tory councillors, because we know there is a real problem in local government when even Tory councillors are saying today what Labour councillors were saying five years ago.

I commend the work of all councillors in these difficult times. They need commending for doing all they can to support local services and local communities, despite this Government’s best efforts. This incompetent Secretary of State, even though he could come to the House of Commons in December and pass a provisional settlement off as fact, when he tells us today that his officials were to blame. He knew that it was riddled with errors. He can blame his officials today, but his letter to me, which he signed only two days ago, was far less definite. He said:

“My intention is always to provide local authorities with as much certainty as possible…We published the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement before Christmas to give councils notice of the figures they should use to plan their budgets…At that time…we knew the overall scale of the error in the…published data….We therefore published the Provisional Settlement on 19 December on the basis of the...statistics.”

Those were his words, and it was his signature. The Secretary of State is either so incompetent that his officials do not bother to tell him about important details ahead of him making a statement to the House of Commons, or he does not read the letters that go out in his name, which is perhaps why he needs to place a corrected version of the letter in the Library.

I have written to the Prime Minister today to draw her attention to this sorry affair, because it has done incredible damage to the Secretary of State’s reputation and to the Department’s reputation in the local government sector. Councillors deserve better. Many councils are doing all they can to help people live independently in their communities and reduce demand on hospitals, but with unprecedented funding cuts since 2010 and social care services facing a £2.3 billion funding gap by 2020, that is becoming increasingly difficult.

It is not just adult social care. As Labour’s first health check report showed, demand for children’s services is also placing growing pressure on local authorities. Funding to support children and their families has been cut by 55% over the last seven years, and the result of those cuts has been appallingly clear. Cuts to early years intervention meant that a record number of children—some 72,000—were taken into care last year. The number of serious child protection cases has doubled in the last seven years, with 500 new cases launched each day. More than 170,000 children were subject to child protection plans in the last year, which is double the number seven years ago.

Many of us hoped that the Budget would contain the genuine new funding that our children’s services need, but the Secretary of State failed to get that put in place. We then hoped that yesterday’s announcement might offer some hope for children’s services—another let-down. When is the Secretary of State going to stand up to the Chancellor and demand the money that the sector so desperately needs? The financial crisis engulfing local government should be giving the Secretary of State sleepless nights. The Local Government Chronicle suggests that there are already at least 10 authorities preparing to follow Northamptonshire and issue section 114 notices, and the Municipal Journal reports that one in 10 council bosses fear that their local authority will not have enough funding to fulfil its statutory duties in 2018-19. Ministers cannot afford to stand by and wait for that to happen.

Today’s vote offers all Members on both sides of the House an opportunity to send a very clear message to the Government that things have to change, that vital public services should be properly funded, and that our communities deserve better than this botched and rushed settlement. I hope that all Members will join us in the Lobby to stand up for their communities, their public services and their councillors, and to get this Government to think again about their damaging approach to council funding for next year.
7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to close this debate. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their valuable contributions. I pay particular tribute to all Members who are either former or serving members of local authorities and have brought that expertise to bear today. I pay a special tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who has left impressively large shoes for me to fill.

Local government and the hard-working, dedicated people who work in it deliver vital services every day at the heart of the communities they serve. I am deeply honoured to represent them in government—to listen to them, learn from them, and work with them to build communities that people are proud to live in. I am therefore delighted that this settlement delivers on our promise to local government. It confirms the third year of an unprecedented four-year deal accepted by 97% of councils, providing long-term certainty to local government. It is a deal that delivers more than £200 billion over a five-year period, allowing councils to be bold and ambitious in planning for the future.

But there is no room for complacency. This Government are under no illusions about the pressure on local services, so today’s settlement seeks to ease that pressure and respond to what the sector wants. That is why last year we allowed increased flexibility on council tax rebates, which the Minister knows that I have raised a number of times the income, and relative costs of delivering services will also be considered.

Imran Hussain: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the Minister, but I have been advised that I must raise this point of order immediately. When I took part in the debate earlier, I should have put on the record and referred Members to my registered interest as a serving local councillor.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am sorry—Mr Deputy Speaker.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Laughter.] I am sorry—Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I may be called Lindsay, but—[Laughter.]

Rishi Sunak: We have gone above and beyond the four-year deal in listening and responding to what the sector wants. That is why last year we allowed increased flexibility in the use of the adult social care precept, and why this year we have proposed additional flexibility on the core council tax referendum principle.

On adult social care, of which we have heard much today, on top of the extra £2 billion announced at the spring Budget last year, we have now announced an additional £150 million extension to the adult social care support grant, and we have increased the rural services delivery grant to its highest-ever level.

We are also building on the highly popular business rates retention scheme. Local authorities estimate that in the year just finishing they will keep about £1.3 billion in business rates growth, and we expect this to be maintained going forward.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Minister knows that I have raised a number of times the issue of people avoiding paying both council tax and business rates on holiday homes by converting them to business use and enjoying small business rate relief. Councils in tourist areas are losing out from that. Will he commit to trying to close that loophole?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He rightly points out that he raised this issue in Prime Minister’s Question Time earlier and has made representations to me about it. I am pleased to confirm that my officials and I are looking into the matter. He makes the point well. The existing system does leave some scope for ambiguity, and we will look into that.

The vital funding that comes from business rates retention—over £1 billion—is a direct result of local authorities driving economic growth in their areas, and it is on top of the core settlement funding that we have announced today. Over the long term, local government will be transformed, becoming increasingly self-sufficient with local resources funding local services. But to achieve that, we all know that the funding formula needs to become fairer, more transparent and more responsive to changing demands. Getting it right will of course be a challenge, but the prize if we can do that is a system that will be truly fit for the modern world and allow councils to face the future with confidence.

The business rates retention proposals that we mentioned earlier are a key step in this journey, and we hope to see local authorities retaining 75% of business rates from 2020-21. There is a great deal of enthusiasm across the country for this new model, and I can assure the House that I and my Department are committed to working with the sector to make this a success.

I turn briefly to some of the specific points that have been made. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) were right to pay tribute to local councillors who have, we acknowledge, made difficult decisions and have done an extraordinary job over the past few years. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), for North Dorset, for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) talked about rural areas and the need for fair funding. I can assure them that we are committed to that. The fair funding review will specifically take a fresh look at how council tax should be taken into account when redistributing income, and relative costs of delivering services will also be considered.

My hon. Friends the Members for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) rightly talked about the role of governance and leadership in local councils. They were followed by my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who rightly said that it is not just about how much, but how it is spent. Unaccompanied asylum seekers and the costs that councils have to bear were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). I am pleased to announce that the Government have allocated funding from a £29 million pot for exactly that. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby will be pleased to know that Northamptonshire will receive £231,000 from that grant, and the hon. Member for Dover will know that Kent will receive more than £1 million.

Opposition Members talked a lot about whether the funding was fair. They pointed to Knowsley, so they will be pleased to learn that it receives core spending...
power per dwelling 26% higher than the average. Indeed, across the country, the 10 most deprived local authorities receive core spending per dwelling 23% higher than the least deprived. We heard a lot from the Opposition about money. Indeed, the hon. Member for Dover put it well: there is no question to which the answer is not more money. We all know where that money has to come from—our hard-working taxpayers. Under the last Labour Government council tax doubled, and that is what we would have to look forward to again.

This is a settlement that honours our commitment to local government—delivering certainty, recognising the challenges and making additional resources available, all while keeping excessive council tax rises in check. It gives councils the resources they need to provide the world-class services that their communities expect and deserve. I commend it to the House.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind the House that the motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England.

The House having divided: Ayes 287, Noes 223.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 263, Noes 188.

Division No. 117  [7.28 pm]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloami, Bim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrin, Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldous, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan, Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen, Heidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amess, Sir David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew, Stuart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argar, Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkins, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon, Mr Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badenoch, Mrs Kemi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker, Mr Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin, Harriett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barclay, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baron, Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebb, Guto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellingham, Sir Henry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benyon, rh Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beresford, Sir Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry, Jake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackman, Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt, Crispin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boles, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone, Mr Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottomley, Sir Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowie, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley, Ben</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley, rh Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Sir Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breerton, Jack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgen, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brine, Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce, Fiona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckland, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burghart, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burns, Conor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairns, rh Alun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euslice, George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evennett, rh David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricant, Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandes, Suella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford, Vicky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, rh Dr Liam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frazer, Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gale, Sir Roger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garnier, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauke, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghani, Ms Nusrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibb, rh Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girvan, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldsmith, Zac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill, Mr Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gove, rh Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham, Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant, Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant, Mrs Helen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grayling, rh Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green, rh Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood, rh Justine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grieve, rh Mr Dominic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griffiths, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glynrh Mr Sam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair, Kirstene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halfon, rh Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hammond, rh Mr Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hammond, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hancock, rh Matt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands, rh Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harper, rh Mr Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrington, Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris, Rebecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison, Trudy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayes, rh Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heald, rh Sir Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heappey, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaton-Jones, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson, Gordon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert, rh Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinds, rh Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoare, Simon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollingbery, George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollinrake, Kevin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollobone, rh Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howell, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huddleston, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hughes, Eddie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurd, rh Mr Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack, Mr Alistier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James, Margot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javid, rh Sajid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkin, Mr Bernard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkyns, Andrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennick, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenrick, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, rh Boris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Dr Caroline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Gareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones, Mr Marcus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawczynski, Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keegan, Gillian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy, Seema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerr, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knight, rh Sir Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwarteng, Kwasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latham, Mrs Pauline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadson, rh Andrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee, Dr Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lefroy, Jeremy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh, Sir Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letwin, rh Sir Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewer, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, rh Brandon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lidington, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord, Mr Jonathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loughton, Tim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macklinay, Craig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maclean, Rachel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Mrs Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mak, Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malthouse, Kit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mann, Scott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masterton, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maynard, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCloughlin, rh Sir Patrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McPartland, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McVey, rh Ms Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menzies, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merriman, Huw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metcalfe, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller, rh Mrs Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mills, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milton, rh Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Damien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordaunt, Penny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan, rh Nicky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris, Anne Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morton, Wendy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mundell, rh David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray, Mrs Sheryll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murrison, Dr Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neill, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newton, Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nokes, rh Caroline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman, Jesse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Brien, Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opperman, Guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paisley, Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parish, Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patel, rh Priti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawsey, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penning, rh Sir Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penrose, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percy, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry, rh Claire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pincher, Christopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prentis, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisk, Mr Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pritchard, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursglove, Tom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quin, Jeremy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quince, Will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raab, Dominic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redwood, rh John</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Thangam Debbonaire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,
That the Report on Local Government Finance (England) 2018–19 (HC 791), which was laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.

7.43 pm
More than three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the first motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of business to be concluded at that time (Order, 5 February).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE (ENGLAND)

Resolved,
That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) 2018-19 (HC 792), which was laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.—(Sajid Javid.)

Resolved,
That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2018-19 (HC 790), which was laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.—(Sajid Javid.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

INSOLVENCY

That the draft Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 (Consequential Amendments, Savings and Transitional Provisions) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 6 December 2017, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

M42 Motorway Service Area

7.44 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I rise to present a petition relating to the proposal for a new motorway service area at junction 6 on the M42. An MSA near junction 6 was proposed long before the route of HS2 was finalised or the extension of the runway at Birmingham airport. It was so long ago that at the time, the Transport Secretary was Lord Prescott. He was minded to approve the motorway service area, subject to the outworking of taking the hard shoulder into normal running, which today we call a smart motorway. Years later, the application has still not been decided, but the congestion on this stretch of the M42 gets heavier and heavier every day. In addition, Highways England has now said that the risk of creating a new junction south of junction 6 but above junction 5, close to the new MSA proposal, would be reasonable, even though they would have to deviate from the normal standards for motorway junctions.

The petitioners ask the Secretary of State for Transport to reconsider how a motorway service area can be considered a sustainable development under today’s planning law. I present for consideration a petition of 645 signatures.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the Meriden Constituency,
Declares that the proposed motorway service area near Junction 6 of the M42 is unsustainable; not least as a result of the threat it poses to road safety.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to call on the Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government to reject the proposals for the construction of a new motorway service area; particularly in light of significant transport and infrastructure changes since the original application was made in 1999.
And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Woodlands Hospice, Aintree

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

7.46 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have an Adjournment debate on my local hospice, which is such an important topic. Many people think that a hospice is place where people go to die, but it is actually a place where people go to live. It would not be a debate on a hospice and end-of-life care without reminding ourselves of the words of Dame Cicely Saunders, who is widely acknowledged as the founder of the UK hospice movement:

"You matter because you are you, and you matter to the last moment of your life. We will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die."

When I recently visited Woodlands Hospice in my constituency, that is exactly what I found. Although it may sound counter-intuitive, it was a place brimming with life. Woodlands Hospice is an independent charity situated in the grounds of Aintree University Hospital. It covers a population of 330,000 in north Liverpool, south Sefton and Kirby and Knowsley. The hospice provides 15 in-patient beds with a purpose-built wing. Its wellbeing and support centre, which includes multi-professional assessment days, group therapies, outpatients, complimentary therapies and a therapy-driven outreach service, provides services to enable people living with cancer and other life-limiting illnesses to live their lives in a positive and independent way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I asked the hon. Gentleman beforehand whether he would give way, and he said he would. It is important to put this point on record. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who work in hospices, such as Woodlands and the Marie Curie Hospice in Northern Ireland, do tremendous work and are much to be thanked for the tremendous care that they provide, not just for patients, but for families?

Dan Carden: I am delighted to agree. This is a great opportunity to thank all those staff and volunteers, wherever they are across the UK.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend was describing the excellent work that goes on at Woodlands Hospice, and my constituents benefit from that as well. In addition, the hospice provides “Hospice At Home”, helping people out in the community. The combination of services is vital to supporting the national health service. Does he agree that failing to support hospices, including Woodlands, is very damaging and undermines the national health service?

Dan Carden: Absolutely, and I am coming to how the hospice sector is such a key part of our national health service.

It was a privilege to learn about the work of the wonderful staff and, importantly, the volunteers. More than 125,000 people give their time to volunteer for hospices each year. They are the lifeblood of the hospice sector. The Woodlands’ volunteer workforce of over 200 people from all walks of life and all ages add value to the patient experience, while the volunteers themselves get opportunities to develop their skills, avoid isolation and build a sense of community.

Woodlands Hospice must raise £1.3 million, which it tries to achieve with the help and support of communities in my constituency and beyond, but against the backdrop of financial uncertainty and squeezed living standards, that is no easy feat, particularly in more deprived communities such as mine, which have been hardest hit by austerity. I will return to the issue of funding later, but there are a number of ways our community supports Woodlands that do not involve straightforward cash donations: volunteering, undertaking challenge events for sponsorship, holding coffee mornings and—this year, I hope—becoming a friend of Woodlands via the new membership group scheme, which I will be taking up myself as soon as it is operational.

The support for Woodlands shown by my constituents illustrates how dearly we hold the care it provides. All Members here know how much their constituents value the care provided by hospices in their own local areas. That is what inspired me to call this debate tonight—to highlight the value of hospices as an essential part of the healthcare economy and to look at sustainable funding for hospices around the UK, particularly in the more deprived areas. It is right that those in more deprived areas, who will struggle to raise funds, receive more statutory funding.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. Like him, I recently visited Woodlands, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. Does he agree that the NHS funding that Woodlands receives is vital to its long-term sustainability and that we are seeking assurances from the Minister that at the very least it will be maintained in the future?

Dan Carden: I absolutely agree. I hope that this debate will focus people’s eyes on the hospice sector across the UK and at Woodlands, where we need to ensure viable funding, and also funding that is longer term and better planned. Pressure needs to be taken off hospice managers as they plan the kind of care they provide for our constituents.

People who face progressive life-limiting illnesses require different levels of care. Apart from care and treatments specific to their conditions, they are likely to have what is often called palliative care, particularly as they approach the end of their lives. Death is a natural part of life. We will all die eventually, and most deaths—around three quarters—are expected, so the majority will require some form of palliative care, and everyone deserves to be able to end their life in comfort and dignity. That principle should be central to any civilised society.

There is, I am sure, agreement across the House on the importance of palliative care. It is not a bonus or extra, but an essential part of a good healthcare system. The hospice sector supports around 200,000 people with terminal and life-limiting conditions in the UK every year. This amounts to more than four in 10 of those estimated to need expert end-of-life care. Hospice care is free for everyone and provided for however long it is needed, be it days, weeks or even months. More than 40,000 people in the UK receive bereavement support from hospices each year.

Hospices support people with a wide range of conditions, including cancer, motor neurone disease, cardiovascular disease, dementia, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson’s disease—to name just a few—and they are increasingly
supporting people with multiple life-limiting conditions. Most hospice care is provided while people are in their own home, but it can also be provided in a care home or at the hospice itself as an in-patient. It is a style of care rather than something that necessarily takes place just in one building. Hospices also aim to feel far more like a home than a hospital.

Outcomes are difficult to assess, and of course most patients do pass away, but it is worth remembering that many do not. A gentle, dignified, reflective and peaceful death with 24/7 expert care and surrounded by loved-ones is something that cannot be measured by traditional means, but we can measure the value in the appreciation and wellbeing of the patients and families helped through their bereavement. When I visited Woodlands, I was delighted to meet people who had long and happy associations with the hospice, had made friends there and still visited regularly for support with their health, but also to keep in touch with staff and friends.

It is also clear that NHS pressures mean increased pressures on hospices.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and for outlining the work of the hospice movement. Does he agree that the values and ethos of the movement are deeply ingrained in communities throughout Merseyside? Willowbrook Hospice in St Helens, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary, is a good example. But hospices should not have to rely on the generosity of our constituents: they need statutory funding, because they are an integral part of social care.

Dan Carden: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention. Britain’s older population is set to increase sharply in the next few decades. The number of people aged 85 or over is expected to double in the next 20 years, and the number of people aged 100 or over is set to increase by more than eight times by 2035, to more than 100,000. The number of adults with life-limiting conditions is also on the rise. Everyone deserves high-quality, compassionate care at the end of their lives.

In recent months we have again witnessed the impact of severe winter pressures on the NHS, which has left hospitals buckling under unprecedented demand. Most people in the United Kingdom—just over half—currently die in hospital. Hospitals are amazing, life-saving places, and I pay tribute to all the staff who keep our NHS running at such difficult times. It is our country’s greatest achievement.

The hospice sector plays a vital role in providing care for those who no longer respond to curative treatment, so that patients who have no clinical need to be in a hospital bed can receive specialised and personalised care provided by a hospice multi-professional team. That also frees up hospital beds for those with acute care needs. A good hospice is a perfect example of good health and social care integration. We need a joined-up approach by the NHS, social care, the community and the voluntary sector. I welcome the Government’s decision to bring social care under a departmental umbrella, and I hope that the Minister will reassure me that hospices too will be recognised as a crucial part of the care system as a whole.

On average, adult hospices in the UK receive a third of their income from the Government, although the amount received by individual hospices varies widely. The rest comes from community fundraising, grant applications, hospice charity shops, lotteries and investments. According to Hospice UK, collectively charitable hospices in the UK need to raise about £1 billion a year from their local communities, which amounts to about £2.7 million per day. In a period of stagnant wages, and with national income distributed unevenly, that is a constant challenge, and the fact that it affects different areas and regions differently must be taken into account.

Hospices rely on NHS funding contributions, and need assurances that those will continue even in the challenging financial climate that the NHS currently faces.

Some hospices have agreements in place for multi-year funding, but many are reliant on year-by-year decisions on funding levels, and that requires constant planning by hospice managers. NHS funding needs to be on a more committed and sustainable basis to allow for planning and development, and to enable staff to devote more of their time and energy to doing what needs to be done in relation to patient care. Of course, in more deprived areas, such as the communities in north Liverpool, the need for statutory funding is even greater. The fundraising opportunities that are available in the catchment areas of individual hospices can be very limited. Deprivation also means more complex health needs among the population that hospices serve. All too regularly, I see people dying younger, people dying from addictions, and people dying from diseases that are linked directly to poverty.

The complexity of funding for hospices creates further organisational difficulties for management and staff. Commissioning and contracting arrangements are still causing issues: nationally, a third of hospices are now working with four or more commissioners. Woodlands, for instance, covers a number of clinical commissioning groups, and requires each CCG to maintain or increase funding each year just to stand still. When funding decisions are made on a year-by-year basis, simply maintaining funding can take up much time and effort that should ideally be focused on patients and care.

I am sure I speak for the entire House when I say that we are all very grateful for the care that hospices deliver to people and communities across the country. They need ongoing recognition of the value that they provide to the healthcare economy as a whole. Specialist palliative care and end-of-life services need to be proactively included in transformation plans and service developments. The Government’s intentions were set out in July 2016, when they said that “every person nearing the end of their life should receive attentive, high quality, compassionate care, so that their pain is eased, their spirits lifted and their wishes for their closing weeks, days and hours are respected.”

In order to realise those aims for every person in the UK, we must look at the funding framework as a whole to make it easier for hospices to receive sustainable NHS funding.

Can the Minister address two specific points: what guarantees are there that as pressures increase on NHS budgets, statutory funding to hospices, especially those in more deprived areas with the specific health problems affecting poorer communities, will be protected, and what is the Minister doing to encourage longer term funding models—multi-year agreements—so that hospices can plan better and care better? The people-centred
I am sure that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for the way in which he has approached this debate. I commend him on making an excellent speech, as he could not have been better at articulating the positive contribution that hospices make. I do not think there was anything in his speech with which I disagreed, which is quite unusual.

I was struck by the hon. Gentleman’s description of hospices as places where people go to live. When I visit hospices, I am struck by the very real efforts that their staff go to to make them comforting places. It can be a more difficult time for the loved ones than it is for the person who is ending their life, but they really are comforting places, and the hon. Gentleman is right to pay tribute to all the staff who work in them.

The hon. Gentleman powerfully praised the efforts of his own hospice, Woodlands, which is clearly providing an excellent service. I am grateful that he has given me the opportunity to address some of the concerns and make it clear how much we value the contribution that hospices make to the NHS.

It is testament to the excellence of our hospice sector that last October’s “State of Care” report by the Care Quality Commission showed that 70% of hospices are rated as good and 25% as outstanding. Those figures are higher than for any other secondary care service, which illustrates the significance of hospices’ contribution. Woodlands Hospice received a good rating in the CQC report. Like the hon. Gentleman, I congratulate its staff and amazing volunteers who make Woodlands the excellent service. I am grateful that he has given me the opportunity to address some of the concerns and make it clear how much we value the contribution that hospices make to the NHS.

NHS England has advised that Liverpool clinical commissioning group, which is the main commissioner for the hospice—I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about there being more than one CCG, which probably adds to the strain on the hospice with regard to long-term funding—provides £900,000 of funding a year. Sefton also provides £240,000 per year, which brings the total amount provided to the hospice to over £1 million a year. As the hon. Gentleman outlined, the CCGs of Liverpool, South Sefton and Knowsley are in the process of reviewing their end-of-life care provision. They are taking into account population need, service demand, and all providers of that care, including Woodlands Hospice. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes, as I do, the attention that local healthcare planners are giving to this important area of care. I suggest that the commissioners should pay close attention to what the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have said tonight, speaking on behalf of their communities, about the value they place on this service. I hope that the commissioners will also take note of my comments when I say that the hospice sector, and this particular hospice, are making a very real contribution to people at the end of their life.

I know that many Members have hospices in their constituencies that they support and champion, so I thought that it might be helpful if I set out the broader position on hospice funding. As the hon. Gentleman outlined, the sector is characterised by strong voluntary contributions and philanthropic activity, which is to be celebrated.

We have 223 registered independent hospices and small number of public hospices that are run internally by NHS trusts. Around three quarters of hospices provide adult services, with the remainder caring for children and young people. The hospice movement was established from charitable and philanthropic donations, so the vast majority of hospices rely heavily on charitable income for the lion’s share of their budgets, but they do receive some statutory funding from CCGs and the Government for providing local services. As the hon. Gentleman suggested, the statutory funding varies from place to place for a wide number of reasons—he highlighted deprivation as one of them—but adult hospices receive an average of 30% of their overall funding from the NHS.

Funding remains a local decision, which I think is right, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that we take deprivation into account when making our allocations to CCGs. He referred to long-term funding stability and the importance of knowing how much the Government will provide, and I will reflect on that important point. It would be good practice to give as much certainty as possible, which is a principle of our health funding more generally, so that will bear examination.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful that the Minister has committed to reflect on the thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) about a national framework, but the difficulty in having locally determined support from CCGs is that that will inevitably vary from place to place. Some CCGs are under much more financial pressure than others, which is why it is important that we have some kind of national framework.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I would not want to depart from the principle that this is for local decision makers, but that is not to say we do not make clear our expectations about what CCGs should be delivering as we develop our national policies on end of life, and support for hospices forms part of that. Given the number of people who pass away in hospices and the care that they receive, we would encourage CCGs to carefully consider the extent to which they support hospices.

In addition to NHS funding for locally commissioned services, children’s hospices receive £11 million through the children’s hospice grant, which is awarded annually and administered by the NHS. Children’s hospices tend to receive smaller amounts of statutory funding because of how they have developed and the services that they provide. Unlike adult hospices, which tend to be more focused on end-of-life care services, children’s hospices can provide support for much of a child’s life, and that can involve not only more clinical care, but much more support for families.
It is worth highlighting the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton that philanthropic support does not just mean money. I pay tribute to all those involved in volunteering in hospices. That is a fantastic example of how communities come together to bring out the best in people, so I thank everyone involved in that work.

Members may be reassured to hear that, to improve commissioning arrangements, NHS England is making a new palliative care pricing system available in April. That should help local areas to plan services, and it will also encourage more consistency and, perhaps, transparency in how much CCGs are supporting the sector.

While hospices are, of course, an important feature of end-of-life care provision in this country, it is important to see them within the wider context of our ambitions for such care. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the Government have published the end-of-life care choice commitment, which is designed to transform end-of-life care, and the hospice sector is an important partner in that process. We are determined to significantly improve patient choice by enabling more people to die in the place of their choice, be that at home, in a hospice, in a care home or in hospital. Our commitment is to set out the further action that we will take to deliver high-quality, personalised end-of-life care for everyone, including by delivering advance care planning and ensuring that we have the necessary conversations earlier. I draw Members’ attention to the reference to hospice care at home, which is a significant aspect of the programme. We need to make sure that more people are aware of what their options are, and we need to encourage innovation in end-of-life care. In collaboration with partners from the voluntary sector, including key hospice and end-of-life charities, the Government and NHS England have been working to make sure that the quality and availability of end-of-life care services continue to improve and that our end-of-life care commitment is delivered.

As I have already mentioned, the Government believe it is right that CCGs have the autonomy to shape local services according to local need, but it is important that we do more to provide commissioners with the tools, evidence, support and guidance to demonstrate the benefits of delivering our vision for end-of-life care. A crucial part of that is strengthening the provision of end-of-life care services outside hospital and in the community so that people can make the choice of where they wish to end their life.

To deliver this, we are working with sustainability and transformation partnerships so that there is tailored information to assess where we need further investment, commissioning and intervention. NHS England is also a member of the national palliative and end-of-life care partnership, which is made up of charities and organisations from across the health and care system that have together developed a framework for improving end-of-life care at a local level. More guidance will be published through that body soon.

NHS England has also commissioned Hospice UK to undertake an evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of hospice-led interventions in the community. I fully anticipate that could be a good news in support of the hon. Gentleman’s arguments. Although many such care models exist across England, there is poor data on what are the most effective approaches, which makes it rather more difficult for CCGs to confidently commission such services. The project will examine hospice-led initiatives that appear to be having a positive impact on where people are cared for, as well as on where they die. The Department and NHS England will pay close attention to the findings when they are made available, which should be next month.

We fully acknowledge that more needs to be done if we are to meet our ambition to reduce variations in end-of-life care and to ensure that the system works effectively to support more people to die in the place of their choice. However, I am confident that through NHS England’s programme board for end-of-life care, with all key system partners and stakeholders, including the hospice sector, we have the best opportunity to continue delivering the progress in end-of-life care that we all want, however and wherever it is provided. I cannot emphasise enough that hospices are central to our commitment. Local commissioners will wish to reflect on all the comments that were made in this evening’s debate when they come to make their allocations, and I wish Woodlands Hospice every success in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

8.13 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 8 February 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Sporting Venues: Plastic Recycling

1. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps he is taking with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to encourage sporting venues to recycle plastic containers. [903821]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): I have held discussions with the Environment Secretary on reducing plastics, including at sports venues, and further work is ongoing as part of our wider environmental agenda.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Secretary of State for that very helpful answer. People just have to go to any sporting venue to see a massive amount of single-use plastics. This is an area where there are opportunities not only for improving recycling, but for raising awareness. Will the Secretary of State continue to use his office to that end?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I strongly support the work that the Environment Secretary is doing in leading on reducing single-use plastics. In fact, he was in Scotland this weekend, including at Pittodrie—I believe also that the right hon. Gentleman is a graduate of Aberdeen University—so the Environment Secretary is talking to venues about how they can reduce plastic waste. Of course, the London 2012 Olympics was an exemplar, but there is clearly more to do.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As we have just heard, in 2012 this country set new high environmental standards at the London Olympics. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital we continue to show environmental leadership, not just sporting leadership, at other major sporting events, including the Commonwealth games in Birmingham in 2022?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that continuing improvement must be seen. While the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games set a new standard, we have to make sure that these standards keep advancing, and I hope to see that at the 2022 Commonwealth games.

Fixed Odds Betting

2. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on publishing the Government’s assessment of the effect on the public purse of a reduction in the maximum fixed-odds betting stake. [903822]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): I have held discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the issue of gambling. The Government’s consultation on the gambling review closed on 23 January and we are considering the responses.

Stephen Timms: Vile machines are cynically clustered by shameless and irresponsible conglomerates in the poorest communities, where they destroy hard-working families. They are a magnet for crime, and they launder the proceeds of crime. Tawdry and soulless high street outlets drive decent shops away and repel family shoppers. Will the Secretary of State now call time on this racket, with its £1.5 billion a year welfare burden, and cut the maximum stake to £2?

Matt Hancock: I know that the issue of fixed odds betting terminals raises strong emotions in the House and around the country, and it is very important that we approach it properly. Especially coming from the right hon. Gentleman, who is widely respected across the House and was a member of the Government when the expansion of FOBTs happened, that is a telling statement.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is not like the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) to give the House an ill-informed rant, but that is what we heard. I notice that the Secretary of State did not actually answer the question on the Order Paper, which is about the cost to the public purse of a reduction in the stake. Will he indicate what the cost to the Exchequer would be of the lack of tax receipts, increased unemployment benefit to pay to all the people who would be put out of work by a substantial reduction and the lack of business rates? Will he total up all those amounts and tell us how much it would actually cost the Government if they went for a drastic reduction in the stake?

Matt Hancock: Impact assessments on the question of FOBTs were of course published alongside the Government consultation in October. All the consequences of any changes in this area—we are committed to reducing the maximum stake on FOBTs—will be worked through, and that is part of the work we are doing right now to determine the appropriate response.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Further to the excellent points made by the right hon. Member for East Ham—not so much to those from the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies)—with the consultation completed, it is time to get on with it. My Scottish National party colleagues have continually called for a £2 maximum stake. Will the Secretary of

State confirm that this will finally happen, and if not, will he devolve these powers to Scotland so that we can finally take action?

Matt Hancock: I confirm that we will respond to the consultation in due course. I said in answer to an earlier question that this raises high emotions, and we have seen a demonstration of that today.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): We send our best wishes from across the country to our Winter Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

With the gambling review just two weeks away, we need the Secretary of State to ensure that the Government take action against FOBTs, and they must intervene to stop these machines ruining lives and tearing families apart. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham is absolutely right, so will the Secretary of State answer my simple question and commit today to reducing the maximum FOBT stake to £2 a spin?

Matt Hancock: What I will do is commit to reducing the maximum FOBT stake, and to responding to the consultation in due course and in the proper way. We must ensure that we come to the right answer on this question.

Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas

3. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

5. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): Our ambition is for the UK to have better digital connectivity wherever people live, work and travel, which very much includes rural areas. Superfast broadband is now available to 95% of UK premises, and roll-out will continue to cover the majority of remaining premises. By 2020, the universal service obligation will give everyone the legal right to high-speed broadband at 10 megabits per second or faster.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the Minister for her response, but around 33% of my rural constituency of Copeland is still not covered by fast internet, which is holding back our villages and farm businesses. What can be done, as soon as possible, to help those businesses and communities?

Margot James: We are doing a great deal to help businesses and people in rural areas. My hon. Friend might like to campaign for greater awareness of the access that people in her constituency have to the internet, because it is now at 93%. As in many other constituencies, however, people are not taking that up, and I urge those who live in rural areas, where the access is there, to take it up.

Victoria Prentis: Last week, I held a meeting of larger employers in my constituency, and it became clear that one thing they feel is holding them back is the lack of a mobile signal between junctions 10 and 11 of the M40. Will the Minister work with me to improve that?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that problem about the M40, which I experience regularly on my way to my constituency of Stourbridge. Current coverage on UK motorways is 97% for telephone calls, but that is no comfort to those travelling on the stretch she has identified. I will work with her to bring about a solution as swiftly as possible.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I urge the Minister to be much more sceptical about the figures given out by mobile phone companies and operators? In all honesty, looking at their maps on the ground, they have nowhere near the figures of which they boast.

Margot James: The Ofcom “Connected Nations” report contains new measures that reflect truer consumer standards, and it is opening the new 700 MHz spectrum band, which will be suitable for wider area coverage. I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point, and we are working to get better consumer measures on those matters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Although there has been an improvement over the years, 63,000 homes and offices in Northern Ireland—8% of properties—remain unable to sign up for broadband speeds. What discussions have taken place with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to ensure a roll-out of the moneys agreed for rural areas through the confidence and supply agreement?

Margot James: Northern Ireland’s outdoor geographic coverage is better than the UK average, but I recognise that indoor coverage is poor compared with the rest of the country. The new code reforms will help, alongside our desire to extend geographic mobile coverage to 95% of the entire United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are 10 megabits enough?

Margot James: My right hon. Friend refers to the universal service obligation that will guarantee 10 megabits per second. According to Ofcom, that is enough for multiple usage in the home, and for downloading film and video.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Villages such as Lixwm, Ysceifiog and Bagillt in rural areas of my constituency are getting increasingly frustrated with the performance of Openreach in delivering broadband. Two years ago, the Government pledged through Ofcom to deconstruct Openreach from BT, but what progress has been made on that objective?

Margot James: I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to remember that BT and Openreach are no longer a monopoly. I draw his attention to today’s announcement by TalkTalk that it is cutting its dividend and connecting more than 3 million homes to full fibre, building Britain’s full fibre future.

Mobile Web: Improved Access

4. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to the mobile web.

The Ofcom “Connected Nations” report contains new measures that reflect truer consumer standards, and it is opening the new 700 MHz spectrum band, which will be suitable for wider area coverage. I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point, and we are working to get better consumer measures on those matters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Although there has been an improvement over the years, 63,000 homes and offices in Northern Ireland—8% of properties—remain unable to sign up for broadband speeds. What discussions have taken place with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to ensure a roll-out of the moneys agreed for rural areas through the confidence and supply agreement?

Margot James: Northern Ireland’s outdoor geographic coverage is better than the UK average, but I recognise that indoor coverage is poor compared with the rest of the country. The new code reforms will help, alongside our desire to extend geographic mobile coverage to 95% of the entire United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are 10 megabits enough?

Margot James: My right hon. Friend refers to the universal service obligation that will guarantee 10 megabits per second. According to Ofcom, that is enough for multiple usage in the home, and for downloading film and video.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Villages such as Lixwm, Ysceifiog and Bagillt in rural areas of my constituency are getting increasingly frustrated with the performance of Openreach in delivering broadband. Two years ago, the Government pledged through Ofcom to deconstruct Openreach from BT, but what progress has been made on that objective?

Margot James: I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to remember that BT and Openreach are no longer a monopoly. I draw his attention to today’s announcement by TalkTalk that it is cutting its dividend and connecting more than 3 million homes to full fibre, building Britain’s full fibre future.

Mobile Web: Improved Access

4. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to the mobile web.
The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): As we have just been hearing, improved digital connectivity is a priority. We have reformed mobile planning laws in England to provide new rights—for example, to build taller masts to improve coverage.

Neil Coyle: Parts of my central London community have the lowest mobile internet data broadband speeds, including in Rotherhithe, Surrey Docks and south Bermondsey, deeply troubling my constituents who are trying to get the latest “Hanky” app from the Secretary of State’s own provider. Will he guarantee that those areas are included in the roll-out of superfast broadband? Will he confirm whether he supports my council’s bid for Government-funded broadband improvements in Rotherhithe?

Matt Hancock: I will certainly look at the bid the hon. Gentleman mentions. The point he raises is that the areas in the final 5% that do not have superfast broadband are not all rural. Some are urban. There are complicated reasons for that, in many cases to do with wayleaves and access, especially to multi-dweller units. We are working very hard on this and I will certainly look at his bid for funding.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): The broadband network coverage in some of the Blackdown hills is absolutely appalling. The key to getting broadband and the mobile phone network is combined in those hardest-to-hit spots. We have to get more done.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is dead right.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A recent witness at the Scottish Affairs Committee described the Government’s mobile infrastructure project as a disaster. What are the UK Government doing to address that failure?

Matt Hancock: We had a commitment to reach 90% of the UK landmass with mobile coverage by the end of last year. Ofcom is assessing whether that has been met. We now have a commitment to get it up to 95%. We are doing that largely through a commercial roll-out. There is no doubt that mobile phone coverage is going up. It is just a question whether it is going up fast enough.

Tourism

6. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism across the UK. [903826]

14. Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism across the UK. [903836]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The Government’s tourism action plan outlines the ways in which we support tourism, both domestic and international, throughout the UK. The £40 million Discover England fund supports projects throughout England and aims to encourage visitors to spread beyond London and experience more of the country’s tourism offering. Visit Britain and Visit England work hard to promote the United Kingdom as a domestic and an international tourist destination.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. I am sure no one in the Chamber will need persuading that Dorset is a beautiful county. It is an excellent place in which to live and work, and of course to visit, but it is a significant distance from London and the tourist attractions there. What more can he do to ensure that Dorset and constituencies such as mine benefit from increasing tourist numbers?

Michael Ellis: Dorset is a beautiful county. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport manages the £40 million Discover England fund with Visit England, one key aim of which is to encourage visitors to explore all over England and experience the wealth of attractions we offer. There are many projects in rural and coastal destinations, including the seafood coast and the south west coast path.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Bearing in mind what my hon. Friend has just said about Dorset, may I say that tourism is also incredibly important for the Peak district? We get more than 20 million visitors each year. What is Visit England doing to support tourist attractions in those areas and to show what is available?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: the Peak district and our other national parks are real jewels in our tourism crown. We are working closely with Visit Britain and the GREAT campaign to draw attention to our amazing countryside. I mentioned the Discover England project a moment ago. In the Derbyshire area, it is supporting projects based around our great walking trails and England’s national parks.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): As St Helens celebrates its 150th anniversary, Ministers, those on the Front Benches and perhaps you, Mr Speaker, might like to visit at some point this year. Will the Minister’s Department and tourist authorities help us to use this special year to show that, with our fantastic arts and culture programmes, rugby league and horseracing, historic sites and proud industrial heritage, we are much more than a place to pass by—we are a place to go to?

Michael Ellis: I agree. St Helens is very much a place to go to. I wish it very well with its 150th anniversary.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Minister will know that Discover England does a wonderful job in England, but one of the best things it could do is encourage people to visit Northern Ireland. Given that the question is about what we can do to promote tourism across the United Kingdom, does he recognise the unique attributes of many and various parts of the United Kingdom and does he encourage people to go there?

Michael Ellis: Indeed I do. Northern Ireland has seen a great increase in attractions, with the “Game of Thrones” activities and the set there. There is more to come.
Leaving the EU: Film Industry Funding

7. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to maintain the level of funding for the film industry after the UK leaves the EU. [903827]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): The UK film industry is worth £4 billion a year to the UK economy. The Government are committed to supporting the industry and are consulting stakeholders to ensure that the sector continues to thrive after we leave the EU. The Prime Minister has made it clear that, where possible, we will continue to participate in EU programmes where there is mutual benefit to the UK and the EU, as there is in the case of Creative Europe, for example.

Nick Smith: Blaenau Gwent’s stunning scenery makes us an ideal location for UK films and television series, and the Creative Europe programme has supported the cinema distribution of more than 100 UK films in European markets in recent years. Will the Government ensure our continued participation in Creative Europe after we leave the EU, because it has been such a success?

Margot James: I agree that Creative Europe has been a success and that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency of Blaenau Gwent is a wonderful location, which has been used for many broadcasting opportunities. We are very committed to our role in Creative Europe. We recognise its value, and the Treasury has committed to honouring all applications, even those that are likely to require funding post-Brexit. We can be optimistic, although of course during negotiations there can be no guarantees.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Amid this tour of the UK, Derbyshire and Dorset, may I remind the Minister that the county of Sutherland in my vast and remote constituency offers huge potential for the UK film industry? We have some of the most majestic scenery and Dunrobin castle. What “Downton Abbey” did for Highclere, a new show could do for Dunrobin castle.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good case for Dunrobin castle, and I am sure he will be able to make the most of that as he lobbies for broadcasters to beat a trail to his constituency.

Mr Speaker: A Cook’s tour of the United Kingdom awaits the Minister. I am sure that she looks forward to it with eager anticipation and, I hope, bated breath.

Museums

8. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the museums sector. [903828]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The Government are deeply committed to our world-leading museums sector. The recently published Mendoza review of museums in England looked in depth at museums and the challenges and opportunities they face. The review found a thriving sector, supported by more than £800 million of annual Government funding from a variety of sources.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: South East Cornwall has wonderful heritage and fascinating museums, supported by amazing staff and volunteers. More visitors are always welcome, so will my hon. Friend encourage loans of national importance to smaller museums, such as those in Liskeard and Saltash in my constituency?

Michael Ellis: Before I do just that, may I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend, because I understand that she has just got engaged? I also understand that it was her birthday in the last few days, so double congratulations.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is Valentine’s day next week!

Michael Ellis: It is Valentine’s day next week as well. To answer the question, the national museums have a strong track record on this issue. Last year, the national collection was lent out to more than 1,300 venues, with long-term loans and partnership galleries, multi-object exhibitions and one-off star loans. To help encourage further loans, Arts Council England has provided £3.6 million to regional museums to help to improve their galleries to protect and display objects.

Mr Speaker: I join in congratulating the hon. Lady and say to her: engagement, birthday and a tribute from the hon. Gentleman on the Treasury Bench—her cup runneth over! It does not get any better than this.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Burton Latimer, Desborough and Rothwell are small towns in the borough of Kettering that all have excellent local heritage centres run by volunteers. In small communities that are going through rapid change, is it not more important than ever that we encourage such heritage centres?

Michael Ellis: It is extremely important that we do that, and my hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituency. He is absolutely right about the importance of the work that our volunteers do to encourage footfall.

Internet Safety Strategy

10. Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): What progress his Department is making on developing the Government’s internet safety strategy. [903831]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): We are committed to making the UK the safest place in the world to be online. In October, we published the internet safety strategy Green Paper. On Tuesday the Prime Minister confirmed that we will bring forward the social media code of practice and an annual internet transparency report, as proposed in the Green Paper, and we will publish a full response in the spring.

Matt Warman: It is clear that teaching internet safety in schools will be a crucial part of all that the Government are doing for the future. At the moment, there is a huge number of disparate endeavours from a range of sources. It seems to me that they are in some ways less than the sum of their parts. I wonder whether the Government would consider backing a body such as Internet Matters to really deliver gold standard education in this area.
Matt Hancock: As my hon. Friend says, there is a lot going on in this space. Last Friday, I visited the parent zone at Coupals Primary Academy in my constituency and saw a brilliant presentation teaching 8 to 11-year-olds how to be safe online. There is a lot more to do in this area, so that young people grow up resilient and able to use the opportunities that the internet presents safely. I pay tribute to Internet Matters for its work.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): In the internet safety strategy, the Secretary of State proposed that there would be specific measures to protect children, yet when the Data Protection Bill came to the other place there was a hopeless deficit of any specific measures to protect children. It fell to Baroness Kidron, supported by us, to remedy the gap. When the Bill comes to the Commons, will the Secretary of State agree to work constructively with us to ensure that proper digital rights for children, who make up a third of users, are included in the Bill, like the very good five rights framework proposed by the Baroness and supported by us?

Matt Hancock: That is an interesting proposal. We supported the Baroness Kidron amendment. I welcome it and I think that we have made some progress. Of course, this issue is broader than just data protection, so we have to ensure that we get the legislation right. That Bill can only cover data protection, which is not the whole issue. Also, it would be a backwards step if the Bill gave the impression that the generality of measures did not apply to children because we have specifics that do. I am happy to talk further to the right hon. Gentleman and to work on this because it is clearly an area on which we need to make progress.

Digital Infrastructure

11. Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve digital infrastructure. [903832]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): £1.7 billion of public funding has been invested to deliver superfast broadband across the UK, and a further £1.1 billion to support the next generation of digital infrastructure, including 5G test beds and trials and a fibre infrastructure challenge fund. We have also reformed mobile planning laws in England and reformed the UK electronic communications code, removing barriers to deploying infrastructure.

Martin Whitfield: Given the Government’s commitment to deal directly with local authorities in Scotland in the near future on digital infrastructure, would the Minister agree to meet me, the local authority and, more importantly, disruptive local providers who may be able to give answers to some of the problems that we face?

Margot James: We do need to reduce obstacles and costs in the commercial deployment of digital infrastructure. That is what our reforms to the code were about. The Scottish Government have introduced the first stage of their planning reforms. I hope that they can build on that and introduce reforms for their designated areas, albeit they have fallen behind Wales and England and indeed Northern Ireland. I agree to meet the hon. Gentleman and his local authorities.

Problem Gambling

12. Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle problem gambling. [903833]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): We take problem gambling very seriously. In the gambling review, we consulted on measures to strengthen protection against problem gambling. We are considering all the responses.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful for that response. In addition to that, I have been approached by concerned lone workers who are working in betting shops on high streets in my constituency. There has been a series of incidents of serious sexual assault and violent acts committed against those lone workers. What is the Secretary of State doing to engage with the industry to reduce lone working in betting shops and improve the safety of those staff?

Matt Hancock: There is full consideration of these issues in the gambling review. It is important that all evidence is brought to bear. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who apologises for not being able to be here, has been working on the review very closely. I am sure that we should take this evidence into account.

Equal Pay: Television, Film and Radio

13. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to promote equal pay for women in television, film and radio. [903835]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): The Government are making great strides towards ending the gender pay gap in broadcasting and in the rest of the economy. The new legal requirement for companies above a certain size to publish their gender pay gap details reinforces the requirement by our former Secretary of State for the BBC to publish the salary details of those earning more than £150,000 a year. I hope the hon. Lady agrees that that has been very revealing.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Minister for her response, but it is clear that pay in the BBC has not been managed properly. There is too much individual pay bargaining without any clear guidelines or justification. It is a system that has been advantageous to men at the expense of women. What will the Minister do to ensure that there is transparency and fairness in the future?

Margot James: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady’s comments, but I draw her attention to the fact that there is an independent regulator, the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I understand that it has already approached the BBC following the many concerns raised by journalists and broadcasters in the corporation. We rely on the BBC to set a lead in this regard. I hope very much that the EHRC will call it to account, and that real and lasting change will be the result.
Leaving the EU: Computer Games Industry
Recruitment and Retention

15. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the recruitment and retention of skilled workers in the computer games industry. [903837]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): The games industry makes a crucial economic and cultural contribution to the UK’s games market, which in 2016 was the fifth largest in the world. We are committed to supporting the video games industry so that it can continue to recruit and retain top talent, both from the UK and internationally. We are working closely with the sector to understand the impacts on and opportunities for it as we prepare to leave the EU.

Mr Sharma: What representations has the Minister made to the Home Office about the effect on the UK tech sector of the tightening of the tier 2 visa regulations?

Margot James: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman. We have asked the independent Migration Advisory Committee to advise on the economic and social impacts of our exit from the EU. We are also speaking to the sector and its key trade bodies, such as Ukie and TIGA, as well as individual businesses such as Ubisoft and CE Europe, to ensure that top talent continues to be available to the sector.

Channel 4: Relocation

16. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Channel 4 on its potential relocation outside London; and if he will make a statement. [903838]

Thank you for reaching me.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): It is always a pleasure to reach my hon. Friend. [Laughter.]

Channel 4 does an amazing job. We want to see it do even more to reflect and provide for the country as a whole. We are clear about the need for the company to have a major presence outside London and I am working with it to ensure that that happens.

Michael Fabricant: The Mayor of the West Midlands has cross-party local support in trying to attract the Channel 4 headquarters to the region. Will my right hon. Friend outline in more detail how he thinks—and, more important, when he thinks—that Channel 4 will move?

Mr Speaker: But not in too much detail.

Matt Hancock: Terrific.

I know how strongly my hon. Friend feels about this issue and I have noted the verve with which the Mayor of the west midlands has campaigned for Channel 4 to move there. We believe that the company needs to do more outside London and I can certainly see the arguments for it to move its headquarters.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State will want to congratulate Bristol on being designated UNESCO city of film, which is yet another good reason for Channel 4 to choose to relocate there, but does he agree that, wherever it relocates, this is about commissioning and it will be necessary to ensure that there is a regional spread of commissioning services across the country?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. A lot of this is about where the broadcast production is commissioned. However, the location of the commissioners will undoubtedly help to determine some of that.

Topical Questions

T1. [903839] David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): It is a pleasure to take my first session of topical questions as Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for the things that make life worth living.

We at the DCMS are focused on building Britain’s digital future, growing our nation’s brilliant creative and cultural life, backing a free media fit for the modern age, and supporting sport. With that in mind, I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing good luck to Team GB at the Winter Olympic and Paralympic games in PyeongChang. I am sure that our Olympic athletes will do us proud and we wish them all the very best of British.

David Hanson: I join the Secretary of State in that wish.

I hope you do not mind, Mr Speaker, if I ask the question I asked earlier, because it was not answered. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister answer this question simply: when do they expect the split between BT and Openreach to occur?

Matt Hancock: Last year, Ofcom agreed with BT the outlines of the legal separation and the work to ensure that that happens is ongoing. The deadline set by Ofcom was April this year and it is for BT to take the action with the regulator.

T2. [903840] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): My cup really doth runneth over today: I have a topical question as well.

I welcome the progress the Government are making on superfast broadband, but can my hon. Friend the Minister assure me that the remaining 17% of premises in my constituency that do not have access to fibre broadband will have it as soon as possible?

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): We are all very happy for my hon. Friend.

Progress has continued to bring superfast broadband to Cornwall: access coverage is now 91%. A further 3% of premises in Cornwall will be covered by December 2019 through the current broadband contract between Cornwall Council and BT. I also draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the rights of her constituents under the universal service obligation.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. Today Front-Bench Members will have to be particularly brief as there is heavy pressure on time and I am trying to accommodate a lot of colleagues.

Kevin Brennan: What action does the Secretary of State think should be taken against an app that breaches key provisions of the Data Protection Act and the privacy and electronic communications regulations, and that is not GDPR—general data protection regulation—compliant?

Matt Hancock: I think that all apps should be compliant with the law, and I am delighted to say that the Matt Hancock app is.

Kevin Brennan: Exactly, because the app I am talking about does not just belong to the Secretary of State, but is named after him, and the general public need to be protected from their privacy being invaded by Matt Hancock, their personal information being shared with third parties by Matt Hancock and their private photos being accessed by Matt Hancock. Will he undertake to ensure that Matt Hancock complies fully with all data protection regulations in future, and explain why he thinks other people should abide by their legal obligations with regard to data protection if Matt Hancock does not?

Mr Speaker: I must say that I am surprised the Secretary of State did not call his app “Hancock-Disraeli”.

Matt Hancock: Very good, Mr Speaker.

Of course the app does comply but, more importantly, I think we should use digital communications in all their modern forms to communicate with our constituents. I am delighted by the response the app has had—it has been far bigger than I could possibly have imagined—and I look forward to communicating with my constituents over Matt Hancock for many years to come.

T3. [930841] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I, too, congratulate the Government on the progress made in passing the 95% target for coverage of superfast broadband, but what message can my right hon. Friend give to the over 2,000 households in my constituency who are unable to receive 10 megabits per second, and particularly the over 10% of households in the village of Purleigh who cannot even receive 2 megabits per second?

Matt Hancock: The message I can give those households is that the cavalry is coming: this House has legislated so that everybody shall be able to get 10 megabits per second as an absolute minimum by 2020, and the Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is driving the secondary legislation through necessary to make that happen.

T5. [930845] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Obesity is the single biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking. In my health board area, 26% of four to five-year-olds are overweight or obese. Junk food advertising is the key driver of this, so what assessment have the Government made of the financial impact of the 2007 Ofcom advertising restrictions on children’s broadcasters?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Of course making sure we have a healthy and buoyant advertising market in the UK is important, but it is also absolutely critical that we do what we can to reduce the amount of obesity in the nation. This is a matter on which I have had discussions with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I am very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman in more detail.

T4. [930842] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Department taking, alongside the Department for Education, to improve access to sport for our young people, both during school hours and outside them, given the associated health and wellbeing benefits?

Matt Hancock: A huge amount of work is ongoing. We have managed, through the sugar tax, to double the amount of funding for school sport. I pay tribute to the Minister for Sport for all the work that she has done on this—she cannot be here today because she is flying to the Winter Olympics—and I am sure that she will be happy to work with my hon. Friend to see what more we can do.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The gross yield of the gambling industry is £13 billion a year, yet GambleAware has been able to raise only £8.6 million through the voluntary levy. Come on, Minister—we have to do better than that.

Matt Hancock: I will take that as another consideration in the gambling review, the response to which we are looking at right now.

T6. [930846] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Back to the app. Too many users of Android phones have been unlucky enough to read the words “Matt Hancock has stopped” when the app crashes. Can the Secretary of State reassure us that, for all the fun we have had over this, it is a genuinely meaningful attempt to get in touch with constituents and that, as the owner of the fastest-growing social network in the country, he will continue to press on?

Matt Hancock: I can assure my hon. Friend that I have not stopped and I will not stop communicating with my constituents, which is what this is all about.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the recent estimate by the Centre for Economics and Business Research that 121,000 users of fixed odds betting terminals could be classed as problem gamblers, and that each suffers an average annual loss in welfare of nearly £10,000?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she has done as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on FOBTs. She has raised the issue repeatedly and I look forward to working with her on it.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that climbing will be a new Olympic sport in Tokyo in 2020. Outfit Moray, a great group in my constituency, is encouraging local kids to get involved. What can the Government do across the UK to ensure that we have enough facilities and coaches for this new sport?
Climbing is a cracking new sport. In fact, last week I went climbing, as we celebrated funding some of the athletes, including the world champion female climber, who is British and looking forward to competing at the Tokyo Olympic games.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a fact that, when it comes to the 95% broadband target, the UK Government underfunded the Scottish Government, who had to make up the shortfall. When it comes to 4G coverage, England has 60% landmass coverage and Scotland has only 17%. What are the UK Government doing to make up for this double deficit?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we have increased mobile phone coverage in Scotland more as a percentage than elsewhere in the UK. When it comes to fixed broadband, I will not take that from the Scottish National party. We gave the SNP £20 million over three years and it has not spent it yet. Every single person in Scotland who does not have superfast broadband knows that they could have got it if the SNP had got on with it instead of just worrying about independence.

Scottish Government report found that in 2012 over half of my constituents did not even receive 3G service.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): On a similar topic, a Scottish Government report found that in 2012 over half of my constituents did not even receive 3G service. Six years later I do not feel that enough progress has been made. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that more is being done to ensure that rural constituents are not being left behind?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The roll-out of mobile phone coverage needs to go further. We have made very good progress, but a lot more needs to be done. I commend her constructive tone, which is so much more useful.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but demand exceeds supply. We must move on.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Bribery Act 2010

1. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Bribery Act 2010; and if he will make a statement.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): In the Bribery Act 2010 the UK introduced world-leading legislation on bribery, making it a criminal offence for a company to fail to prevent a bribe being paid. We are starting to see the effectiveness of the offence in holding large companies to account, through the first conviction of a corporate entity and three deferred prosecution agreements.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Attorney General agree that corruption is still embedded in the business culture of many developing countries, particularly in Africa, and that it is always the poorest in society who suffer most? This is being encouraged by a number of major trading countries that have not followed our lead. What is he doing, particularly in the OECD, to ensure that those countries come into a line with the UK?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is the poorest who suffer most when corruption occurs around the world, and it is important that the UK plays a leadership role, not least by setting an example, and we have done that through the Bribery Act and what has flowed from it. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend. In his role as a distinguished Foreign Officer Minister, he was also able to do some of this work, and the work must continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Attorney General believe that his Department can provide more clarification on foreign public officials, hospitality and facilitation payments, self-reporting, sentencing and fines, adequate procedures and the meanings of “associated person” and “relevant commercial organisations”? How can that be done?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is right that clarity is important. The Bribery Act and the prosecutions that flow from it are not all that matters here. We need to change corporate culture, and that is happening. It is important that corporations understand their responsibilities, and he is right that if they are to do that, they need to be clear about what they can and cannot do. We will always seek to give greater clarity, but it all depends on the circumstances.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Do we have enough specialist expertise in our prosecuting authorities to enforce the Bribery Act effectively?

The Attorney General: Yes, I believe we do. For some of the most substantial cases under the Bribery Act, it is the Serious Fraud Office that prosecutes and investigates, and it has a good deal of expertise. In relation to both convictions and deferred prosecution agreements, my hon. Friend will recognise, as I have said already, that we are presenting good cases and securing convictions.

Female Genital Mutilation: Prosecution Rates

2. Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): What steps does the CPS is taking to increase the rate of prosecution of people responsible for female genital mutilation.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): FGM is a crime. It is abuse against children and women. The Crown Prosecution Service has introduced a series of measures to improve the handling of such cases, including appointing a lead FGM prosecutor in each area and delivering training to police and prosecutors across the country.

Mr Whittingdale: I welcome this week’s announcement of extra funding to tackle FGM in Africa and beyond. With over 5,000 cases reported in a year in this country, does my hon. and learned Friend share my concern that we are still to bring a successful prosecution?
The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is correct to raise some of the obstacles that prosecutors have faced over the years, and barriers have caused real issues in the investigation of such cases. I am glad to say that a case is currently before the courts—I will not comment on it—but it is also important to remember that protection and prevention is vital, and our FGM protection orders are being used to good effect, with 179 having been granted to the end of September last year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol is recognised as being at the forefront of some of the community involvement in trying to prevent female genital mutilation, but the fact that we have not yet had a single conviction is still a sticking point. What more can the Solicitor General do to liaise with the police? Local prosecution services tell me that they are being prevented from taking things further because the police are not bringing cases to them.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is right to press me on this issue. With the appointment of lead FGM prosecutors in each CPS area and agreed protocols with local police forces, I am glad to say that there should be a greater and deeper understanding among officers, police officers in particular, of the tell-tale signs of female genital mutilation and of what to do about them. Getting early investigative advice from the CPS is vital in such cases.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Solicitor General is right to identify specific issues that need to be tackled on FGM. However, if we are to increase prosecution rates right across the range of offences, we need a properly resourced and robust disclosure system. The former Conservative politician and barrister Jerry Hayes has said: “The CPS are under terrible pressure, as are the police. Both work hard but are badly under-resourced.” He is right, is he not?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman will know that I was directly involved in the prosecuting and defending of serious criminal cases for over 20 years, and I am well familiar with the long-standing challenge of disclosure. Prior to recent revelations, I am glad to say that the Attorney General and I instituted a thoroughgoing review not only of our guidelines, but of the entire culture. The police and prosecutors—everybody involved at all stages—have to realise that disclosure must be achieved early and efficiently to protect not just defendants, but victims.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I appreciate that there is a review, and I appreciate that there are long-standing issues, but there is also no doubt that social media—things like WhatsApp—and the examination of mobile telephones present new challenges that are time intensive and resource intensive. Surely it is the case that, without proper resources on those things, we will not have the system of disclosure that we need.

The Solicitor General: I remind the hon. Gentleman that one of the main issues in this area has not been that these items have not been obtained but the timeliness in which they are eventually disclosed. That is the issue, and bearing down on that factor will encourage and increase both police awareness and the priority that the police need to place on making sure that all this material is gathered at the earliest opportunity.

Leaving the EU: European Arrest Warrant

3. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the operation of the European arrest warrant. [903851]

7. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the operation of the European arrest warrant. [903856]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The European arrest warrant offers a more effective means than non-EU alternatives of surrendering individuals wanted by other EU member states and of ensuring that those who have fled the UK are returned to face justice. Agreeing continued extradition arrangements will therefore be an important part of negotiations with our European partners and is of mutual interest to both the UK and EU member states.

Mr Sharma: Does the Attorney General agree with the Director of Public Prosecutions that the European arrest warrant is vital to ensuring quick and effective cross-border crime and justice measures? Will the Government commit to remaining in the European arrest warrant?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree that the European arrest warrant is the most efficient means we have available both to bring people back to the UK and to send foreign criminals home to face justice. It is our objective to be part of those arrangements in the future. Precisely how we do that will depend on negotiations that, as the hon. Gentleman knows, are ongoing.

Jeff Smith: Will not these arrangements have to function on the basis of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice? Which is more important to the Government, their heavy red line on the ECJ or the ability to work effectively with our European partners to tackle crime? Does the Attorney General agree with the House of Lords report that the safety of the people of the UK should be the Government’s overriding consideration?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree with the last part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I do not accept that there is necessarily a contradiction between restricting and excluding the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union in this country and being able to have good and productive arrangements for combating crime across the European continent. That is what we seek to do, and we believe it is in the mutual interest not just of the UK but of the rest of the EU, too. That is why we are optimistic that we can negotiate.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the European arrest warrant is just as important to our EU friends and partners as it is to us?
The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend, and he might like to know that, as far as the statistics go, since 2010, under the European arrest warrant, 1,079 people have been surrendered back to the United Kingdom but 8,826 people have been surrendered from the UK to the rest of the European Union. This is an advantageous arrangement for both sides.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Since 2010 thousands of criminals have been removed from the United Kingdom to face trial abroad thanks to the European arrest warrant. Does the Attorney General agree that such agreements are an integral part of our justice system here in the United Kingdom?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is important that we negotiate a settlement that will enable us to carry on sending people back and, just as importantly, to carry on bringing people back from other European nations to face justice here. As I have said, I am optimistic that we can do that.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Irish Supreme Court recently refused to extradite a company director accused of fraud to the UK, despite a request through the European arrest warrant, citing Brexit as the reason, so we are having problems enforcing EAW requests even before we leave the European Union. What discussions are the Government having with EU partners to ensure this vital co-operation continues?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that that case has not yet concluded, so I will say nothing about it specifically. His point is that we need to ensure that there is continuity of these arrangements beyond our departure from the European Union, which is exactly what we seek to negotiate. As I have said, this is not a pie-in-the-sky hope but something that will benefit both us and the rest of Europe. This is two-way traffic, and it is important to everyone that we negotiate continuing arrangements.

Drug Trafficking Gangs: Prosecution Rates

4. Fiona Bruce (Con) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to increase the rate of prosecution for drug traffickers. [903852]

8. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to increase the rate of prosecution for cases involving the exploitation of vulnerable people by drug traffickers across the country. [903858]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): In the new guidance, the CPS has emphasised the importance of safeguarding vulnerable people. Of course, we have organisations such as the UK Human Trafficking Centre, which is a central point of contact for all agencies that work with victims of sex trafficking—for example when a victim is co-operating with an investigation to ensure that if they are of a foreign nationality their status in the UK is preserved during the course of the investigation.

Neil Parish: My hon. and learned Friend is right about these crimes crossing county lines. I also think that vulnerable people are too often prosecuted, and not enough consideration is given to their vulnerability when the cases are being looked at.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Modern Slavery Act 2015 contains provisions to protect people who are compelled into acts of criminality. Choices must be made at an early stage by police and prosecutors whether to treat them as defendants or, where appropriate, encourage them to co-operate. Many of these people are, frankly, victims.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The National Crime Agency just showed its “Invisible People” exhibition in Belfast. It is a harrowing portrayal of what individuals go through when they are exploited through prostitution or for drugs and forced labour. Are we winning the battle?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman graphically illustrates that this fact of life is in every town and city across our country. The idea that slavery ended many centuries ago is a fallacy and, once we face up to that—I think the police and Crown Prosecution Service are facing up to it—we are halfway towards dealing with this scourge. More needs to be done.

Crimes against Older People: Prosecution Rates

5. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to increase the rate of prosecution for crimes against older people. [903853]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Although many older people are not and do not consider themselves to be vulnerable, they can often be perceived as an easy target for criminals. To address this, the CPS has committed to refreshing its legal guidance and public statement on crimes against older people within the next year.

Sir Edward Leigh: We all have constituents and relatives, elderly people, who are the victims of telephone scams. This is a particularly horrible form of crime where people pretend to be banks and it causes acute distress. Often the police shuffle off responsibility to Action Fraud, so can we have real action on this and real resources committed to it?

The Solicitor General: My hon. and learned Friend is right to raise this issue and I commend financial institutions such as Nationwide that have already created much more secure specialist phone lines for elderly people and, in particular, for carers for those who are unwell,
to conduct their transactions. That is an excellent example of how the financial services sector can drive and design out this type of fraud.

Prosecuting Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery: Global Co-operation

6. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to strengthen global co-operation in prosecuting human trafficking and modern slavery.

**The Attorney General** (Jeremy Wright): Later this month, the Crown Prosecution Service will host an international summit for senior prosecutors from 21 countries around the world. It is an ambitious summit that aims to identify better ways to support victims and witnesses and to establish a strong, active international network to tackle more actively the crime of modern slavery.

**Eddie Hughes**: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that modern slavery and human trafficking are international problems that require the collaboration of the Crown Prosecution Service and similar judicial systems from many countries to address them?

**The Attorney General**: I do agree and it is important that we work with partners around the world. The CPS has 30 prosecutors located in other countries and, of course, we agreed last year at the United Nations to double our spend overseas in combating modern slavery.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Attorney General welcome the work of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and support the Home Office in dealing with this issue in particular? Will he help to look at identifying the eight or so countries we are dealing with and give support from his office?

**The Attorney General**: Yes, I do welcome that work. The right hon. Gentleman is right that there is a huge amount we can do in this institution to back up the fight against modern slavery and, of course, to focus on where the majority of those who are trafficked tend to come from. Of course, as he will recognise, it is not just those eight countries. Those who were identified as victims of modern slavery arriving in this country last year came from some 108 different countries, but he is right that there are particular countries to focus on.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): How much money have the UK Government committed to tackling human slavery around the world?

**The Attorney General**: At the UN General Assembly last year, the UK Government agreed that we would spend £150 million overseas to combat modern slavery. As my hon. Friend will recognise, that is in addition to the substantial sums already committed in our domestic budgets to deal with the problem.
Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

- Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Act 2018

**Motability**

10.30 am

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on executive pay and cash reserves held at Motability.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): I am here today to address the concerns that have been raised about the structure of the Motability scheme. Let me first say that the scheme provides important support for more than 600,000 disabled people and has improved and extended its offer over the past few years. For example, in 2013, in my role as Minister for disabled people, I summoned the chief executive and chair to explain the excessive pay and bonuses of Motability scheme staff and the sums of money held in reserves. Despite being told that the charity needed such money for capital reserves, and the Charity Commission agreeing with that, I pursued the matter with the Department and ensured that the funds were used to benefit disabled people. The result was that £175 million was used for transitional support for claimants.

In April last year, after firm encouragement from the then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), Motability extended that transitional support. After direction from the Department, the charity is now piloting a Motability scheme to help children under the age of three who are not eligible for the mobility component of child disability living allowance but who rely on bulky medical equipment. The scheme has the potential to help up to 1,800 families.

I must emphasise that Motability is an independent charity that is wholly responsible for the strategic direction of the Motability scheme. It has oversight of Motability Operations, the commercial partner that operates the scheme under contract to the Motability charity. As a company, Motability Operations is an independent commercial business regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Although the remuneration of its directors and managers is a matter for Motability Operations to decide, from the outside one has to question whether it is really right. That view is endorsed by the Charity Commission, which said yesterday that the Motability trustees may wish to consider the reputational issues raised by the salaries being paid to its commercial partner’s executives.

Motability was set up 40 years ago, with cross-party support. It has done much good in that time, but today, anybody who looked at the size of the reserves and pay packages would question the direction that Motability has taken in allowing that to happen. Motability must listen to the criticisms it has faced, not only in the media this week but over the course of several years, and be receptive to change. As Secretary of State, I want to see a clearer commitment from Motability that it will maximise the use of funds to support disabled people’s mobility and independence.

As we have seen in so many instances, what was deemed correct in the 1970s is not necessarily correct by today’s standards. In the light of the current focus on corporate governance issues and the use of public money, I have today asked the National Audit Office to consider...
undertaking an investigation into this matter. I am keen for the NAO to look at how Motability is using taxpayers’ money.

**John Mann:** I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and the Secretary of State for her initial response.

It is grotesque that this registered charity, which is funded by the taxpayer through a direct grant from Government, is carrying cash reserves of £2.4 billion and has been underspending its budget by £200 million a year, and it is grotesque that this charity is paying its chief executive £1.7 million a year. Will the Secretary of State commit to an urgent review of executive pay at Motability and to publishing its results? Will she commit to urgently examining the finances of Motability and the audit arrangements made by her Department in previous years, and again, will she publish that review?

The point is that there is no risk: this is a no-risk situation. It is a very good scheme for the disabled, but there is no risk. The reserves are only half the picture—the banks are also profiting, possibly to the tune of billions over the years, because they are bearing some of the risk. Will the Secretary of State commit to reviewing the lack of competition in the financing arrangements with the banks, which see the large four banks making huge amounts of profit out of this scheme? How can the banks be allegedly covering the risk, when Motability has £2.4 billion in reserves allegedly to cover that risk? It is the same risk, yet in fact there is no risk at all because the taxpayer is guaranteeing the scheme.

Will the Secretary of State also make it abundantly clear to the disabled people in receipt of Motability that they need fear nothing and that the scheme and the service that they get will continue as is? What we as Members of Parliament are interested in is the finances behind the scheme, the excessive profits and the scandal that a no-risk scheme has banks profiting so much and the charity itself quite unnecessarily holding £2.4 billion in reserves.

**Ms McVey:** First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work and for his courage in pursuing the matter. I also thank the media for exposing the situation. Now that I am back in the House as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, I can say that the situation needs to come under the spotlight. I would like to work with him on that, to bridge the divide of party politics and do what is right. We need to uncover what is happening in the Motability scheme and to ensure that the money held in the company’s reserves goes to the people that it should be supporting. He quite rightly says that having such an amount of money in reserves is grotesque, and that it should really be going to support disabled people.

As for where we go next, an urgent request has gone to the National Audit Office to ensure that if disabled people choose to spend money on the Motability package, that is a good use of the benefits that they get, and to check how taxpayers’ money is being used. Motability has been a lifeline for many disabled people who have chosen to take part in the scheme. As I have said, it is helping more than 600,000 people, and we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. For those whom the scheme is helping, it is an essential lifeline, but if it could be helping many more disabled people then that is exactly where the money should be going.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I granted this urgent question because I thought that it was urgent, and it is, and it is an extremely important matter, but the House will be conscious that we have very, very heavy constraints on time today, so I am looking to those on the Opposition Front Bench to stick to their time, because after that they will be cut off. I appeal to colleagues for short questions, please, and I know that the Secretary of State will oblige us with short answers.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** May I commend the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for his customary tenacity in pursuing this issue? Is it not the case that not only has the taxpayer been overpaying over the years, but disabled people have been overpaying from their benefits for this scheme? Surely those disabled people could be getting exactly the same benefits from it for a lower amount per week. The money saved could then be given back to them to help pay for their other living costs. Will my right hon. Friend consider allowing the scheme to progress, but at a lower cost to disabled people so that they can retain more of their benefits? Motability seems to be losing sight of what it was set up to do in the first place.

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend raises a good point. This issue unites Members on both sides of the House. The first step is for the NAO to look into the matter, but my hon. Friend’s suggestions seem fair and right, and they are the kinds of points we should pursue.

**Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this urgent question. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

The news that the chief executive of Motability Operations Group plc took home £1.7 million last year and that the group is sitting on reserves of £2.4 billion has shocked people around the country. Particularly shocked are disabled people, 51,000 of whom, according to Motability’s own figures, lost access to the scheme last year after being reassessed for their personal independence payment. More than 3,000 were reinstated on appeal, but many lost their car in the meantime.

From Carillion to Motability, excessive executive pay is completely out of hand. With Motability Operations Ltd paid about £2 billion a year directly by the Department for Work and Pensions on behalf of disabled people in receipt of social security support, there are serious questions for the Secretary of State to answer. When did she or her officials last meet with either Motability or Motability Operations Group? The National Council for Voluntary Organisations’ “Report on the Inquiry into Charity Senior Executive Pay and Guidance for Trustees on Setting Remuneration”, published in April 2014, says that charities should include their highest earners in their accounts, regardless of whether they work for a subsidiary company. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Motability Operations Group is sitting on a surplus of £2.4 billion. That is a staggering amount given its VAT exemption from the Treasury, which means that it does not compete on a level playing field.
When the National Audit Office last examined Motability in detail in 1996, it found that the then £61 million reserves “exceeded the necessary margin of safety”.

What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the current necessary margin of safety, and what assessment has she made of the £200 million annual underspend that has allowed such a large surplus to accumulate? Given that the funding of Motability effectively comes from the taxpayer via social security payments, what assessment has she made of value for money for disabled people who rely on their cars for independence? Finally, value for money for taxpayers is not currently one of the criteria for Motability’s remuneration committee. Does the Secretary of State believe it should be?

**Ms McVey:** The Department has worked closely with Motability to ensure that disabled people get good value for money for the cars that they choose to spend their money on. The Charity Commission, which recently undertook a detailed review of the charity’s financial accounts and its relationship with the non-charitable company Motability Operations, said:

“That review did not identify regulatory concerns about the charity’s governance or its relationship with the commercial company. It is not for the Commission to comment on the pay of the CEO of a large non charitable commercial company. However, we have made clear to the trustees of the charity Motability that the pay of the CEO of its commercial partner Motability Operations may be considered excessive and may raise reputational issues for the charity.”

It also found “the level of operating capital held by the company in order to guarantee the scheme to be conservative”, but said that it should be “kept under continuous review.” I would say that that review needs to start again. The Charity Commission should again look into what has happened.

It is the Government who permit disabled people to have a benefit, but where that money is spent is always the choice of the people who receive it. When the scheme was originally set up in the 1970s, with cross-party support, that was deemed the best way forward, but as I said, the NAO must now look into the matter. When I personally looked into it in 2013, I ensured that Motability paid £175 million more to disabled people, and I will continue with that direct action from my new elevated position.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Only a third of those who can get grants from this operation currently do, so will my right hon. Friend ensure that the eligibility criteria are reviewed? Will she also look into the marketing to those who are eligible, so that people who are disabled and who can get this service actually get it and use the money?

**Ms McVey:** That is exactly what we want to ensure. My hon. Friend is right that the people who could benefit from this scheme should be benefiting from it, but obviously it is their choice whether they want to do so. If we could widen the scheme by allowing the money held in reserves to go to those disabled people, surely that would be right.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): I am pleased to follow the Chairman of the Select Committee. In the recent past, with regard to BHS, his Committee and this House have raised grave concerns about corporate governance in private companies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those concerns are particularly pertinent when private companies are so reliant on the public sector? If she shares those concerns, will she ensure that is included in the remit of the NAO report?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend is directed by true compassionate Conservative beliefs. The Government are bringing forward a new review and new law on corporate governance to cover all these matters. We want transparency—that is what will drive correct behaviour. We want accountability, and we want people to do the right thing. If that takes shining a sharper spotlight on their actions, then that is what we should do.

**Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Lab): The Work and Pensions Committee will be undertaking an urgent inquiry into this issue. We will be seeking your support, Mr Speaker, so that we can co-opt my hon.—very honourable—Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on to our Committee to pursue the issue. As we are drawing up our agenda over the next few days, will the Secretary of State say which questions she would find most helpful for us to seek answers on?

**Ms McVey:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I will meet him to decide between us, with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), which questions would be best to focus on.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): I am pleased to follow the Chairman of the Select Committee. In the recent past, with regard to BHS, his Committee and this House have raised grave concerns about corporate governance in private companies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those concerns are particularly pertinent when private companies are so reliant on the public sector? If she shares those concerns, will she ensure that is included in the remit of the NAO report?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend pursues this matter with tenacity. I will be getting in touch with the Business Secretary to discuss what additional actions need to be taken in the forthcoming new law on corporate governance.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Yesterday I raised the issue of my constituent, Natasha, who was in receipt of lifetime DLA. That was removed following...
a PIP assessment, and she was threatened with having her vehicle taken from her on Boxing day—I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but this is particularly pertinent for me. I am grateful that the Secretary of State is having an investigation. Will she pay particular attention to the conduct of the trustees?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady is right to be emotional, because for many people this is an emotional matter, particularly just after Christmas. Again, these are matters that need to be pursued, and the trustees need to be held to account.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that while the Government Benches may be full of people who are instinctively pro-free market and respect commercial operations, we have no qualms whatsoever about interfering or raising questions when things have gone wrong? Does she believe that things have gone wrong in this case?

Ms McVey: We have to get the results from the NAO, from the Select Committee, and from the Charity Commission. However, my hon. Friend is right. This scheme, which was set up with the best intentions and good purposes, and has helped people, appears to have lost its way. It is only right that we help it to get right back on track to help the people it was set up to support.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that she got a concession five years ago, but nothing has changed in five years on executive pay and concerns about reserves. Why is the National Audit Office only now being asked to do this, five years late? Is it just because of newspaper publicity?

Ms McVey: It is because of the tenacity of certain Members, for sure, and the freedom of our press, which has aired the case. This has been looked at for quite a few years, and I got concessions from Motability, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North, but now we need to take the matter further.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Motability has been a lifeline, but it is obscene that this money has not been going to the neediest in our society. I appreciate the Secretary of State’s urgent request to the National Audit Office, but what steps will she take to monitor the level of reserves, to ensure that they are not hoarded in this way again?

Ms McVey: We have to bring in the correct people to do the oversight, whether that is the FCA or the NAO, and those are the parameters we will use in a cross-party way to make sure we check out what reserves are needed, what reserves are not needed and what reserves need to go back to disabled people.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Given the shocking news of Motability’s £2.4 billion in reserves, does the Secretary of State agree that Motability’s policy of removing cars before constituents’ PIP appeals have taken place is even more reprehensible? Will she urge Motability to reverse that policy with immediate effect?

Ms McVey: When we have got the money back from Motability that we believe we should to support disabled people, that is one of the first things it should be used for.
Same-Sex Marriage in Bermuda

10.51 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs why he has allowed Her Majesty’s Governor of Bermuda to assent to a Bill that will abolish same-sex marriage in Bermuda.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): We are obviously disappointed about the removal of same-sex marriage in Bermuda. The Domestic Partnership Act, to which the Governor of Bermuda assented yesterday, ensures that Bermudians who have been legally married in Bermuda since the Supreme Court decision will retain their married status and enjoy the same legal rights as those in domestic partnerships.

Less than a year ago, same-sex couples had no legal recognition at all under Bermudian law. While the Act withdraws the entitlement for same-sex couples to marry, it replaces it with a provision for domestic partnerships for all couples, regardless of gender. The intent of the Act is to provide domestic partners with the same benefits as married couples, including provision for pensions, inheritance, healthcare, tax and immigration.

After full and careful consideration of Bermuda’s constitutional and international obligations, the Secretary of State decided that in these circumstances, it would not be appropriate to use the power to block legislation, which can only be used where there is a legal or constitutional basis for doing so, and even then, only in exceptional circumstances. It is important to recognise that the regime for domestic partnerships implemented by Bermuda in its Domestic Partnership Act can also meet the European Court of Human Rights requirement for legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

The Government are committed to promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality globally through projects, partnerships and persuasion. In engaging with the British overseas territories, we have to respect that they are separate, self-governing jurisdictions with their own democratically elected representatives and the right to self-government.

Chris Bryant: However the Government try to dress this up, it is a backward step for human rights in Bermuda and in the overseas territories. Same-sex Bermudian couples who have been married under the ruling of the Bermudian Supreme Court have now been rendered an anomaly. Gay and lesbian Bermudians have been told that they are not quite equal to everyone else and that they do not deserve—this is the word being used—the full marriage rights that other Bermudians enjoy. Cunard and P&O’s Bermuda-registered ships will be banned from holding same-sex marriages at sea.

Does the Minister not worry that when she tells the Russians to respect LGBT rights in Chechnya, or when she tries to convince India, Pakistan or Indonesia to change the law to benefit LGBT people, those countries will just laugh at her and say, “The first territory in the world to repeal same-sex marriage is British Bermuda, and they did it with your express permission.”

The Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), said last week in the House that the Government were absolutely committed to “promoting equal rights”—a point that the Minister has repeated today—but did the Government make any attempt to persuade the Bermudian Government to accept the ruling of the Bermudian Supreme Court in favour of same-sex marriage? Did the Minister or any Minister—the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister or anybody on behalf of the Government—ring the Bermudian Premier or any of the Ministers in Bermuda to try to change their minds?

Do the Government not see that the Domestic Partnership Act expressly contradicts the Bermudian Human Rights Act 1981? It even states as much in the Act itself. Will the Bermudian Supreme Court not conclude exactly the same now as it did earlier last year, so we will be back to square one? Most importantly, how can it possibly be right that lesbian and gay British citizens in Bermuda—and, for that matter, in Northern Ireland—are worth less than British citizens in this country?

Harriett Baldwin: I want to put on the record that I fully appreciate the voice the hon. Gentleman has given to this issue in Parliament not only today, but in his recent Adjournment debate, at business questions and so on. I want to make it clear that we are disappointed that the right to marry has been removed, but we have to recognise that the Act provides legal recognition of same-sex relationships, as required under the European Court of Human Rights. The Secretary of State considered the implications extremely carefully at Bill stage. Without going into the details, Mr Speaker, of the range of conversations that were held, I can say that we are seriously disappointed—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say that the Minister is perfectly welcome to go into the detail of those conversations about which the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) had inquired? There is certainly no prohibition from the Chair.

Harriett Baldwin: I was not implying that, Mr Speaker. I was saying that I do not have the full details in front of me, but obviously there were extensive conversations internally—

Chris Bryant: Will you write to me?

Harriett Baldwin: I am very happy to commit to following up on that with the hon. Gentleman in writing. As he will appreciate, this was carefully discussed by those at our end and, balancing the issues concerned in this particular case, the Secretary of State decided not to intervene in the matter.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I respect the right of overseas territories to set their own laws, but in her discussions with the Bermuda Government, will the Minister communicate the fact that there is discomfort with the decision among Members on both sides of this Chamber?

Harriett Baldwin: Yes, I will. By allowing the urgent question today, Mr Speaker, you have allowed colleagues to express the views held very strongly in this House. On the ongoing discussions, as my hon. Friend will be aware, there will be a range of opportunities for Government interlocutors from the United Kingdom to interact with those from Bermuda. He will also be aware that this was
put into the manifesto of the party that was successful at the last election. Although we in the United Kingdom may disagree with the direction of travel, we have decided in these circumstances not to intervene.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for so eloquently and passionately putting the case against this shameful piece of legislation, which turns same-sex couples into second-class citizens just a year after they had won their equality through the courts.

Following a year in which Australia and Chile have joined the march towards marriage equality, this legislation is a significant step backwards. For that to happen anywhere in the world would be shameful, but for it to happen in a British territory—with the legislation signed by a British Governor, and permitted by a British Foreign Secretary—makes us complicit in something that this House has repeatedly voted against.

The Government say they are disappointed, that there is a difficult balancing act to be made between the will of Bermuda’s Parliament and the views of the British Government and that this legislation tries to bridge the gap between the two. That is not really the case: the legislation is in conflict with Bermuda’s own constitution and Human Rights Act. When it comes to the rights of British citizens, there should be no such thing as a balancing act.

On the powers of the Governor to veto this legislation, the Foreign Office states that “British Ministers expect the Governor to observe international obligations and protect key values.”

The Minister has just said that the law should be in line with the constitution. How does the Governor’s decision to sign this legislation square with that expectation of protecting key values? Surely LGBT equality is a key value. How is it right for the Governor to sign legislation that overturns the independent decision of the judiciary, conflicts with the constitution, and enshrines not integrity but rank inequality into Bermuda’s administration of justice?

**Harriett Baldwin:** The hon. Lady is right to highlight the progress being made around the world on this issue, and our overseas territories observe different states of legislative progress. Five Caribbean territories—Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, and the Turks and Caicos Islands—currently have no recognition at all of same-sex unions, and I repeat our disappointment that the Act in Bermuda removes the right for same-sex couples to marry. Against that, however, we must balance issues of self-determination, and having carefully considered those issues, the Secretary of State decided that in this case it would not be appropriate to use his powers to block the legislation. Such powers can be used only where there is a legal or constitutional basis for doing so, and even then only in exceptional circumstances. His judgment was that when engaging with the British overseas territories we must respect the fact that they are separate, self-governing jurisdictions with their own democratically elected representatives that have the right to self-government.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My family has links with Bermuda going back some years, so on a personal level, and across the House, there is deep regret that we find ourselves in this position. Ultimately, however, would it not also be a profound step if Britain were to take action in relation to Bermudian democracy?

**Harriett Baldwin:** Those are the issues that need to be balanced in this case, and to withhold assent would require limited circumstances and need to be based on a legal or constitutional issue. Having considered the circumstances very carefully, the Secretary of State decided that in this case it would not be appropriate to use that power.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I echo the views that have already been stated about our deep regrets about this step. Human rights groups have argued that the new legislation contradicts Bermuda’s constitution, which guarantees freedom from discrimination, and the repeal of the Act is a blow to LGBT campaigners in Bermuda and much further afield. How many representations did the Foreign Secretary make to Bermuda’s Governor before this decision was given assent? Will the Minister urge the Foreign Secretary to use this year’s Commonwealth summit in London to lobby for LGBT equality throughout the 52 Commonwealth states?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I assure the hon. Lady that the Secretary of State considered carefully a range of different views that were communicated to him by a range of different groups. I also understand that the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April will include a strong strand on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights.

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): The first slaves were brought to Bermuda in 1620: oppressed, segregated and discriminated against. That is why leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Barack Obama have fought not just for race rights, but the rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. This country has been one of the world leaders on this subject, so if this is not the issue on which to refuse assent I do not know what is. The Minister has come to the Dispatch Box and, frankly, I can see the discomfort on her face. Can she get into the detail, or ask the Secretary of State to get into the detail, of the discussions with the Bermudian Government and what our representations entail? Can she at least put them in the House of Commons Library? It is a shame that we stand on the wrong side of human rights in Parliament this morning.

**Harriett Baldwin:** I fully accept the eloquent way in which the right hon. Gentleman makes his case. He will be very aware that the rights on which he speaks so eloquently need to be balanced against the rights of self-determination, based on a democratically elected Government. That is the judgment the Secretary of State had to make. In this case, he decided that the situation was not exceptional enough for him to use those rights.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am personally stunned by what has happened. Surely this is an exceptional case? The hon. Member for
Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is to be congratulated on raising it. May I press the Minister again? Will she please come back to the House with more detail on the conversations between the Governor and the Foreign Secretary? This place deserves that.

Harriett Baldwin: I think I have, in an earlier answer, already committed to doing that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): How do we expect to be leaders of the world on this issue, and how do we expect to raise this issue seriously in the Commonwealth as the Minister suggests, if they can all turn around and say, “Well, in the territories you sanction it. In Northern Ireland you sanction it”? We are making our country a laughing stock in the international human rights field. Will we be able to think again? Will we put pressure on all our territories to introduce same-sex marriage? Will we consider the self-determination—the phrase the Minister uses—of LGBT people in our territories and stop going on about the self-determination of some usually rich elected politicians, far up in their ivory towers in their islands, who do not represent a lot of the minorities on their islands who we need to stand up for today?

Harriett Baldwin: In championing the human progress, as we see it, in England, Scotland and Wales, the hon. Gentleman rightly points out that it is somewhat different in Northern Ireland. As I pointed out, five Caribbean territories currently have no general recognition. There are, of course, a range of other territories that do. Around the world we are moving in the right direction. I strongly believe that in due course the direction of travel will continue to be in the direction he seeks, but in this case we are balancing this issue with allowing the right to self-determination in the back of a democratic manifesto and a vote in the Parliament of Bermuda.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What action will the Minister or the Foreign Secretary take if and when a gay married couple take a case to the Supreme Court and the Bermudian Supreme Court overrules that decision and says it is unconstitutional?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that routes such as the one that he described would be open to people. At this point it would not be possible to speculate about any future legal challenge. Clearly, should such a legal challenge occur, we would, depending on its progress, potentially have to—[Interruption.] Yes, we do have something called the Magna Carta fund, which I understand people might be able to apply to.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): When the 2016 referendum in Bermuda failed to reach the turnout threshold, what advice did the Foreign Office give to the Governor of Bermuda on this issue?

Harriett Baldwin: Again, I re-emphasise that in terms of UK Government policy, we are explicitly committed to rights for equal marriage. We have to emphasise that, in this particular case, there are not grounds for intervention in the first instance.
urgent questions, instead of Secretaries of State. Also, when will the Data Protection Bill be debated in this place?

If this is not ideological, I do not know what is: the Secretary of State was warned at the time, so why was the east coast railway line, which returned £1 billion to the Treasury and had a 91% satisfaction rating, privatised in the first place? So far, the cost of forfeiting that contract is £2.2 billion, and the shadow Secretary of State for Transport has said that another £380 million would be added to the bail-out. Rightly, the National Audit Office has launched an investigation. Will the Leader of the House please write to me to say what the costs associated with this debacle are so far, and will she say whether the Secretary of State made that decision against advice?

An inquiry is ongoing into the east coast railway, and now an inspector has been sent into Northamptonshire County Council. Surrey, which benefited from a midnight visit by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to No. 11 Downing Street, is also in difficulties. The leader of Northamptonshire County Council said that she had been warning since 2013-14 that the council “couldn’t cope with the levels of cuts” it was facing. An inspector is being sent in to do what? The council leader has explained that the cuts are the cause and the fact of the inspection also stifle any further discussion. As the Minister said, it “would be inappropriate for the Government to comment while the inspection is under way”.—[Official Report, 6 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1357.]

So, will the Leader of the House write to me, letting us know how long the inspection will take before the inspector reports, and what the inspector’s terms of reference are?

Is the Leader of the House aware of any statement by the Government on the misuse of statistics? Sir David Norgrove, Chairman of the UK Statistics Authority, said the Prime Minister was misusing the statistics on waiting times by comparing different things. In England, she uses time from decision to admit to time of admission to another part of the health service. In Wales, she quotes the entire time patients wait from arrival, including decision to admit, to actual admission. When will that be corrected? The Government’s statement said that they accept the UKSA assessment, but their assessment of this target still stands. That is bizarre. When will the correction be published, in response to Sir David’s comments?

Let us acknowledge that the oldest language in Europe was celebrated this week in the Welsh Grand Committee. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

However, more delay by the Government: the Women and Equalities Committee report, “Building for Equality: Disability and the Built Environment”, was published in April 2017, but there has been no Government response. In a written answer, the Minister for Employment referred back to an earlier answer. That earlier answer says “shortly”—but that was on 9 November. This issue affects blind people. When will the Government respond, and when will they take people with disabilities seriously?

I join the Leader of the House in celebrating the fact that women got the vote. They said, “Deeds, not words”—the cry celebrating women over a certain age and with property getting the vote. The test of a Government’s commitment is deeds, not words. So, will the Leader of the House explain why former military wives are losing out on their pension credits because they reached pension age before the rules changed? Deeds, not words, on WASPI women. Deeds, not words, on the House of Commons research that found that 86% of austerity falls on women. Cuts have cost women £79 billion compared with £13 billion for men. Deeds, not words, on equal pay for equal work. The Leader of the Opposition has done his deeds, because our shadow Cabinet is 50% made up of women. That cannot be said of the Cabinet.

We could not take part in the photo in Central Lobby because the members of the shadow Cabinet were at the Museum of London, and I would encourage everyone to visit the suffragettes exhibition there. A loaf of bread had been preserved since the day when one of the suffragettes came out of prison and held it aloft to prove that she had been on hunger strike. It is an amazing thing to see. The deeds of the suffragettes allow our words to resound, as we strive for equality.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the series of questions that she put to me. In response to her requests for letters, I will write to her on several of the points that she raised, to which I do not have the specific answers to hand.

Through the usual channels, we will, of course, as soon as possible give the summer recess dates, and, as the hon. Lady knows, a list of ministerial responsibilities will be published very soon.

The Data Protection Bill will be introduced to the House as soon as possible—as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The hon. Lady asks about county councils. She will appreciate that under this Government, since 2010, we have seen in real terms, taking into account inflation, a decrease in council taxes, and in non-real terms—in headline terms—some of the lowest council tax rises since council tax was introduced. This year, the cap has been lifted to 3% to take inflation into account, and that is important.

On my own county council, Northamptonshire, the hon. Lady will be aware that there are particular concerns around the way that budgets and finances have been managed there, and that is subject to an investigation by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is now in hand.

The hon. Lady invites me to celebrate the oldest language—the Welsh language. I am delighted to do that, and proud that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales is himself a Welsh speaker. We could probably drag him to the Chamber to sing to us, or something of that sort. However, he might require prior notice, and he might be very cross with me for even suggesting it.

Finally, the hon. Lady talked about “deeds, not words”. I think she should celebrate the fact that the UK was one of the first countries in the world to introduce mandatory gender pay gap reporting, which will quickly become a reputational issue for companies. McKinsey & Company, the consulting firm, estimates that closing the gap would add £150 billion to the economy by 2025. I am pleased to tell the House that the gender pay gap among full-time workers is the narrowest that it has ever been, but we are committed to eliminating it entirely.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As usual, a great many Members are seeking to catch my eye, and I shall do my best to accommodate their interest. However, I must remind the House that there are no fewer than three Government statements and two Select Committee statements to follow these exchanges, before we even reach the debate that is due to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee and the debate that will follow that, so there is a premium on brevity from Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike. If colleagues have scripted screeds as prefaces to questions, may I very politely suggest that they abandon those scripted screeds? Let us just have the pithy questions.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on banning UK tour operators from advertising and selling rides on Asian elephants? Those wonderful animals are often abused when in training, and I am sure that no UK visitor would want to condone that.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend has raised a question that is of huge interest to the United Kingdom, a nation of genuine animal lovers. I am proud of the fact that we have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We do not believe that changing the law in the UK would make a significant difference, but we absolutely agree that making people aware of the situation and allowing them to judge for themselves is likely to result in UK tourists’ addressing the problem with their feet.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the week after the recess.

After all sorts of attempts by the Government to keep the figures for their Brexit concealed from the British public, we now know the true costs of their disastrous plans for the nations and regions of the UK, and my nation’s economic growth is to take a hit of up to 9% to pay for their chaotic cluelessness. Scotland does not want their Tory hard Brexit—Scotland did not vote for their Tory hard Brexit—but here we are, tethered to a dysfunctional Titanic as it careers haphazardly towards the abyss. May we have a debate on these national and regional breakdowns, and design a solution that will at least protect Scotland from the worst of this madness?

May we also have a debate about coups and how to achieve them? Over the weekend, we were presented with the prospect of the “dream team” of Boris, Rees-Mogg and Gove, which sounds like a bad remake of a film: “Three Men and a Brexit”. For most of us, it was possibly our worst nightmare, or something designed to keep the kids awake at night. How much longer must we endure this Tory civil war, and will the Leader of the House accept my offer to supply peacekeepers to ensure that it is conducted properly?

When we return, we will have our new estimates debates. For the first time in recent political history, we will actually debate estimates on estimates day. What a novelty that will be! The one piece of departmental spending that we urgently need to address is the billion-pound bung to the Democratic Unionist party, as the House has never debated it and never had a chance to give its verdict. Does the Leader of the House agree that the new estimates debates will provide the ideal opportunity for a debate and vote on that subject?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his series of questions. He asked first about the economic analysis of the impact of Brexit on different parts of the United—United!—Kingdom. He will be aware that a room in Parliament Street has been made available to Members who wish to look at that analysis. He will also be aware that it was early analysis, and had not been seen by Ministers.

The hon. Gentleman talked about coups. For a moment I thought he had said “cows”, and wondered where we were going with that. I can assure him, and all other Members, that the Government are working together to make leaving the European Union a success, both for the United Kingdom and for our 27 EU friends and neighbours. I share his delight at estimates being debated and being announced in the future business, and at the efforts of the Liaison and Procedure Committees to resolve the timing of those with the Backbench Business Committee.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about additional funding for Northern Ireland. In recognition of the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, we have committed to make available £50 million of the funding set out in the agreement in this financial year for health and education, but we continue to want to see the financial support set out in the agreement decided upon and spent by a restored Executive in Northern Ireland.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) is no doubt having a most illuminating private conversation, but it must not be to the detriment of a pertinent inquiry from the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair); the hon. Gentleman can always witter away outside the Chamber if he is so inclined.

Kirstene Hair: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House agree that, while income tax is devolved to the Scottish Government, we in this House should debate the impact the Scottish National party’s tax hike will have on armed forces personnel and how that will reduce the demand for postings in Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I commend her for standing up for her constituents and raising an important point. Over the coming months, the Ministry of Defence will be reviewing the impact of this latest decision by the Scottish Government, but she is right to point out that, in accordance with the legislation, all those who are identified as Scottish taxpayers by HMRC will continue to be issued with the appropriate tax code and so must have Scottish income tax applied on their earnings.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the confirmation that the estimates day debates will take place on the 26th and 27th. The subject
of those debates is in the hands of Members of this House and applications have to be made to the Backbench Business Committee by next Friday, the 16th, in order to determine which departmental estimates will be debated, so I say to Members, “Please, it’s in your hands. Make those applications.”

I am also aware, Mr Speaker, that today we will be very pressed for time. May I humbly suggest that we withdraw the pre-recess Adjournment debate and devote the whole time to the divisible motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth)?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry that time for the Backbench Business debates has been reduced today, but the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it is important that the House is able to question Ministers on some of the very important issues in today’s statements and urgent questions. I will always consider requests for the protection of Backbench Business time, and I was pleased to be able to protect time for the Backbench Business debate on Tuesday this week.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that we will not have American-style industrial factory farming in this country, yet in my constituency there is an application to have 540,000 chickens slaughtered every 42 days. That is unacceptable. May we have a debate in this House on industrial-scale factory farming? Would you allow me, Mr Speaker, to bring in a cage with the chickens in it to demonstrate the appalling conditions they have to live under?

Mr Speaker: No cage, no chickens—at any rate in the Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. As I have said, we have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, including for the way chickens are reared. However, he raises an important and concerning point and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that a DEFRA Minister can come to respond.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Having heard the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) chuntering from his seat, let us hear him on his feet.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): First, may I apologise for my earlier excitement?

May we have a debate on crime statistics? In Nottinghamshire, the latest crime statistics show a 29% year-on-year increase. The Prime Minister yesterday just said that that was because of the different way this was recorded. In Nottinghamshire, we believe it is due to police cuts and many of the other changes that have been made. There is an urgent need for that to be clarified.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about policing and crime statistics. He will be aware that, overall, traditional crime is continuing to fall—by almost 40% since 2010. It is also the case that the recording of crime is improving and more people than ever before feel able to come forward to report crimes such as domestic violence. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman is right to raise that specific issue. It is important that communities are able to do more to help themselves. That is why we have awarded £765,000 to community groups and more than £280,000 to community projects that are specifically working on ending gang violence and exploitation. There is much more to do, but across all areas of rising crime the Government are taking action to try to get on top of it and reduce it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Every two minutes, a child dies of malaria in this world. May we have a statement or a debate in the Chamber on what we are doing to combat this dreadful disease, and on the opportunities to promote its treatment around the world at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April?

Andrea Leadsom: We all share the desire to see malaria stamped out, and other insidious diseases, particularly those affecting children in poorer regions of the world. My hon. Friend might like to seek a Backbench Business debate in order to share views with colleagues across the House.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on old toll bridges and the traffic chaos they cause? The Warburton toll bridge in my constituency is causing traffic jams on all the surrounding main roads, for the sake of a 12p toll. The Department for Transport seems to hold no data on the impact of these bridges. Is it not time we debated that and abolished these 19th century tolls?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the hon. Lady’s frustration because I have had my own experience of toll roads and queues going down the street for the sake of 5p or 10p. I encourage her to raise the matter at departmental Question Time because I am sure that, if she persists, Ministers will look into it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Unlike the Scottish National party spokesman, my constituents are optimistic about post-Brexit Britain. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate, in Government time, when a Minister from every Department, including the Treasury, can come to the House and outline the advantages of Britain leaving the EU? We would need at least a full day.

Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend would expect, I share his enthusiasm for the United Kingdom’s prospects outside the European Union. He certainly might like to put that to every Department in Question Time.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): As the Leader of the House might be aware, there are widespread concerns over the outsourcing of probation services to community rehabilitation companies, many of which are facing financial difficulties. I am aware of one serious case in my constituency where a violent offender was released without a risk assessment by the CRC. May we please have a debate or a statement on the future of outsourcing probation services to CRCs?
Andrea Leadsom: This is a very important area. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that our reforms to probation mean that we are now monitoring 40,000 offenders who would previously have been released with no supervision at all. That is a positive change for public safety. Overall, community rehabilitation companies have reduced the number of people reoffending. If she has a specific constituency case, she might like to raise it directly with the Department.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I very much support what my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said. May we have a debate on the status of recommendations made by trust special administrators—in my case for the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust? That report—the cost was £20 million—was accepted by the Secretary of State for Health and it made a lot of recommendations that are really important for my constituents, but we are seeing some erosion of them, despite the best efforts of the trust that took over Mid Staffs to implement them. It is absolutely vital that my constituents know that those recommendations are firm and will continue.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has always championed his constituents and, in particular, been a strong advocate for improvements to his local hospital. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can hear directly from the Department of Health.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In a written statement, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy recently announced the creation of the Office for Product Safety and Standards. Please may we have a debate so that we can better understand the Department’s responsibilities, especially around counterfeit electrical goods sold online and, of course, electrical white goods?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, and we have heard several times about the problems with counterfeit goods. If she wants to write to me, I can raise the matter directly with the Department, or she could seek an Adjournment debate to raise it directly herself.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): An important piece of legislation for the post-Brexit world is the immigration Bill, but recent statements from the Home Secretary would suggest that there has been some back-sliding on its potential timescale. Will the Leader of the House tell us when we can expect to see this important Bill before the House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend should rest assured that we are determined to make a success of leaving the European Union, and all the legislation that is necessary to ensure that that is the case will be brought forward as soon as it is required.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My constituent Helen Hill’s husband was murdered in 2002, and his killer was released after 10 years. Helen has recently been told that his supervision may stop four years on from his release and she has started an online petition calling for the supervision of murderers to be kept in place in for life. May we have an urgent debate on the supervision of murderers?

Andrea Leadsom: I am truly sorry to hear about that. I can well imagine that that is a difficult situation for the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. He will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice is reviewing the Parole Board’s processes, and I am sure that there will be further updates to the House in due course.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Members will no doubt share my admiration for the way in which Scottish rugby legend Doddie Weir has reacted to his motor neurone disease diagnosis. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on MND and join me in congratulating everybody in Kelso who raised £250,000 last week to help deal with this terrible disease? I also remind Members that I am running the London marathon to raise money for Doddie’s foundation and to combat MND—any donations will be welcome.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to support my hon. Friend and all other hon. Members who are mad enough to take part in the London marathon. I share his admiration for the manner in which Doddie Weir has reacted to his MND diagnosis. It is a terrible disease, and we should do everything we can to support work on it. I congratulate everyone involved in the Tartan Giraffe Ball, which sounds fascinating—I would love to see the photos.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In her opening remarks, the Leader of the House mentioned that it is Children’s Mental Health Week. I am working with the Royal Society for Public Health to establish a specific all-party parliamentary group on child mental health and the links with social media companies, including the impact that social media has on mental health. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate that focuses specifically on child mental health and the impact of social media?

Andrea Leadsom: I genuinely commend the hon. Gentleman for sorting out that APPG. It is such an important matter. We are seeing a spike in young people with problems that are attributed to the use of social media. We are putting a record £1.4 billion into children and young people’s mental health, and a record 1,440 children’s mental health beds are available. We are also training staff in secondary schools in mental health first aid. There is a lot more to do, but I commend him for his contribution.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Many local government problems have been laid bare this week and, as the Leader of the House knows, I have warned week in, week out about such problems. May we therefore please have time in the Chamber for a debate on the problems within local government—not just in my area, but throughout England and Wales?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that there was a debate yesterday on local government funding, and there are regular opportunities to raise matters of
local government in the House. If he feels that a further debate is important, May I encourage him to seek a Backbench Business debate?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): In my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on off-patent drugs, I have been proud to contribute to the working party on this issue over the past two years. The drug repurposing report produced by that group is now on the desk of the Minister in the other place, the noble Lord O'Shaughnessy. When can we have a statement from the Government on the report's recommendations?

**Andrea Leadsom**: If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me on that point, I can find out from the Department and get back to him.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Following the debate in this Chamber last week on High Speed 2, will my right hon. Friend consider a further debate on statutory compensation not just for HS2 but for other major infrastructure projects of national importance?

**Andrea Leadsom**: Mr Speaker, I am sure that both you and I would support such a debate. My Friend might wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise her particular concerns with Ministers.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can we have a statement on the failure of the Financial Conduct Authority to release its report on the Royal Bank of Scotland’s mistreatment of small businesses?

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise how small businesses were treated by the big banks during the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis and subsequently. He has now raised the issue in this place, and I suggest that he seeks an Adjournment debate if he would like further action so that Ministers can respond directly.

**Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Can we have a debate on what we can do to encourage more women to stand for public office? That is particularly apt as we commemorate the first women getting the vote 100 years ago.

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend is right that, 100 years after the first women got the right to vote, we have made huge progress in advancing women’s rights, but he is also right that there is a long way to go. Vicious and personal online abuse has no place in our public life. We can make a real difference to people’s lives if only we try hard.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Can we have a debate on family businesses? Earlier this week we celebrated Scottish family business day, and two of the five oldest family firms in Scotland are in my Moray constituency: Johnstons of Elgin, which was established in 1797; and Christies of Fochabers, a garden centre established in 1820. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating these two Moray firms on their contribution to the local economy and on what they do for our local area?

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend is always a great champion for his constituency, and I am proud to tell him that I own a Johnstons jumper. The British Business Bank is supporting more than £276 million of finance to more than 3,000 small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland. Additionally, the start-up loans programme has delivered more than 3,000 loans, worth more than £20 million, in Scotland. There is much more to do, but he is a great champion for all those small businesses.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I recently held my first jobs and apprenticeships fair in Dewsbury, and it was attended by more than 300 people and many businesses, but too often young people in towns such as mine feel that there is a lack of opportunities at home and that the only alternative is to move to the big city. Can we have a debate on how we can nurture talent in Britain’s small and very proud towns?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I am delighted that the hon. Lady is supporting apprenticeships, as many of us in this Chamber do in our constituencies. I take every chance to recommend to colleagues that they get an apprentice for their parliamentary office. I have had an apprentice in each of the last seven years, and it has been brilliant for me and for them. This is an important issue across all our towns. There have been more than 3 million apprenticeships since 2010, and there is much more to do. We should all combine forces to improve these life opportunities for young people.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): May we have a debate on the progress made on house building and the further action needed to build the number of homes we so urgently need in this country?

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. He will be pleased to know that this week the Prime Minister chaired the inaugural meeting of the housing implementation taskforce to talk about the progress we are making and what more action is needed. More than 217,000 additional homes were delivered last year—the highest level we have seen in all but one of the past 30 years. That takes us to more than 1.1 million extra homes in England since 2010. There is more to do, but there has been good progress.
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Activists in Honduras have been targeted with a wave of surveillance, intimidation and violence. Last year, as we found out last week, the UK—for the first time ever—approved the sales of interception equipment to the Honduran Government. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement from the Secretary of State in this House about how the consolidated criteria on arms sales might have been breached by the sales to their sister party, which organised a coup in 2009, and has killed 100 lawyers since then and 50 Opposition members in the past year—their sister party?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that will be of concern to many Members in this House. He is right to do so and he might want to seek an Adjournment debate, but what I can say to him is that we operate one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world and a licence will not be issued where there is a clear risk that items to be licensed might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May we have a statement or a debate on the benefits of switching energy supplier and how we can and should encourage even more consumers to switch?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important question for many people in this country. I am glad to tell him that there has been good news. Since 2010, the number of energy suppliers has gone from 13 to more than 60 and 7.8 million energy switches took place in 2016, an increase of nearly 1.7 million on 2015. That means that customers are saving an average of around £308 by switching from a standard variable tariff offered by the big six. He will be aware of our commitment to bringing forward an energy price cap Bill, and that will happen in the near future.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Christine Lilley of Kilmarnock, has received confirmation from the Department for Work and Pensions that from now on it will cover her mortgage interest as a loan against her property. May we have a debate about the impact of this policy, the stress it is causing and the utter madness that could see people feeling forced to sell their homes and claiming more money on housing benefit than their mortgage interest relief would cost the Government?

Andrea Leadsom: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I recently had a constituent come to me to discuss this issue. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, the reality for many is that there is significant value in their property. It is important to be fair to taxpayers as well as to those who need support in meeting their mortgage costs.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady say what she has done in her role as Leader of the House to satisfy herself of the accuracy of reports into the economic impact of Brexit produced by civil servants? Will she make a statement on what she is doing to prevent Ministers from attacking the motives of the civil servants who produce those reports?

Andrea Leadsom: I simply do not accept that people are attacking the credibility of those reports. What Government Members and Members from across the House quite rightly say is that economic forecasts are independent but nevertheless often subject to views and inputs as to the economic models used, and that they are therefore not an exact science and are often wrong. We need only look at the out-turn of economic forecasts in the past to see that they are not always accurate. In direct response to the hon. Gentleman’s question, however, he will be aware that a room is made available in Parliament Street for hon. Members who wish to see for themselves the economic forecasts to which he is referring.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate on UK Visas and Immigration decision-making processes? This morning, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and I heard of a group of young Malawians who have been denied visas for this country on the basis of their not presenting birth certificates. They have not done so because many people in Malawi do not have birth certificates, but their sponsors have a flawless record of bringing people over. Will the Leader of the House look into that case urgently, and may we have a debate in Government time on the failures of UKVI?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue for his constituency, as he often does. I am sure that if he raises the matter directly with Home Office staff, they will look into it for him.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The remains of Royal Navy sailors who died serving our country on board HMS Exeter and HMS Electra are being buried in shallow mass graves in East Java in Indonesia. The Dutch Government are acting in support of the Dutch sailors from warships lost in the same actions, but the UK Government are not. May we have an urgent debate on this issue to make sure that we are taking every step to at least re-bury our fallen sailors with the dignity and respect that they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point and I am very sympathetic to what he says. He might be aware that we have Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on 20 February—the first day the House will sit after the recess—when he might wish to raise the matter with Ministers directly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 2 January 2018, Mr Hamed bin Haydara, a follower of the Bahá’í faith, was sentenced to death in Yemen for his religious beliefs. Formal charges against him included trying to incite Yemenis to leave Islam and embrace the Bahá’í faith. The sentence represents a clear violation of Mr Haydara’s right to freedom of religion or belief and is part of a worrying trend in the treatment of all Bahá’ís in Yemen. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning issue of freedom of religion. He will be aware that the House fully supports freedom of religion and is totally against depriving people of their human
Mr Speaker: We have made timely progress, so if the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) wants to come in, he can, briefly.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thank you for the opportunity, Mr Speaker, but my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) raised the case in his question. I would add, though, that that case is urgent, with the exchange visit due to take place next week, so I would certainly appreciate it if the Leader of the House would look into it urgently.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and alacrity. I hope that he is content.

11.52 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I am pleased to announce the publication today of the report on an independent complaints and grievance policy.

In this week of celebrating 100 years of women’s suffrage, it is right that we recognise the bravery of those in the suffrage movement and praise the great strides we have taken in our politics and our society over the past 100 years. But we are also all too aware of the unacceptable level of intimidation and aggression being shown towards people in public life, often directed particularly at women, BAME and LGBT+ candidates. Such behaviour clearly deters people from entering politics and threatens our democracy. When dealing with this very real issue, our Parliament must lead by example.

The working group was set up last November by the Prime Minister, with the support of all party leaders, in response to the very troubling allegations of sexual harassment and bullying taking place on the parliamentary estate. We all recognised the need for robust procedures to change the culture in Parliament and for this place to set the best example of a workplace that protects and supports all those working in it.

In my first statement, I said that urgent interim action would be taken, and that was the case. The staff helpline was extended to include staff of peers and others, with face-to-face counselling made available on the estate; party codes of conduct were updated and published online; and since Christmas, interim human resources guidance has been made available to Members’ staff. Nevertheless, it was clear from an early stage that there was a substantial amount to do if we wanted to create a sound working environment that properly supports the more than 15,000 people who work for or with Parliament.

I am hugely grateful to all members of the working group for giving their time, consideration and indeed patience as we worked towards the publication of this report. You were clear, Mr Speaker, that for the House Commission to take up the new scheme, the response had to be cross-party. Although there have been some challenging discussions, I am pleased that that is what we have been able to achieve.

The group took extensive evidence, both in person and in writing, from a wide variety of stakeholders, including parliamentary officials, staff of MPs and peers, unions, academics, authorities on sexual violence and legal professionals. The group also conducted its own survey, which was open to a wide range of people and included a number of passholders who had not previously been asked for their experience of bullying and harassment.

Many people have devoted a considerable amount of time to this matter over the past three months and, after more than 100 hours of discussion, consultation and consideration, we have proposed a set of policies that will fundamentally change the working culture in Parliament. I would like to turn now to those proposals.
First, Parliament will agree a shared behaviour code, which will apply to everyone on the estate or engaged in parliamentary business regardless of location, and will underpin the new policy. It will be consulted on, and will make clear the behavioural expectations of everyone in the parliamentary community. Secondly, the new complaints and grievance procedure will be independent of political parties.

Thirdly, it was acknowledged that sexual harassment and sexual violence are different from other forms of inappropriate behaviour such as bullying and intimidation. Therefore, separate procedures will be agreed for those looking to raise a complaint regarding sexual harassment, and for those with a complaint of bullying. This is an important distinction and, although everyone has acknowledged the severity of complaints of sexual harassment, evidence from staff made it clear that instances of intimidation and bullying are in fact more prevalent. Fourthly, MPs’ staff require proper HR advice—something that has previously been lacking and will go a long way to helping to resolve workplace grievances.

Importantly, the new system will be based on the principles of equality; be confidential and fair to all parties; be in line with the laws of natural justice; and command the confidence of all those who use it. The working group took advice at an early stage that, rather than reinventing the wheel, we should work with, and build on, the many sound processes and systems already in place.

For the benefit of Members, I turn briefly to the process for making a complaint or raising a grievance against a Member of this House. As colleagues will appreciate, the process for raising complaints against other members of the parliamentary community—such as peers, Members’ and peers’ staff, journalists and contractors—will differ according to their particular role. All the procedures are designed for the protection of staff and parliamentarians alike and have fairness at their heart.

It is intended that the House authorities will procure two independent services: one to consider allegations of sexual harassment and violence, and the other to consider workplace bullying and intimidation. Both avenues will provide support and, where needed, will investigate the complaint. Where informal resolution is not possible and the complaint is upheld, it will be referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in the case of a Member of this House. The working group proposes that the commissioner’s role will be expanded and reformed. She will have access to legal advice, and will be able to impose a new range of lower-level sanctions that may include a written apology, mandatory training or future behaviour agreements.

The commissioner will be able to review any finding by the independent investigator, and where she does so, she will ensure that her investigations are also strictly confidential, that both the complainant and alleged perpetrator have access to all evidence, and, crucially, that each has the right to representation or to represent themselves. Those measures will ensure fairness.

In the most serious of cases, the commissioner will refer her findings to the Committee on Standards. The Committee will be able to recommend to the House that an individual is suspended, and the House will vote on the recommendation. It is through this route that the existing Recall of MPs Act 2015 could be invoked. The trigger for recall will remain the same as it is now, and there is no plan for changes to primary legislation.

The working group fully recognised the fact that those who work in this place are often in the media spotlight, and that vexatious and malicious complaints are a risk. The new procedures will therefore ensure that checks and balances are in place to guard against such complaints.

I will now briefly outline the next steps. A motion will be brought before the House and a debate will take place in the first two weeks after recess. Any necessary equivalent steps will be taken in the other place. It will then be for the House of Commons Commission to instruct the House authorities to finalise the agreed processes and carry out their implementation.

I am grateful to the Clerk of the House for confirming that the House authorities are ready to begin this work via a series of workstreams that will include, first, developing and consulting on a behaviour code for Parliament; secondly, procuring the two separate services required to support and investigate complaints of sexual harassment or bullying; thirdly, procuring an HR guidance service for Members’ staff; fourthly, developing a staff handbook for Members’ staff; and fifthly, identifying and drafting changes to Standing Orders to finalise necessary amendments to the procedures of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Committee on Standards.

The working group will continue as a steering group to monitor the work of the House authorities. It is our intention for the work to proceed at pace over the next few months. Finally, six months after the start of the new scheme, an appropriate body—covering both Houses and having direct staff representation—will review the operation of the new processes.

In conclusion, the working group was formed to bring about change. It is a right, not a privilege, to be treated with dignity and respect at work. This ambitious report is a major step towards a safer, more professional environment. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members across the House will welcome the report, which I am confident will ensure that our Parliament is among the best in the world, demonstrating our commitment to equality, justice and fairness. I commend this statement to the House.
investigated elsewhere. Paragraph 31 provides that there will be support services, emotional guidance and other guidance, including advice on processes. Paragraph 32 outlines the confidentiality arrangements.

The informal and formal stages of the new sexual harassment policy and procedure are outlined in paragraphs 50 to 61, in chapter 3. Complaints handled by a specialist trained sexual health advisor are outlined in paragraph 54. There will be a separate process for bullying and harassment policy procedures, which is outlined in paragraphs 62 to 75, in chapter 4. The HR advice service that is to be up and running for the staff of MPs and peers will be procured as discussed in paragraph 74. There will also be cultural change training, as outlined in paragraph 79, because some people may not know what unacceptable or acceptable behaviour is. Chapter 7 outlines possible sanctions, and paragraph 92 sets out the timeframe in which the work will proceed. The estimate for the completion of all workstreams is roughly three months.

Members should note that staff supporting the working group have had to deal with their own work as well as this unusual way of working. I am pleased that a formal secretariat will be set up that is dedicated solely to implementing the recommendations, so staff do not have to cover their other posts and this one.

Dr Helen Mott was a gracious and knowledgeable adviser to the working group. The report says that any legal advice that is requested will be from a senior lawyer, but I would suggest that it should be at QC level. The expertise of ACAS should also be accessed. Our survey response showed a 17% return—lower than expected. However, further work may usefully consider ongoing surveys to test the robustness of the procedures.

The Leader of the Opposition has read the whole report and he, too, passes on his thanks to the staff for their hard work.

This is a much better report than the draft that was available before Christmas, as the Leader of the House has kindly acknowledged previously. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who is in her place, was keen to have flowcharts so that we could work out the procedure. There is a reference to that, and they may be forthcoming later. In the report before Christmas, there was no reference to the independent sexual harassment adviser, and that could have been lost. There is a body of work to be done, and I am grateful to the House authorities for ensuring that this work will continue. I know that it will be in capable hands.

Everyone in Parliament must be able to work together co-operatively, respecting the expertise of the House and balancing our responsibilities as elected representatives in a safe, secure and constructive workplace so that everyone, including our constituents and the staff of this House, can benefit from working for the common good in this extraordinary place.

Andrea Leadsom: I continue to be grateful to the hon. Lady and to her colleague, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for their contribution to the formulation of what I think will be a game changer for Parliament. They have both been stalwarts, as have all the other members of the working group. It has been an extraordinary and very concentrated piece of work, and I think we can all be proud of it.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I pay tribute to the staff of the House and of the Cabinet Office, who, as the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) says, really gave of their time, with their day job still to be done. I would love to name them all, but I think they know who they are. They have done a fantastic job. I also pay tribute to my own team who support me in the Leader of the House’s office. It is a small but rather excellent team. They are all seated in the Box, so I shall not look at them and embarrass them, but they have done a really superb job.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and to all the people who have been involved in the preparation of this preliminary report, particularly those who gave evidence, which really put the flesh on the bones. We need to ensure that the parliamentary estate is a complete no-go area for all harassment and bullying and is a safe place to work for everyone who enters into it.

As Members of Parliament, we all live our lives in a very public space. What protections will there be for people against malicious claims that are raised against them? More importantly, once a complaint is in train, how can we ensure that such complaints are dealt with and examined on a timely basis? We all know that some examinations of behaviours in this place can last literally for years and never reach a conclusion. It is only fair to the people who are being investigated that this is executed on a timely basis and adjudicated on in due course.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises two issues that were debated at enormous length within the working group. She will appreciate that much of the evidence that we took demonstrated the importance of putting the complainant at the heart of this procedure, making sure that we created a sufficiently safe space for people to feel that they could come forward with their complaint and not find themselves plastered all over the press. That was absolutely key.

By the opposite token, my right hon. Friend is exactly right: we do live in the media spotlight, so it is very often of great public interest when a complaint is made even if that complaint is subsequently not upheld. Part of the process, for the sake of both complainant and alleged perpetrator, is that the independent investigation will be held confidentially. It will be very important for natural justice that both sides can present their side of the story and that the independent investigator comes to a finding, which the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards can then review, should the alleged perpetrator require her to do so.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and congratulate her once again on the solid leadership she has offered to the working group and the immense patience she has demonstrated to get this report over the line. I do not think I have ever been involved in a process that has been subject to such scrutiny, review and rewriting, but we got there. I sincerely want to thank the secretariat, the staff of the Leader of the House and all the other staff who were involved in the report. They had to deal with many competing demands to ensure that we got this very good report.
This is a significant, substantial document, and it has managed to secure all parties’ support. It hopefully signals the beginning of the end of the poisonous patriarchal culture that has characterised so many of the relationships in this House. Victims of sexual harassment will now have a process to bring forward complaints independent of the political parties, which is perhaps the key feature of what has been designed and delivered today.

There is a clear road map for how complaints will be examined, with a range of solid sanctions in place to deal decisively with perpetrators. A shared behaviour code is also significant and to be welcomed, as are the proposals for training for all Members and measures to support staff, especially the HR support available to members of staff for the first time.

I have a couple of questions for the Leader of the House. Will she pledge to keep a cross-party approach, which has been so useful, with staff in place as a key feature of that? Can she tell us what will be available to ensure that everything in this document is implemented in good time?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I thank him and the Scottish National party for their unstinting support and determination to see this progress. He is right to raise the fact that we put aside any political differences.

I would like particularly to pay tribute to the staff members of the working group, who contributed in a totally constructive way to getting the right solution that is fair to both the complainant and the principles of natural justice. They gave their time unstintingly, and they too had day jobs to be getting on with. They have been superb, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is fully my intention for their contribution to continue to be a core part of the process as we complete the implementation. The report is clear about the areas in which staff representation will be necessary. He can rest assured that we will be working at pace and that the same members of the working group will remain involved, where they are able to do so.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I too would like to congratulate and thank everybody involved in this report, which is an amazing work to have produced over a short time. Every Member comes to this House with a different background. Will my right hon. Friend outline what training will be available to Members and whether it will be compulsory?

Andrea Leadsom: Training was another area on which the working group had lengthy discussions. I can see my friends on the working group inwardly groaning—“Not training again.” We discussed the need for extensive training to be made available. Of course, we were not just considering issues around complaints about sexual harassment and bullying. We were also dealing with issues raised by staff members about how to properly recruit someone, how to properly discipline someone, how to deal with conflict in the workplace and how to deal with complications between staff of different teams and people who come into contact with one another who do not necessarily have an employment relationship at all. We looked at many different areas.

There will be a comprehensive package of training on areas such as consent, unconscious bias and how to properly recruit, retain and discipline members of staff. Equally, there will be sanctions. Voluntary training will be made available, and there will be mandatory training from after the next general election. There will also be compulsory training by way of lower-level sanctions that can be imposed by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on Members of the House.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I join other hon. Members in commending the work of the Leader of the House and thank her for the way she has gone about it. Her approach has been very serious and committed but also inclusive, involving—right at the heart of the process and on an equal footing—the shadow Leader of the House and the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who have been able to consult and involve us in the process.

The right hon. Lady’s working group has been able to ripple the discussion widely. Of course, we all have an interest in ensuring that grotesque abuses do not happen in this House, that it is a safe and decent place to work and that any wrongdoing is called to account.

People have talked about the balance between a fair system for the complainant and a fair system for the person who is complained about. Obviously that is right. The media spotlight can be very harsh indeed on a Member of Parliament just on the basis of an accusation made, but it can also be very harsh on a complainant, and we have to bear that in mind. Timeliness is very important for an hon. Member against whom a complaint has been made, but it is also important for someone who has complained. I know that that has been at the forefront of the working group’s mind.

I appreciate the fact that the right hon. Lady has said this is a work in progress. She has established a response and a system and set up some processes, but it is very important indeed that she stays on the case, with colleagues across the House, to ensure that this actually works. I thank her for her work.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady. She has, over decades, shown her commitment to equality, fairness and justice in this place. I am glad to hear that she is pleased with the work we have put to paper. I assure her that I am committed to seeing this through, as I know are other members of the working group. It is absolutely our intention to put the complainant at the heart of everything we do. She is exactly right. I have heard separately from a number of people who have come to me with their concerns, knowing I was involved in this process. Often, those complainants’ stories have got into the media, and they have been hounded. That is a terrible situation for them to find themselves in, and we are determined that the new procedure will address that.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and the working group for producing a far-reaching and radical document that I hope the House and the other place will proceed with implementing, as they intend to. The report talks about a behaviour code for the whole of Parliament, which is a very comprehensive change. It also talks...
about a culture change in paragraph 82 and training. That underlines the shortcomings that the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs has advertised exist in our code of conduct, and the report requires changes to the House of Commons code of conduct.

I particularly commend the intention to set up a review body once all this is implemented. If I read the report correctly, that might be a joint committee of both Houses of Parliament, perhaps including lay members. Ultimately there has to be comprehensive oversight of this change and how it integrates with what we already have.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, for his Committee’s contribution. It made a very useful written submission with recommendations on the establishment of a joint committee, with staff representation, to review the workings once this system is up and running. I am very sympathetic to that idea, and the report indicates that we would like to see such a review take place once the new system has been up and running for six months. The behaviour code for all in Parliament, including visitors to this place, is designed to sit alongside existing codes and not to interrupt them. I look forward to working with him in consulting on the behaviour code.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): My Plaid Cymru colleague, the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—she could not be in the Chamber today, but she is a member of the working group—asked to be associated with my comments. We very much thank the Leader of the House for the way in which she has conducted this incredibly important inquiry.

I welcome this report, which is a potential game changer. The shocking figure that almost one in five people working in Westminster have experienced some form of sexual harassment is testament to the fact that the ongoing political culture is toxic. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need not only the consent of the complainant to have their privacy and confidentiality respected. It is a difficult area and we will need to find that fine balance. I am sure that it will end up being on a case-by-case basis, with very careful assessment by the independent investigator, who will of course have the right qualifications to be able to make that decision.

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Six or seven Members of the US Congress and Senate have announced their retirement after sexual harassment allegations. So far, none has done so in the UK Parliament and no political party has yet required people to either stand down or retire. Does the Leader of the House agree it is important that political parties do not hide behind these very welcome proposals in terms of their responsibilities? Will ongoing complaints be allowed to be retrospectively submitted to the new system?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that it is important to have ultimate sanctions. It is obviously for individual perpetrators to make a decision about whether to resign or retire, but it is absolutely the intention of the new procedure that they will and can be forced to do so, regardless of who they are and what their role is in this place.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s other point about historical or pre-existing allegations, this was another area the working group spent a considerable amount of time discussing. There is a specific complication with respect to continuing individuals liable to a procedure that was not in place at the time of the allegation. That complicates this somewhat. However, we will make sure that we are able to deal with the issues of historical allegations, even if they cannot be dealt with specifically by this new procedure.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I very much welcome the statement and appreciate all the work across the whole of the House that has gone into it. Can the Leader of the House confirm whether the new process is intended to cover all staff, including constituency staff, interns and perhaps even contractors?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes. The new procedure is designed to cover all the people who work in this place—all pass holders—and indeed those who work in our constituency offices, with the exception for the time being of House staff because they are already subject to the respect policy. We agreed some time ago, which protects them from issues of bullying and harassment. We have agreed with the House authorities that there will be consultation to consider whether all House staff should also come under this procedure in due course. To be specific, it will include contractors coming to this place, all those with
parliamentary passes, Lobby journalists, staff of Members and Peers and those who support all-party parliamentary groups.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am all for robust debate and even occasionally a witty heckle or two, but one of the worst forms of bullying in a playground is when a bunch of kids gang up on another child. That is sort of what we do every Wednesday afternoon in Prime Minister’s questions, is it not? When somebody we do not like is called, there are groans from Members on the other side of the Chamber, as if to suggest that they are less important than anybody else. We praise somebody from our own side and all too often the Whips on either side deliberately try to shout down people on the other side of the Chamber. If we are really going to tackle bullying, are we not going to have to tackle the whole culture of the way in which we do our business?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. This procedure seeks to change the culture in this place. We all have our own personal opinions about different activities—what is right and what is wrong—but what is very important is how the complainant feels. By having this independent procedure, it will be possible for an individual to go and talk to somebody to receive support and guidance and, where necessary, to have an investigation if it is felt that something is serious and needs to be addressed. Once we see the impact that that has on people—not necessarily Members of this place; it could be anybody who works on the parliamentary estate—and people start to see that there are consequences, that will change the culture in this place. My ambition is that, over time, we become the best example of how a Parliament treats all its staff and workforce with respect and dignity.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) knows, I deal with the manifestations of disorder at Prime Minister’s questions and on other occasions to the best of my ability. However, in noting what he has said, I can tell the House that I have raised the concern he has articulated with successive Chief Whips on both sides of the House. To say that the response has not been receptive would be an understatement. I call the Leader of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: Is that a question from you to me, Mr Speaker, because I had already replied to the hon. Member for Rhondda?

Mr Speaker: No. This is just a matter of putting on the record what is a matter of fact. As I say around the country, behaviour at Prime Minister’s questions is and on other occasions to the best of my ability. However, in noting what he has said, I can tell the House that I have raised the concern he has articulated with successive Chief Whips on both sides of the House. To say that the response has not been receptive would be an understatement. I call the Leader of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: Is that a question from you to me, Mr Speaker, because I had already replied to the hon. Member for Rhondda?

Mr Speaker: No. This is just a matter of putting on the record what is a matter of fact. As I say around the country, behaviour at Prime Minister’s questions will change when the Whips on each side want it to change. It is as simple and incontrovertible as that. If they want it to change and they say it must change, it will; if they do not, it will not. I can deal with the manifestations: I do, and I will. Whoever glares at me or waves at me, I could not care less—I will do what is necessary. Others must face up to their responsibilities.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I most sincerely thank the Leader of the House for her statement? I acknowledge the work that has been put in by the working group, including by my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson). I am delighted to hear that these policies will apply to constituency staff, some of whom work very far away from this place. How will this information be disseminated to those staff and will there be an opportunity for them to come to Westminster to be trained up?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for her absolute commitment to the success of the working group. She was also very diligent and very focused. I thought her outing on the “Today” programme this morning was brilliant and also rather funny. Colleagues will notice that there was a little sting in the tail.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there will be outreach to constituency offices. I assure him that there will be.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I warmly welcome the work done by the Leader of the House on this issue and I thank all hon. Members involved in the development of the report. The right hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) asked about confidentiality and the policing of anonymity. We have an investigative press in this country and people in this Palace talk. So I wonder how the Leader of the House intends to police and regulate the confidentiality of those who are victims and those who have been accused. I am sure there are newspaper editors who would argue that publishing the name of someone who has been accused would be in the public interest. It is important we get detailed information about how that should be policed.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right, and that goes to the heart of the challenge of ensuring that the complainant’s desire not to be all over the newspapers and social media is respected and upheld. The two services—one dealing with sexual harassment and the other with bullying and intimidation—will be independent and procured by the House authorities on behalf of the House, and they will have strict procedures for confidentiality. As would be expected, should those procedures be breached—for whatever reason—there would be severe consequences. Confidentiality will be a key part of that. Similarly, the working group proposes that the processes of the commissioner for standards should also be strictly confidential, and having met her, I am absolutely sure that she will uphold that need for confidentiality. My expectation is that all those involved in the investigatory process will uphold the need for complaint confidentiality.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, thank the Leader of the House. As the manager of the team, so to speak, she has delivered, together with the other hon. Members involved. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for her significant contribution. Will the Leader of the House say whether the mandatory training provided will also deal with non-sexual harassment and give not just MPs but our teams and staff guidelines on how to handle stress and react appropriately in highly pressured situations? How does the investigatory committee envisage that such training will take place?
Andrea Leadsom: First, I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for her contribution. She had a different perspective on this working group and she has been incredibly constructive all the way through. The hon. Gentleman mentions staff in this place. One key piece of evidence that we took is that staff feel a strong need for proper HR guidance to be made available to them. A number of issues were raised about members of staff who resign simply because they feel that they are not happy or not being treated well, and they do not know where to go. They recognise the risks of talking to the press or to their MP, and rather than cause a fuss they just leave. They are then left feeling dissatisfied and unhappy, and that can affect their job prospects elsewhere because they want to get a good reference and so on. It is important, right across the board, that staff are able to learn about their contractual rights through proper HR guidance, and that training is made available for all those who manage or supervise staff. Many MPs have a chief of staff or someone who manages an intern or an apprentice, and we must make training easily available—online as well as face to face—so that we support the desire among people in this place to professionalise our working environment.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. The next statement comes as a result of, and in response to, the exceptionally brave, persistent and unstinting pressure brought by the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). That point is known to many, but has just been acknowledged to me in the most glowing terms by the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Social Care. Therefore, when we come to questions, I will allow the hon. Lady some latitude in probing the Minister on a matter with which she has been extraordinarily closely involved.

Acute and Community Health

12.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the independent review of Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust, which was conducted for NHS Improvement by Dr Bill Kirkup and published today.

What happened to patients of Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust is, before anything else, a terrible personal tragedy for all families involved, and the report also makes clear the devastating impact on many frontline staff. On behalf of the Government I apologise to them, and I know that the whole House will want to extend our sympathies to every one of them.

As Mr Speaker correctly identified, I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). The people of Merseyside know only too well the cost of attempting to silence the victims and campaigners for those seeking justice. As the report makes clear, her personal commitment to get to the truth on behalf of the victims of Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust, her personal courage in asking difficult questions of those in senior positions within the NHS, and the persistence and precision of her search for accountability, are all vindicated today. We in this House, and across the wider health and social care services, owe her a debt. I also thank Dr Kirkup and his team for this excellent report. As with his report on Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, it is a clear, forensic, and at times devastating account of failures in the care of Liverpool Community Trust by its management, its board, and its regulators.

The report covers the period from the trust’s formation in November 2010 to December 2014, and it describes an organisation that was, “dysfunctional from the outset”. The consequences of that for patient care were in some cases appalling, and the report details a number of incidents of patient harm including pressure sores, falls leading to fractured hips, and five “never events” in the dental service—an incredibly high number for one organisation.

The failings of the organisation were perhaps most starkly apparent in the services provided at Liverpool prison, where the trust failed to properly risk-assess patients, including for nutrition and hydration, and it did not effectively manage patients at high risk of suicide. The review also identified serious failings in medicine management at the prison. There are many more examples of poor care and its impact on both patients and staff in the report, but what compounds the shock is the lack of insight into those failings displayed by the organisation at the time. This was the very opposite of a culture of learning, with incidents under-reported or played down, warning signals ignored, and other priorities allowed to take the place of patient safety and care for the vulnerable.

We have seen this sort of moral drift before, most obviously at Mid Staffordshire and Morecambe Bay. As with Mid Staffordshire, the management at Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust put far too much emphasis on achieving foundation trust status. The review states that,
[Stephen Barclay]

"the trust undertook an aggressive cost improvement plan, targeting a £30 million reduction over five years. This represented a cut in resources of approximately 22%. We were surprised that such an ambitious financial reduction was not scrutinised more closely—by both commissioners and regulators."

There is a direct line from the decision to pursue foundation trust status in that reckless manner to the harm experienced by patients. Indeed, an earlier report by solicitors Capsticks reported in March 2016 that the interim chief executive who took over from Bernie Cuthel found in her first week that

"there was an underspending by £3 million on district nursing. These teams were devastated because they weren’t allowed to recruit, some of them down to 50%".

This is a district nursing service in which Dr Kirkup reports that patients were experiencing severe pressure sores, up to what is clinically called grade 3. That was accompanied by many of the hallmarks of an organisation that has lost sight of its purpose. As Dr Kirkup states,

"the evidence that we heard and saw amply confirmed the existence of a bullying culture within the Trust, focused almost entirely on achieving Foundation Trust status. Inadequate staffing levels, poor staff morale and appalling HR practice went unheeded. This was the end result of inexperienced leadership that was not capable of rising to the challenges presented by the Trust."

Following the Mid Staffordshire report, Dr Kirkup recognises that steps have been taken to introduce independent, clinically-led inspection by the Care Quality Commission. The Government have also introduced the special measures regime within NHS Improvement. Alongside this, we have put in place a number of measures to create a wider culture of learning and improvement. The Secretary of State has offered a great deal of personal leadership in helping to create this culture, including the establishment of an independent chief inspector for hospitals, whom I met yesterday and spoke with again this morning, and the recent introduction of measures to support trusts to learn from deaths and to improve patient safety.

I am sure I am not alone in finding it astonishing that Dr Kirkup found there was a "small minority of individuals who refused to co-operate" with the review. I wholeheartedly agree with his view that "it remains the duty of all NHS staff to assist as fully as they are able with investigations and reviews that are directed toward improving future services".

All but one of the board of the Liverpool trust shirked their legal and moral responsibility to be candid about the organisation they governed. In large, complex organisations, responsibility and accountability are always distributed to some degree. It is the case that the higher up in an organisation someone is, the greater their degree of responsibility. In this case those individuals were Bernie Cuthel as chief executive and Frances Molloy as chair. It is clear from reading the report that they each must take a significant share of the responsibility for these failures.

Hon. Members will, I am sure, have noted the conclusion to the clinical governance section of the report, which highlights the responsibility of the trust for the system of clinical governance and its failures. It would appear from the report that while the former chief executive, Ms Cuthel, is now able to see that there were failures in clinical governance, she does not have as strong a sense of her own responsibility as one might expect. I understand that she is no longer employed in the NHS in England, but she does continue to hold a role working with the NHS in Wales.

In response to this report, the Government intend to take a number of actions. First, the Government accept the recommendations in full. While this was a report commissioned by NHS Improvement, I will write to all the organisations named in the recommendations set out at section six of the report, asking them to confirm what steps they will take to implement the recommendations, or to set out their reasons for not doing so. I will ensure copies of that response are shared with the Health Committee.

Secondly, one recommendation is specifically for the Department of Health and Social Care, as set out in paragraph 6.5 on page 64. This relates to a review of CQC’s fit and proper person test. I intend to discuss the terms of that review with the hon. Member for West Lancashire and will appoint someone to undertake that review within the coming days. I believe that review will need to address the operation and purpose of the fit and proper test, including but not limited to: where an individual moves to the NHS in another part of the United Kingdom; where they leave but subsequently provide healthcare services to the NHS from another healthcare role, such as with a charity or a healthcare company; where differing levels of professional regulation apply, such as a chief executive who is a clinician compared to one who is a non-clinician; where there is a failure to co-operate with a review of this nature and what the consequences of that should be; and reviewing the effectiveness of such investigations themselves when they are conducted. I will be pleased to hear the views of the hon. Member for West Lancashire, and those of the Health Committee, on these issues.

Thirdly, I have asked the Department to review the effectiveness of sanctions where records go missing in a trust, or where records appear to have been destroyed.

Fourthly, I have asked the Department for advice on what disciplinary action could be taken against individuals in relation to the findings of this report. Clearly due process needs to be followed, but it is important that we address a revolving door culture that has existed in parts of the NHS, where individuals move to other NHS bodies, often facilitated by those who are tasked with regulating them.

Fifthly, I will ask NHS Improvement and NHS England to clarify the circumstances under which roles were found or facilitated for individuals identified in the report as bearing some responsibility for the issues at the trust.

Finally, I have spoken with colleagues at the Ministry of Justice and confirm to the House that they intend to investigate the issues arising from this report in respect of HMP Liverpool specifically and the prison estate more generally.

All organisations and individuals make mistakes. Where this is used as an opportunity to learn and improve, we will do all we can to provide support. Where, however, there is any kind of blinkered denial of what has happened, Members of this House and the victims of that wrongdoing have a right to expect accountability. The hon. Member for West Lancashire
the report. The Government are acting in full on the findings of the Kirkup review in the House of Commons Library.

I am pleased that the Minister recognises concerns that managers responsible for these extreme failures can often go into leadership roles in other parts of the health service, or indeed for private providers to the NHS in another capacity. Will he advise the House how many people who refused to co-operate with the investigation are still employed in some part of the NHS? Is there anything in the existing terms and conditions or structures that can be used to require future co-operation? Is there any redress in existing policies and procedures that we can use against these people?

The report said that regulators were distracted by higher-profile services such as acute care. The Health Service Journal said today that oversight failures were partly attributable to organisational changes that were taking place under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, so what will the Government do to ensure that national priorities are not allowed to interfere with local oversight?

Finally, the report raises serious concerns about the quality of healthcare in prisons. HMP Liverpool still has significant challenges, and the new provider of the prison’s health service—the Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust—has just said that it cannot continue with the contract on the level of funding currently available. The Ministry of Justice will investigate these matters more generally, but will the Minister assure us that prison healthcare is properly supported and resourced in Merseyside and elsewhere across the country?

Paragraph 1 of the review’s findings sums up the devastating impact of these multiple failings:

“Staff were overstretched, demoralised and—in some instances—bullied. Significant unnecessary harm occurred to patients.”

In the unprecedented financial squeeze that the NHS currently faces, we need assurances from the Minister that patients and staff will come before finance and that today will be the last time we hear such a damning message about what is going on in our NHS.

Stephen Barclay: I thank the shadow Minister for his questions and the manner in which he put them before the House. His first key question was to what extent measures are in place to address this sort of issue, should it arise again. Post Francis, and following Sir Bruce Keogh’s review of 14 trusts with high mortality rates, a new regime has been put in place. There is a new chief inspector of hospitals, Professor Ted Baker, and a specific regime involving NHS Improvement, which commissioned this report. NHS Improvement has a new chair, Dido Harding, a very senior figure from the business community.

That regime has put 37 hospitals into special measures so far. The methodology that is used to alert regulators to areas of concern has also been revised. For example, far more importance is now placed on staff and patient surveys. However, it remains to be explained why a trust could pay so many compromise agreements, for example, in response to so many staff disciplinary issues. I assume that many concerns were raised by trade unions locally, as no doubt the hon. Gentleman is aware. We must also consider the extent to which earlier reports, such as the Capsticks report, raised concerns that should have been addressed. That is why, in my statement, I signalled my desire to look at those issues and ensure that they are addressed by the fit and proper person test in particular. As he will be aware, though, that test pertains only to...
[Stephen Barclay]

board-level appointments in the NHS, not to all roles. We will need to look at that scope, at the effectiveness of the investigation and particularly at the revolving door element of the problem, which he recognised.

Turning to the other issues that the shadow Minister raised, we clearly need to ensure that due process is followed. I do not need to remind the House of the difficulties of any enforcement against for instance, Fred Goodwin in financial services or Sharon Shoesmith in child services. People rightly expect due process, and all hon. Members would ask for that. The victims will rightly ask, “How can the chief executive, with this catalogue of issues, move within the NHS rather than be fired?” I know that the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) has many concerns about that as do the Health Committee and many other Members.

I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) in the spirit in which he raised these issues. We share concerns, and I know the House as a whole wants us to get to the heart of them.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I pay tribute to my colleague on the Health Committee, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). She is a remarkable parliamentarian and advocate for patient safety. All of us on the Committee look forward to working alongside her to examine in full the Kirkup report’s recommendations, and I welcome the Minister’s commitment to a review of the fit and proper person test.

On the wider issues that the report raises, it is clear that when staff and funding continue to be cut from community services, there are terrible consequences for patient care. Will the Minister assure the House that he and I welcome the Minister’s commitment to a review of the fit and proper person test.

On the wider issues, when these issues, move within the NHS rather than be fired?”

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to work with my hon. Friend on this. As she will be aware from reading the report, it is explicit that the finances were there for the existing service. That is stated at the outset of the report. What drove the problems was a wholly unrealistic attempt to seek foundation trust status, with a cost improvement plan that was simply undeliverable. There was a massive reduction, without any attempt to reconcile that with serious issues on staff levels and vacancies. As the report explicitly sets out, when staff raised those concerns, they were bullied, harassed and on occasion suspended without due cause. The culture has changed significantly, and measures have been put in place for how the regime involving NHS Improvement would address such issues and look at cost improvement plans.

On the extent to which the culture was driving the problems, I refer to the remarks I made in my statement. According to the report, the interim chief executive went in and found a significant underspend—£3 million—in the district nursing budget, at the same time as there were significant vacancies and patient harm. That culture was driving the issue, and that culture is what we need to put an end to.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Minister for early sight of his statement. I certainly echo his comments about our sympathy for the families and staff members who have been involved over the years. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), although the tenacity required from her perhaps sums up what is wrong with the present system.

On Dr Kirkup’s observations and recommendations, as the Minister has acknowledged, some individuals did not co-operate with the investigation. Is there therefore a case for a law change to prevent that from recurring in the future, or at the very least for employment and registration sanctions ultimately to be applied to such personnel?

On the fit and proper person test that the Government have pledged to undertake, will any agreed new standards be applied retrospectively to board members who are currently in place? Again, the Government have acknowledged the revolving culture, so it is important that the test is done properly. Will they review executive pay for chief executives and senior staff? After Mid Staffordshire and this, what will be done to properly protect whistleblowers in future to allow them to come forward?

Funding and resources are clearly really important. Dr Kirkup’s report lays bare the fact that the defining strategic objectives were foundation status and a £30 million saving, or a 22% reduction in resources, rather than the true goal of clinical quality. What will be done to ensure that regulators pick up on such contrasts in future, and what responsibility do the Government take for funding and the drive for efficiency savings?

Lastly, does the Minister agree that this situation confirms the failings of the trust system, and that any privatisation of the NHS and profit before care cannot be allowed under future free trade deals?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of important points, but particularly regarding whistleblowers. That was one warning signal that clearly failed here. The regulations have been changed, as he will be aware. In the past, there was a culture in which compromise agreements were applied with gagging clauses attached. That prevented visibility of the compromise agreements. That is why I asked, on receipt of the report, why the compromise agreements that were paid were not escalated to the board, and indeed what sight, if any, regulators had of those compromise agreements. Clearly financial payments will have been made, so there should be an audit trail.

The hon. Gentleman asked what changes had been made. An area on which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has placed a huge amount of importance, and in which he has given a huge amount of leadership, is patient safety guardians and ensuring that there are people in trusts tasked specifically with giving voice to patients. One of the many sensible pieces of advice that my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), gave me was that when visiting a trust, I should have a one-on-one meeting with that individual, not only because of their status within the trust but to gather information from them. He did so assiduously on all his visits.
The wider point is how, from a regulatory structure point of view, we can ensure that there are safeguards when there are cost improvement programmes and ask what visibility there is of them. NHS Improvement has set out a series of measures to ensure that trusts learn the lessons of Francis. Obviously the period covered by the report goes back as far as 2010, but it is important that the NHS learns from the issues that Dr Kirkup sets out.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I add my tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper)? She is a formidable parliamentarian and has done some very good work on this. The report is shocking. Back in March 2015, following other incidents, the Public Administration Committee produced a report investigating clinical incidents in the NHS, in which it recommended the setting up of the health service’s safety investigation branch. The Government have now published the draft Bill for that. When will it enter pre-legislative scrutiny, so that we can change the culture and have the open learning culture that we should have in our NHS, very much as is seen in the airline industry?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend raises an important point on the draft Bill and the consultation. I am not in a position to announce a date; that will be announced by business managers in the usual way.

My right hon. Friend is right to allude to that Bill as one of a suite of measures following Sir Bruce Keogh’s review and the Francis report, which are all part of changing the culture. I acknowledge the importance of those measures, but I want to signal to the House today that Dr Kirkup’s report identifies remaining issues that need to be tackled. He has done us that service, and that is where I am keen that we focus as a Government.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker. I do not intend to test your patience today by dealing with the details of these matters; I will do that through Adjournment debates, questions, the Health Committee and other mechanisms available to me.

I thank the Minister for his kind words and his comprehensive statement in response to the excellent work of Bill Kirkup and his team. I pay tribute to Dr Kirkup for his thoroughness and independence, and I thank him most sincerely, on behalf of the staff and the patients, and I want to place it on the record for everyone who is affected that I do not see the Kirkup report as the end—far from it. The Minister has a legal and forensic background. How will he assure the House that these matters will be dealt with properly, and that cover-ups and backdoor deals have ended once and for all? The Secretary of State has said so many times, “This will stop. We are not going to keep moving failed executives around,” yet it continues to happen.

I will say quite honestly that I asked a question of a Minister last year and he answered me in good faith. He said, “NHSI doesn’t participate in moving staff around.” Not only can we now prove that it is true that it does, but it nearly happened in the Wirral a few weeks ago. The message has got to go out: “If you do this kind of stuff, you are responsible. You will not escape.” The NHS must be accountable, and those in it held responsible.

Stephen Barclay: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments. As I said, I have asked NHS Improvement and NHS England to clarify the circumstances under which roles were found or facilitated for individuals identified in the report as bearing some responsibility for the issues at the trust. I await the answer to that central question, which the hon. Lady posed.

On the sense of cover-up, the Secretary of State has provided leadership in bringing about the culture change on patient safety. Following the awful situation in Mid Staffordshire, it was recognised across the House that changes needed to be made on patient safety, and I think the NHS itself has recognised that. NHS Improvement has new leadership, who commissioned the Kirkup report themselves.

On the changes that have been put in place, I alluded to the CQC regime and the chief inspector and the methodology. I spoke to the chief inspector yesterday. Every hospital has now been visited, using that new methodology, and obviously that programme will start to accelerate and target as further work visits are done. The methodology used for that has also evolved to include staff surveys, for example. So a number of measures have been taken, and the special measures regime is also very much at the heart of that.

A number of steps are being taken, but the approach that underpins those is that although we must create a duty of candour, enabling people to learn from the mistakes that will happen in an organisation employing more than 5 million people, there should not be the sense that people can escape their responsibility by moving within the system. I have discussed that with people in the NHS, and I believe there is a wide recognition that the culture has changed significantly. But clearly, as we consider the issues that emerge from the Kirkup report, the House will need to see further reassurance.
Stephen Barclay: Only one member of the board co-operated with the review, from which we can deduce that all the rest did not. Given that I am relatively new to the Department, it would probably be wise for me to seek clarification on the extent to which individuals should be named, but I am happy to confirm that the chair of the board did not co-operate.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the report shows that leadership really matters in our local NHS? What further steps can he take to ensure that hospital trusts fully understand the importance of transparency to clinical quality and patient safety?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we are increasing the number of doctors we train by 25%. We are also looking into how we can increase the number of clinicians in leadership positions in trusts, and how we can reduce variance. That is one of the key issues. The NHS has some brilliant leaders, but the variance between trusts is far too wide.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Given that health is devolved to the Scottish Government, Mr Speaker, you may wonder why I am asking this question. Will the Minister reassure me that the report will be shared with NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government, and secondly that, as and when senior appointments are made, there will be an ongoing, constructive and informed dialogue across the border? Now you will see why I asked the question, Mr Speaker.

Stephen Barclay: I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman, but he has raised an important point. The question of people moving within the United Kingdom is not the only issue; another potential issue is the question of people moving to a charity or a private company that is providing services for the NHS, or taking up other roles in the healthcare landscape.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): May I press the Minister a little further on his worrying suggestion that revolving doors are often facilitated by those who are tasked with regulating them? Will he also look at democratic accountability not just in the appointments of officials, but more widely in the NHS?

Stephen Barclay: I referred earlier to my desire to work on these issues with members of the Health Committee, who include my hon. Friend, and I shall be happy to look into the points that he has raised. The previous statement was about the culture in the House of Commons. I think that what goes to the heart of my hon. Friend’s question and the matters that we are discussing is that issue of culture, and the need for the culture in pockets of the NHS to change. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has done a great deal to bring about such change, particularly in respect of patient safety, but I shall be happy to work with my hon. Friend to take that further.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What lessons can be learnt by Liverpool Community Trust—and, indeed, by other underperforming trusts—from the successful turnaround of some 20 trusts under the Government’s new special measures scheme?
Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right: although 37 trusts have gone into special measures, a significant number have not just moved out of special measures, but moved from “room for improvement” to “good”. That is relevant to a much wider challenge in the NHS, whether it involves procurement, workforce planning, or mentoring for junior doctors. I met the family of a junior doctor last week to discuss mentoring and support, particularly for those in their first year out of medical college. Trusts have shown leadership on a number of issues, and I think that the special measures regime has shown the scope to spread that best practice much more widely across the system.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I agree with the Minister that it is vital for us to expose and tackle failings in the NHS, especially when they put people at risk of harm. Does he agree with me that this case highlights the fact that money is not always the only answer? Effective leadership and responsible management are also important.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right. I think that at the heart of Dr Kirkup’s findings was the conclusion that what drove these events was not money—and he made that point specifically in relation to the finance for the initial services—but the desire to seek foundation trust status, which led to a wholly unrealistic cost improvement plan and an unwillingness to address the issues that arose as a consequence.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I thank my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), for all the work that she has done on this issue.

As has already been said, it is important for the right culture to exist in our NHS. However, it is also important for those who compromise patient safety to be brought to book and punished, and for us to know what action was taken, because otherwise the same thing will keep happening.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right. Professor Ted Baker, the chief inspector of hospitals, has drawn attention one of Dr Kirkup’s findings, which is that the CQC is now in a much better position to challenge and fine those responsible for unsafe care and poor standards. That also reflects the excellent work that Professor Baker and his team have been doing to ensure that inspections become much more rigorous in identifying issues such as those that we have been discussing today.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am a member of the Justice Committee, which has taken a particular interest in Liverpool prison. Will my hon. Friend assure me that there will be a review of the suicidal potential of prisoners to ensure that the systems are right?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to allude to the importance of learning lessons, especially given that there are many vulnerable people in prisons, and given the risks that accrue as a result. Yesterday I spoke to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is responsible for offender management issues, and the Prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), visited Liverpool prison last week. I know that they have both taken a great interest in the report, and that they will take any further action that is needed.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend envisage an ongoing oversight role for Dr Kirkup that would enable him to help to put these failures right?

Stephen Barclay: I should be happy to discuss any such future opportunities with Dr Kirkup. His excellent report builds on the work that he did at Morecambe, and I think there is a huge amount for us to take forward from its findings.
State Pension Age

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement following the Opposition day debate on state pension age.

The decision to equalise the state pension age for men and women dates back to 1995 and addresses a long-standing inequality between men and women’s state pension age. This change was part of a wider social trend towards gender equality, but was also a decision, partly as a result of European and equality legal cases, relating to occupational pension provision.

During the Blair and Brown years, the then Government decided that a state pension age fixed at 65 was no longer affordable or sustainable. The Pensions Act 2007 introduced an increase in state pension age to ages 66, 67 and 68. The coalition Government brought in further changes under the Pensions Act 2011, which accelerated the equalisation of women’s state pension age and brought forward the increase in men and women’s state pension age to 66 by 2020. During the passage of this Act, Parliament considered a range of alternative options, resulting in a £1.1 billion concession that capped the maximum increase any woman would see in her state pension age at 18 months, relative to the Pensions Act 1995 timetable.

Many Members raised the issue of communications in the November debate. Since 1995, the Government have gone to significant lengths to communicate these changes. People were notified with leaflets, an advertising campaign was carried out and later individual letters were posted out. Those affected by the 1995 Act changes were sent letters informing them of the change to their state pension age between 2009 and 2011, with letters sent to 1.2 million women. Those affected by the Pensions Act 2011 changes were sent letters between January 2012 and November 2013, which involved sending over 5 million letters with an accompanying leaflet.

Life expectancy and state spending are what have driven these changes. Society has changed in countless ways since the 1950s and life expectancy is no exception. A girl born in 1951 was expected to live to 81, and a boy to 77. By 2018, the latest Office for National Statistics cohort figures show an increase of over 10 years for newly born girls and over 12 years for boys, to 92 and 89 respectively. Life expectancy at older ages has also gone up during this period and is projected to continue to increase in future years.

These welcome increases in life expectancy of course have implications for the state pension. As people live longer, they invariably also spend longer in retirement. Had we not equalised the state pension, women would be expected to spend over 40% of their adult lives in retirement, a proportion which would only continue to increase to 68 in 2037, justifying this on the increase in life expectancy. However, in the same week, the renowned expert on life expectancy, Professor Sir Michael Marmot, described how a century-long rise in life expectancy was “pretty close to having ground to a halt,” and had flatlined since 2010—in part, I have to say, the consequence of Government policy on austerity.

Any further transitional arrangement would come at great cost. The Government have considered many options and all of the proposals would be fraught with substantial problems, as well as financial ones. Any amendment to the current legislation which creates a new inequality between men and women would unquestionably be highly dubious as a matter of law. Causing younger people to bear a greater share of the cost of the pensions system in this way would be unfair and undermine the principle of intergenerational fairness that is integral to our state pension reforms.

Let me turn to some of the proposals from the debate. The Scottish National party seeks a full compensation package of at the very least the reverse of the 2011 Act. The SNP costed this at £8 billion, but that is a vast underestimate: it would actually cost the taxpayer over £30 billion and potentially even more. There is also no doubt that the Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Government the powers they need to address this issue. The Labour Opposition have made multiple suggestions, with many seeking the full compensation package of £70 billion. In addition, they have proposed in their manifesto keeping the state pension age at 66. That would cost over £250 billion, more than the Government’s preferred timetable by 2045-46. Payments on this scale are simply unaffordable and cannot be justified.

The key choice a Government face when seeking to control state pension spend is to increase state pension age or pay lower pensions, with an inevitable impact on pensioner poverty. The only alternative is to ask the working generation to pay an even larger share of its income to support pensioners. I believe that successive Governments have made appropriate but difficult decisions to equalise and increase the state pension age. A significant concession was made in 2011 so that no woman will see an increase to her state pension age of more than 18 months, relative to the 1995 Act timetable. To renege on our decisions and further increase costs to the public, especially the working population, would be unfair and unaffordable.

1.24 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for arranging to let me have sight of it earlier this morning.

The state pension for women born in the 1950s should be set in the wider context of the Government’s—uninspiring, I have to say—track record on pensions. Last July, the Government announced that they would be bringing forward the increase in the state pension age to 68 in 2037, justifying this on the increase in life expectancy. However, in the same week, the renowned expert on life expectancy, Professor Sir Michael Marmot, described how a century-long rise in life expectancy was “pretty close to having ground to a halt,” and had flatlined since 2010—in part, I have to say, the consequence of Government policy on austerity.

Since then, statisticians from the ONS have revealed that by 2041 life expectancy for men and women would be a year less than had been projected just two years previously. In addition the ONS has revealed that, although women continue to live longer in good health than men, their healthy life expectancy has decreased since 2009. Yet more evidence from Public Health England shows how deep inequalities in healthy life
expectancy remain. On average, people in the UK are now projected to live shorter lives than previously estimated. Does the Minister agree?

It is in this context that the Government are failing women born in the 1950s. This statement does nothing to address the pensions injustice these women face. The Government have had multiple opportunities to act, so why is the Minister again refusing to use the opportunity of a motion passed by this House to do so and to take further steps? It is unacceptable that we are having to make this same argument and raise the same points again because this Government continue to refuse to help these women, who are suffering and losing out due to the acceleration of the state pension age and lack of proper notice. This issue is not going to go away. Why do the Government continue to act as though it will? This statement is, sadly but not unsurprisingly, yet another example of the Government’s failure to give women born in the 1950s the dignity and respect they deserve. It is a missed opportunity to take real action.

We have all heard often heart breaking stories from many thousands of women affected by the changes about how the situation they face is one of desperation and fear of poverty. Christine in my constituency is 62 and is now having to wait until she is 66 to retire, with both her husband and her father having just died. In her words, “Not that cleaning jobs are a bad thing, but I have never done a cleaning job in my life and I am now having to do three cleaning jobs to make ends meet until such time as I can retire.” That is wrong.

It is to this Government’s shame that they refuse to recognise the very real basis for the fears of women such as Christine. What immediate measures will the Government take to address this appalling situation? Does the Minister understand how difficult it is for many women in their 60s to retrain and access decent work? What support will his Department offer these women—or will he repeat the bizarre proposal made from the Conservative Benches that they might take up apprenticeships?

As we have repeatedly set out, there are several immediate actions the Government could and should take, but time and again they have refused. Can the Minister explain why he refuses to offer women affected by Government changes to the state pension age the cost-neutral option to draw their state pension at age 64, as we have proposed? That would allow women who choose it to retire up to two years earlier.

The pension age is due to rise to 66 by the end of 2020. We reject the Government’s proposal to increase the state pension age even further. We will act by putting in place a new review of the pension age, specifically tasked with developing a flexible retirement policy that reflects the contributions people make, the wide variations in life expectancy and the arduous conditions of some work.

It is also right to extend pension credit to those who were due to retire before the increase in the pension age, which would benefit hundreds of thousands of women. Will the Minister look again at that proposal?

In conclusion, sadly, this statement does nothing to help women born in the 1950s. Actions are needed, not words, if the Government are to restore some of the faith and dignity that many people feel they have lost as a result of the Government’s refusal to act and to introduce proper transitional procedures. These are the women of Britain—the women who built this country. They deserve nothing less.

**Guy Opperman:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He seeks an independent review of the state pension age. Well, the Government did that last year. The Criddle review was independent of Government and it published its conclusion, just as the Labour party manifesto called for. The review’s findings supported the assertions that the Government have put forward.

The Labour party used to be financially credible, but sadly those days are long gone. The Labour party, under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, passed the Pensions Act 2007, which raised the state pension age. We now have the bizarre situation in which the Labour party manifesto states that the state pension age should not go beyond 66. In other words, it is going back on its own decision in 2007. Its credibility is sadly lacking.

The situation is further complicated by Labour’s reliance on Michael Marmot. The shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions keeps relying upon him, and the hon. Gentleman repeated that today. Michael Marmot made it very clear that “improvements in life expectancy at birth, which had been around a one-year increase every five years for women, and every three and a half years for men, have slowed since 2010 to a one-year increase every 10 years for women and every six years for men.” The point is that the increase is still going ahead; it might have slowed to a degree, but life expectancy continues to rise.

The Labour party agreed in 2004 that the ONS cohort figures should be accepted and then followed them thereafter. The ONS produced a report last December on life expectancy at birth, which found that in 50 years’ time, by 2066, cohort life expectancy at birth is projected to reach 98 years for females and 96 for males, a rise of over six years for both genders. In 2018 life expectancy at birth is projected to be 92 for women and 89 for men.

Let me touch briefly on the Fuller Working Lives strategy, which I am sad to say the Labour party seems no longer to support. There are 1.2 million people over the age of 65 in employment, which should be celebrated. It is entirely right that retraining might not be suitable for everyone, but it is also right that Governments of every hue should provide opportunities for those who wish to take those things up. For example, over the most recent nine-month period, the number of apprenticeship starts for people between the ages of 45 and 59 was 53,000, and for the over-60s it was 3,400. That means thousands of people taking opportunities for retraining. With respect, that should be supported.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind the House of the substantial business to follow, which is heavily subscribed. There is therefore a premium upon brevity, from Back and Front Benches alike—minimum preliminary comments; simply a focus on the question to the Minister.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I shall cut to the chase, Mr Speaker. What impact assessments have the Government carried out to assess the impact of their proposals on women born in the 1950s?
Guy Opperman: Multiple impact assessments were carried out, in 1995, 2007 and 2011, and obviously these matters were debated at great length in both Houses of Parliament, on an ongoing basis.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, although, frankly, it does not say very much that is new. The Government seem unable to accept that, irrespective of their policy of abstaining in Opposition day debates, there is a clear majority in the House in support of the 1950s women. Five Conservative Back Benchers and six Democratic Unionist party Members voted for the Scottish National party’s motion on 29 November, which is the second biggest rebellion in this Parliament. Rather than engaging in more bluster and buck-passing, the Government should be bringing forward proposals to address what the motion called for: “to improve transitional arrangements for women born on or after 6 April 1951 who have been adversely affected by the acceleration of the increase to the state pension age.”—[Official Report, 29 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 366.]

That is the will of the House, clearly expressed time and again.

It is not good enough for the Minister to wave a red herring and pretend that the Scottish Parliament could somehow resolve the situation. This is about reform of the pensions system, and the state pension age is reserved—the Scotland Act 2016 is very clear that the Scottish Parliament cannot make benefits by way of old age. In any event, it is not the job of the Scottish Parliament to clean up a mess made by the UK Government, and it is certainly not the job of Scottish taxpayers effectively to pay twice to mitigate the impact of Tory cuts.

If the Government continue to ignore this House and the voices of the 1950s women, they should get ready for further debates, questions, petitions and amendments to legislation, because this is not going away. This week we have been celebrating the suffrage campaign, and it is not by coincidence that the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women have chosen those colours for their campaign. The 1950s women have paid in, and it is time for the UK Government to do them justice and pay out.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that the Scotland Act 2016 gave a variety of powers, under sections 26, 28 and 24. Crucially, if an individual is of working age, they can be addressed with assistance by the Scottish Government—those are not my words; that was set out in crystal-clear detail on 22 June by Jeane Freeman, my opposite number in Scotland. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the SNP’s manifesto included a commitment to assess the impact of these changes and the options open to the Scottish Government with a view to providing support to these women. I suggest that the support is there. I have written to my opposite number in the Scottish Government, and the leader of the SNP at Westminster, saying, “Go ahead; the UK Government do not object to that in any way.” He should get on with it.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Minister will be aware of my support for local WASPI women in Moray, and indeed that I supported the Opposition motion that has brought forward this statement. Will he update us on the legal challenge being taken forward by Bindmans on behalf of women affected by these changes, because a number of Moray women are looking at that?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend will be aware that a legal challenge is being brought forward. I cannot comment on the outcome of it, but it will be resisted by the Government. We do not believe that it has merit. Clearly that is a matter for Bindmans and the WASPI women, but it will definitely be resisted.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am afraid that the Minister might have missed the point, never mind the anger of 1950s women. Today, in the constituency of my hon. Friend for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), there is a city-wide pensions roadshow. So many women are affected by the pension changes that demand has outstripped supply and not everyone can be let in. When will these women have answers and transitional arrangements?

Guy Opperman: With respect, this matter was debated at great length in 1995 and in 2007, under the Labour Government, and they could have altered the decision if they wished to do so. At that stage they took the view that the changes were fiscally sensible, and in 2011 the matter was again debated by Parliament and there was a concession of £1.1 billion, after much consideration by this House.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Having heard the statement, I can only assume that the Minister really does not get this, because the strength of feeling, not just among the 1950s women, but among colleagues, is extremely high—they are angry. Maybe I can offer some help. If he agreed to meet me and his hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), we could share with him the findings of a consultation we have recently undertaken on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. We could talk him through the problem and encourage him to do the right thing by acknowledging the problem and coming up with a respectful answer.

Guy Opperman: With respect, this matter has been debated since 1995—long before the hon. Lady and I arrived in this House—and successive Governments have taken a similar view on the appropriateness of the action, based on affordability, workability and the applicable equality legislation.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Even though there is a shortage of time, I crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker, so that I can give two tiny bits of context. First, I believe that all parties are at fault here: the Conservatives, Labour—the Labour Government did little for 13 years—and the coalition. No party has a clean hand. Secondly, I urge the Minister to address three possible options. One is Labour’s cost-neutral option for retirement at 64. The second is the indication of some kind of transition. The third is that the Minister could accept some change if the parliamentary ombudsman took some WASPI cases and concluded that the communication from Governments of all parties had been shocking.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman walked through the Lobby with me in 2011 to pass the Pensions Act when the Liberal Democrats was a party of financial
discipline, and I believe that we took the right decision at that time. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the so-called cost-neutral option is far from it—it is neither workable nor cost-neutral. The Government are sticking to the position that has been in place since 1995. The Labour Government took the same position for 13 years as did the coalition Government in 2011.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Yet again, the Minister has tried to break things down to a binary choice between paying out lower pensions or increasing the state pension age. However, pensions are only one aspect of Government spending and tax-raising powers. His Government have chosen to reduce corporation tax, which will cost the taxpayer £50 billion by 2025, and other tax cuts will cost £15 billion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, the parliamentary arithmetic is in favour of some changes, so will the Minister take control and actually make some sensible choices?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman and I are going to disagree massively on economic theory and taxation. It is right to cut taxes for business, because businesses make the payments that pay for the public sector that we all support so much. The key choice is whether the Government increase the state pension age or pay lower pensions, but the hon. Gentleman seems unable to accept that, and I do not agree with his approach to taxation.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): During the Minister’s rather disappointing and sadly predictable statement, he said, as the Prime Minister said to me last year, that no woman will wait more than 18 months for their pensions. Will the Minister explain in simple terms how it is that those women are waiting six years and seven months. Will the Minister confirm whether those women are wrong and the Government are right, because those women are waiting and waiting and are not receiving their pensions?

Guy Opperman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the point I made in my statement. The simple fact is that the 1995 Act brought the state pension age to 65, the Labour Government then increased it, and the coalition Government accelerated the process. The reason why it was referred to as an 18-month acceleration in 2011 is that that was relative to the 1995 Act timetable.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I recently attended the launch of the WASPI campaign group in the Amman valley in my constituency, and they raised with me the seemingly arbitrary deadline of 31 March this year for those wanting to make a complaint to the DWP about the lack of notice of the proposed changes. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the deadline? If it is, what is the reason for it?

Guy Opperman: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a precise answer, but I will write to him. However, it is the case that maladministration claims are being brought through the independent case examiner or the ombudsman, and I will write to him with the details.

Ministry of Justice: Environmental Sustainability

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE
Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, will speak on the subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call the hon. Lady to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Those on the Front Benches may take part in questioning.

1.44 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to make this statement on behalf of the Environmental Audit Committee about our third report of this Session, “The Ministry of Justice: Environmental Sustainability”, which I am delighted to share with the House.

The Committee’s remit includes carrying out regular sustainability audits of Departments and agencies. Working closely with the National Audit Office, we look at whether Departments are doing enough to reduce their impact on the environment and meet their greening government commitments. In the previous Parliament, we published sustainability audits of the Treasury and the Department for Transport, and this is our first audit of this Session.

The Government are the largest purchaser of goods and services in the country, and I pay tribute to the civil servants working across Government to reduce their carbon footprint. The Government should be leading from the front on sustainability. They have signed up to the UN’s global goals, to the greening government commitments, which commit Departments to reducing their impacts on the environment, and to Government buying standards on procurement. All three are aimed at improving sustainable practices.

Why did the Committee choose the Ministry of Justice? With 1,600 sites, the Ministry of Justice has the second largest estate in Government. It accounts for 20% of the Government’s greenhouse gas, waste and water emissions. It is the second largest buyer of goods and services, spending £4.6 billion through external suppliers in 2015-16, which is 10% of total Government spend on procurement. The Committee recognises the financial pressures that the courts and prison services are under, but being green brings financial benefits. UK businesses, for example, could save £23 billion a year by improving how they use energy and water and by reducing waste.

The Ministry has committed to put sustainable development at the heart of everything it does, so with the assistance of the NAO, the Committee examined whether that was happening. First, we were disappointed that the sustainable development goals were not mentioned in the Ministry’s single departmental plan, despite the Government promising us that they would appear in every single departmental plan. That is a worrying trend across Government. Secondly, our audit uncovered significant weaknesses relating to how the Ministry...
manages its sites, buildings and refurbishment projects, carbon emissions and vehicle fleet and in its approach to policy making.

The Ministry’s estate is one of the most ecologically diverse in Government. Its prisons and immigration removal centres contain 10 sites of special scientific interest, only two of which are in a favourable condition. We also found gaps in the Ministry’s governance and oversight. Senior management are often not informed of sustainability incidents. For example, we heard about one contractor that destroyed a nationally important protected orchid meadow but was not penalised or held to account through the contract.

The Ministry wants all its new buildings to achieve an “excellent” rating under the Building Research Establishment environmental assessment method—BREEAM—and it wants refurbishment projects to achieve a “very good” rating. However, we found that the Ministry had not assessed the environmental performance of nearly two thirds of its new-build and refurbishment projects. Of the 54 that did get the certificate, 14 failed to meet the required standard. Not knowing the rating of a building could not only lead to costs from retrofitting and poor energy efficiency but risk inmates’ health through overheating. When a cost-benefit analysis is put forward, it is predicated on good or excellent standards being achieved, meaning that the building will cost more to run and manage than expected and will not meet the case set out for the project.

We also examined Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service and its courts closure programme. Since 2010, 103 magistrates and 54 county courts have closed, and the Ministry is consulting on plans to close nine more courts. There were gaps in the guidance to staff on how to sell off court and tribunal buildings, and the oversight on contractors also showed gaps. For example, people tasked with selling the buildings were unaware of their statutory duty to tell Historic England if the buildings were listed or of particular local architectural significance, and they failed to minimise the risk of new owners letting the buildings fall into disrepair. In my constituency, Wakefield Crown court, sold off 20 years ago, has been left to fall into ruins, leaving my local authority and local council tax payers to foot the bill.

The Ministry of Justice did not meet its targets for domestic flights and carbon reduction in 2014-15. In fact, its use of domestic flights is increasing. We found that in one year there were 108 flights between London and Anglesey and 98 flights between London and Cardiff, as well as flights between Southampton and Manchester, even though perfectly good train services are available. The Ministry did not provide any explanation for the increase.

In the autumn Budget, the Chancellor committed that 25% of all cars in central Government Departments should be electric, yet only two of the Ministry of Justice’s 1,500 vehicles are ultra-low emission vehicles. We also found that the Ministry does not systematically undertake environmental impact assessments of new policies. For example, in February 2017 the Government tried to remove the fixed cap on court costs in environmental cases, but they failed to consider the environmental impact of that decision, despite environmental groups saying it would have a “chilling effect” on access to environmental justice.

The Ministry of Justice acknowledged many of its shortcomings during our hearing, and it has been working to improve its oversight, systems and performance. That is welcome, but we urge it to improve in three key areas. We urge it to embed sustainability in all it does; to follow its own guidance when making policy—it is ironic that the Department tasked with upholding the law is failing to meet its own legal requirements in certain areas—and providing guidance to staff and contractors; and to improve oversight and governance of sustainability, including in the governance of its contractors, such as on buying standards for prison food.

We recommend that the Ministry of Justice sets more ambitious environmental targets for 2019-20, as we found it was setting its targets too low so that it could say, “We have met the targets a year or two early.” That is no good. The targets have to be stretching, and they have to be on just the right side of impossible. The Ministry also needs to develop its sustainability policies, reflecting global goals, and it needs to set out how it will meet its existing targets. It needs to improve its estate management and systematically collect environmental rating certificates for all refurbishment and new-build projects.

The Ministry of Justice should provide better support to staff, especially prison governors and the people involved in selling courts and tribunal buildings, and it should provide guidance and oversight to contractors on how to manage the estate sustainably, including its sites of special scientific interest, which are protected by law. That is particularly important in the wake of the collapse of Carillion, which was a contractor on several of the prisons we looked at. The Ministry must improve its oversight of sustainability issues, and it must show leadership to the rest of central Government on sustainability.

If the UK is to be at the forefront of sustainability, the Government must lead by example. All Departments must do their bit, and the Ministry of Justice is failing to meet that challenge. Sustainability and the environment have been bolted on as a bit of an afterthought. In the Ministry’s response to our report, I expect to see a clear plan that addresses our concerns and incorporates the global goals into everything it does.

I look forward to the Government’s response, and I look forward to our Committee, and my many excellent Committee colleagues, continuing our quiet work in this overlooked but vital part of Government activity. I thank the House for giving me the opportunity to raise this report today.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I thank the hon. Lady for her very detailed and considered report. She has made some valuable points, and the Ministry of Justice will respond in due course in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: Except for that gracious tribute from the Minister, such has been the force, incisiveness and comprehensive scope of the statement by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) that she has left the House speechless. I trust that the appropriate extract from the Official Report will be put up on the wall of one of the rooms in her home.
Universal Credit

WORK AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second Select Committee statement. The procedure is the same as for the previous statement.

1.55 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I hope I will also leave the House silenced by my report, and I hope to do so in record speed.

The House passed a motion on 5 December 2017 agreeing that the Select Committee on Work and Pensions should review the five project assessment reviews on universal credit. The Government went beyond that and gave us other papers. All the papers were almost unreadable, and the fact that they are now turned from pigs’ ears into a silk purse owes everything to our Clerk, Adam Mellows-Facer. When Members read the report, they will understand precisely our debt to him.

Mr Speaker, I request your help on two fronts. First, this huge project—huge in Government finance and huge in what it might do to our constituents—is based on no business case at all. I am therefore pleased to see my friend the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who is now the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, sitting on the Treasury Bench. I ask through you, Mr Speaker, that he does not approve further development of universal credit until the Treasury has received the business case from his colleague the Minister for Employment, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma).

Secondly, the project assessment reviews talk about the industrialisation of claims. This is the roll-out of a benefit that is, to put it at its kindest, hit and miss. The problems that our constituents face are beyond imagination, and the cost to taxpayers will be enormous. Mr Speaker, at another time, might I seek your help in getting time to allow many more Members of the House of Commons to comment on how universal credit is affecting, or not affecting, their constituents?

I end by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to present the Select Committee’s report to the House.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his report. I have appeared before the Work and Pensions Committee in the past few days, and a number of the points raised in the report were raised in that session. I will of course consider the report, and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury has indicated that we will work closely together on reviewing its content.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the Select Committee as a whole for their excellent work.

Universal credit was designed to smooth the transition into work and to help lift people out of poverty. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that, more than seven years after universal credit was first announced, and after repeated resets and delays, it is clear that the Government still cannot provide evidence for their key claim that people claiming universal credit will be more likely to find employment? I mean not just single unemployed people without children, before cuts to work allowances, who appear in the statistics that the Government cite, but the full range of people—single parents, the self-employed, carers and disabled people—who are now claiming universal credit as the full service is rolled out.

Frank Field: I am immensely grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, because the central part of any business case for universal credit is that there will be a movement from benefits into work. We know the Government have no up-to-date data on that, yet they are pressing ahead. That is why I asked the Economic Secretary to the Treasury not to sanction further cash for this programme until the Department for Work and Pensions has produced a business case.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, for his work on this report. Given the key economic assumption underlying universal credit—the claim that it will deliver much improved employment outcomes for the vast range of people who claim it—and given that a full business case for the biggest reform of the welfare state in 50 years has not been made, does he share my concern that claimants have been pushed into dire financial straits because universal credit is simply not fit for purpose? We know the Government say that they are confident about the progress of universal credit, but does he agree that there needs to be more openness about this internal review?

Frank Field: There needs to be some internal sharing of information with the Treasury, if the Department has it, and the Treasury should put a stop to any expansion until it gets the business case. I underscore what the hon. Lady says: our constituents will be on the rough end of this if it all goes wrong.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To use your terminology, Mr Speaker, a pithy question: does the right hon. Gentleman feel that the process so far is IT-focused, not person-focused, and that that is the problem?

Frank Field: I would love to say that it was IT-focused, but it is neither that nor person-focused.
Backbench Business

Community Bank Closures

2.1 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the vital importance of community-based banking; believes that national banks have a responsibility to their customers; is concerned about the effect of branch closure announcements by Lloyds Bank, RBS/Nat West, Santander, Yorkshire Building Society and the Co-operative Bank; and calls on the Government to support measures to protect access to banking services in local communities in the UK.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this timely and incredibly important debate and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for co-sponsoring it. I thank colleagues for their support; the number of those in the Chamber on a Thursday afternoon just before the recess demonstrates how important this issue is to us and the communities we represent.

Like many colleagues, I am angry and frustrated, as are my constituents. In the past three months, the three towns I am so privileged to represent have all had bank branch closure announcements, ripping the financial heart out of them. So what on earth is happening? The high street bank has played a fundamental role in our local economy and communities for generations. It has been a rare constant in the ever-changing landscape of our market towns and city centres.

Those bank branches have provided and continue to provide a vital function for local customers, whether it is the pensioner withdrawing her money for the week, the local business depositing the day’s takings, or the young family looking to take their first step on to the housing ladder. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you can remember, as I can, being taken into a bank by a trusted loved one to sign up for a first account—a big moment. For me, it was a NatWest account with a ceramic piggy bank and, as I proudly represent the moment. For me, it was a NatWest account with a ceramic piggy bank and, as I proudly represent.

The closures will have an immediate effect and impact on people’s lives. I have heard from elderly constituents who use the T unstall Co-op branch and will be forced to queue. They are used by hundreds of residents as well as local businesses.

These cherished childhood memories for so many of us might sadly not be available to the next generation. For millions of people up and down the country, the services that local branches provide are as necessary as they have ever been, but they are disappearing.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. My first bank was the Midland bank when I was 11, so I therefore discovered I had been a member of that bank for 24 years, much to my shock. On the question of shrinking bank services and millions of people being affected, following NatWest’s decision to close the banks in Maesteg and Pencoed there will be only one bank left in my whole constituency. That is 58,000 people within a geographical area with only one bank. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a shocking failure of the banking system and that the banks are not following through on the community banking schemes that they are meant to be doing to serve communities?

Ruth Smeeth: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, although I think many others will be astonished that he has had a bank account for that long. There is a genuine issue about the responsibility of community banking. When I got my first paying-in book, there were 20,585 branches across the country, but by 2012 that figure had dropped to just 8,837. In the past three years alone, we have seen a further 1,500 branches close, and that does not include the announcement of further closures made in the past three months.

The hole that these closures leave behind goes far beyond an empty shop front. For the elderly or disabled, a 3 mile journey to the nearest branch is more than inconvenience.

Petitions against the closure have already attracted thousands of signatures, and residents have contacted me about what the closures will mean for them. I must thank Councillor Kyle Robinson for leading the campaign in Kidsgrove, collecting more than 1,200 signatures so far, as well as Tom Simpson, Lucy Kelly and local traders in Tunstall and Tunstall market for their incredible efforts, as well as the wonderful June Cartwright for co-ordination of the Our Burslem campaign.

The closures will have an immediate effect and impact on people’s lives. I have heard from elderly constituents who use the Tunstall Co-op branch and will be forced instead to travel 3 miles via unreliable public transport to a city centre with no public conveniences. For people in their 70s and 80s, or those with a disability, this is more than an inconvenience—it is a genuine struggle.

That was brought home to me by a story from a constituent whose parents have used the branch for many years. They are not technologically savvy—a weakness I, and I am sure others across the House, share—and they find it difficult to use an ATM or to pay for things in shops using their debit cards. If the House will humour me for just a moment, I want to quote what my constituent had to say about this matter:

“My parents are 81 and 83 years old and have used the Co-op bank in Tunstall for many years. The staff know my parents very well. They are exceptionally helpful, supportive, patient and ensure that they understand everything that they need to. Knowing...
that my parents have this level of support when I’m unable to be there every day, provides me with a great deal of reassurance, and I’m extremely grateful for this.”

I am sure that we all know people who benefit from this level of personal service and for whom the faceless and bewildering world of online banking simply will not work. In fact, in my great city too many of my constituents do not even have access to the internet. In the past three months, the Office for National Statistics suggests, up to 51,000 people, or one in four, aged over 16 in Stoke-on-Trent have not accessed the internet. One in four. For the record, that is more than double the national average, which makes talk of internet banking as the panacea for this crisis nonsense for too many people.

For businesses too, the closures present a challenge. For those who trade primarily in cash it is neither safe nor practical to expect staff to travel halfway across the city to deposit the day’s takings. And for small businesses with a limited number of employees, the time that this will take out of their day is a real hindrance. One of the defences often given in advance of such closures is that nearby ATMs will continue to be available, yet hundreds of them are at risk of being closed down thanks to the proposed overhaul of the LINK network. What is more, the services provided by external ATMs are incredibly limited, even compared only with the automated services available in bank branches.

The Post Office provides a valuable service, and in 3,000 locations—soon to include Burslem—it is the last banking retailer in town. But its ongoing restructuring process has seen too many branches close in recent years and we do not know what the future holds. Of course, although the Post Office can support customers looking to withdraw or deposit cash, it cannot provide the same range of services and advice as a bank branch.

The Post Office provides a valuable service, and in 3,000 locations—soon to include Burslem—it is the last banking retailer in town. But its ongoing restructuring process has seen too many branches close in recent years and we do not know what the future holds. Of course, although the Post Office can support customers looking to withdraw or deposit cash, it cannot provide the same range of services and advice as a bank branch.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that many people are not necessarily aware of the services available in post offices? If they are, they do not always want to do their banking in, for example, a local shop—where a lot of post offices are now based—because it might be busy.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. In fact, one of my concerns is that no assessment is made of whether local post offices have the capacity to deal with these issues when a bank in a community closes, and there is no communication with those post offices.

Britain has often been described as a nation of shopkeepers, so what does it say about us if we are unable to maintain the national banking infrastructure that our small traders need? There is a safety aspect to these closures as well. Should the final Lloyds branch in Burslem close, the only remaining ATMs will be inside shops. There will be no external ATMs available in the town and nowhere to withdraw cash after closing time. If I were to go for a drink in Burslem one evening, and as the vice chair of the all-party beer group, it would be impolite not to—

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): You’re propping it up.

Ruth Smeeth: Absolutely. If I were to go for a drink, there would be nowhere for me to get cash out to pay for a taxi home. For many young women—I am not sure whether or not I still fall into that category—
further afield. Worse still, closures are associated with a real decline in local bank lending. Growth in lending to small and medium-sized enterprises is dampened by an average of 63% in postcodes that lose a bank branch, and that figure grows to 104% for postcodes that lose the last bank in town. The impact on our high streets, on our local businesses, and on future regeneration can be devastating.

What does all that mean for towns such as Burslem, where local people are coming together to lift their community up and push back against years of decline? There was a time when the local bank was thought of as the heart of the community—perhaps it still is—so what happens to a community when it loses its heart? What happens when the monetary circulation of a town is cut off mid-beat? What happens when the last financial lifeline disappears and leaves the elderly and vulnerable without support? The world we live in is not the same as it was 10 years ago, let alone 40 or 50 years ago. Times change, technologies change, and we must change with them. But we must also do more to ensure that as the world moves, we do not leave behind those who find it hardest to keep up. We must recognise that there remains a place for community banking, local lending and face-to-face advice. That means we need the banks to take some ownership and responsibility for their loyal customer base. They need to be imaginative and consider sector and community-wide solutions, not pass the buck and blame their customers. If they will not do it voluntarily, we will have to force them to.

The banking sector has options. Banks could launch community banks that share counter facilities, like they do in parts of Spain. They could invest in multi-functional ATMs so that customers can pay in money directly, in their local communities. They could fund more extensively community-based financial education to assist people with online banking. They could even fund access to broadband in some of the harder to reach communities, so that their customers could access online banking. Yet all we have had from the sector is silence. We need to ensure that our banks are working in everyone’s interests, not just their own.

2.17 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who gave a splendid exposition of the issue we face in the country and clearly showed her dedication to her constituents.

The number of Members present is testament to how important this debate is. Given the extent of bank branch closures, it is likely that we all have an interest in this issue because of what is happening in our own constituencies. In the past 25 years, the UK has seen the closure of nearly 10,000 bank branches, which is over half of all of them. The rate has accelerated, with more than 600 branch closures in the past year. It is right that we should embrace technological change, but the rise of new approaches, including online banking, means that we are faced with the decline of traditional banking.

Many customers have a preference for in-branch banking. They prefer face-to-face service and the chance to talk to people, to get financial advice, to access their money physically, and to have the security of seeing their bank transaction take place and of receiving a paper record to prove it. In recent times, against a backdrop of scandals, one of banking’s redeeming features has been the personal relationships that banks still offer to customers. Members of the community often struggle when a bank closes, and closures are particularly important for elderly or vulnerable people who may not use online banking.

In recent years, my constituency has suffered from the closure of several local banks. Like other Members, I am sure, my constituency postbag and inbox have swelled as a result. In May 2016, Lloyds bank earmarked its branch in Woodley precinct for closure as part of a cost-saving measure. At the time, I presented a 583-signature petition to the House on behalf of local residents, calling on Lloyds to reconsider its decision. Despite that large demonstration of popular feeling, the bank went ahead with the closure regardless. That decision made it harder for hundreds of customers to access their money and to get financial advice and that face-to-face service.

The NatWest has also recently closed branches in two local towns, namely, in Romiley and in Marple. The last case was particularly galling as the justification given by NatWest at the time of its closure of the Romiley branch during the statutory consultation process was the proximity of the Marple branch as an alternative. However, just a few months after shutting the first branch, the bank announced its intention to close the Marple branch, too. Customers who had taken early assurance about a back-up branch in good faith felt that they had been treated as fools and that the behaviour of the bank in this instance made a mockery of the process of consulting on closures. Of course, if customers feel sufficiently overlooked, banks may well find that they start voting with their debit cards and switch accounts.

Although I accept that decisions on bank closures are ultimately a commercial decision, I urge all banks to show a lot more consideration of the needs of customers and how they can best be met. They must think carefully before making any decisions on a branch closure, particularly in rural or semi-rural areas, which have been hard hit by these measures.

Although it may not be a matter for the Government to intervene directly in a decision on an individual basis, the Government do have a role in promoting general access to banking services. Therefore, I ask the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to consider placing a duty on the Financial Conduct Authority to promote financial inclusion as one of its core objectives, as recommended by the Financial Inclusion Commission. That duty could include a mandate to require financial service providers to meet certain standards relating to access and customer service. Such a duty should require the design of products and services to be more inclusive and to maintain access to essential services for people who may not be online.

During my research for this debate, I was pleased to learn that a lot of the services offered by banks can now be done over the post office counter. Post offices continue to offer basic banking services to many bank customers. Indeed, around 99% of a bank’s personal customers and 95% of its business customers are now able to withdraw cash, deposit cash and cheques and make balance enquiries at a post office counter. All post offices can take cash deposits of up to £2,000. However, that
begs two important questions on which I would like the
Minister’s thoughts when he winds up. First, what is
being done to ensure that local people are aware of the
options available following the closure of a local branch?
Secondly, and perhaps most crucially, although this is
good news for customers, why is it deemed acceptable
for privately owned banks, and indeed publicly owned
banks in some circumstances, to close their own branches
and rely on the state-owned Post Office to process their
transactions for them? Are they making a profit while
the overhead costs are met by the Post Office?

I thank all Members of the House for turning up this
afternoon on our last day of term and for participating
in this debate. I look forward to hearing their contributions
and the response from the Minister.

2.23 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
(LD): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me
so early in this debate, because I have a very long
way to travel. I apologise to the House for not being
present when the winding up speeches take place; it is
not an intentional discourtesy.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent
North (Ruth Smeth) on making a really first-class
speech. She covered every single point, and I am left
with almost nothing to say as a result, which is rather
distressing for someone like me who has a tendency
to be verbose.

This issue causes me an element of personal pain
because I have a number of friends who work for the
Royal Bank of Scotland, at all levels of the bank. My
comments about the bank are not intended particularly
for the bank; they are aimed at the system in general. In
my constituency, we face the closure of three RBS
branches. One, in Tongue in north-west Sutherland,
may be on hold—there has been a stay of execution.
However, in the old royal boroughs of Tain and Wick,
the intention is to close the branches. I have never seen
an issue that has caused so much deep unhappiness
among my constituents.

Call me old-fashioned, but the bank and the bank
manager were as much a part of the social structure of
these communities as the doctor, the minister and the
school teacher. I think particularly of what happens
when someone has, for example, a seed corn business—from
little acorns mighty oaks grow. The point is that, in
the past and even in recent times, someone with a business
idea could go to the branch of their bank and say to the
manager, “I have this idea. This is my business plan.
Will you take a punt and lend me the money?” I have
seen, in my home town, some seriously big businesses
grow in my lifetime from absolutely nothing—there was
a brave bet by the bank manager. We should not
underestimate that.

The point has been made about the post offices. Our
main post office in the town of Tain in the north of
Scotland closed. Our post office now, which is very well
staffed by well-intentioned individuals, is essentially a
newsagent. The gap between the counter, where a person
does their business, and the magazines is only the distance
between two Benches in this place. If someone is trying
to bank large amounts of money at the same time as Mrs
McKenzie is trying to buy her copy of the
Scots Magazine, everything gets muddled and, frankly,
the staff get hassled. I really do not envy their position
one little bit.

I have a short anecdote, which reflects on the banks.
My first bank account, with the Royal Bank of Scotland,
was opened by my father when I became a student. He
put in £16—I did not see many £16s after that. In due
course, I spent all the money because I was a young
first-year student who did not know what he was doing.
When my grant cheque came in, I opened another bank
account in the Bank of Scotland and then I spent all
that, too. The trouble came when the two bank managers
talked to each other and said, “Do you realise that
young Jamie Stone has two bank accounts and he is
spending money like water?” Then they went and told
my dad. There was absolutely no end of trouble over
that. In a way, for those Members who are experts on
Adrian Mole, that conversation, perhaps not completely
correct today, headed off a potential multiple debt
situation. I was pulled up and stopped—well, I had to
be—which was probably to my great benefit in my life.

Banking is about the human face—of course it is. It is
about seeing someone in the branch of a bank who says,
“Don’t worry. What’s happened here is that the payment
will not clear for three days.” That can be the difference
between peace of mind and mental torture. It takes
someone just to say, “Wait a minute, I will go online and
take a look. Oh, here’s the problem. This is what’s
happening.” You cannot take that away. We talk about
online banking. Well, let me tell Members: if I hit the
icon on my phone, it says that I have been logged out
and, no matter how hard I try, I cannot get back in
again. I do not have a clue, just like when I was 18, I do
not know what my bank account is doing. Therefore,
online banking is not for everyone.

The issue, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove
(Mr Wragg) said, is one for Government. The only way
in which we will stop this relentless gloomy slide of
closures, which is eating into our communities and
sapping morale, is for the Government to say, “Wait.
What is the public service responsibility here?” They
should then come forward with some thoughts and
guidelines. It has been suggested that perhaps we should
combine banking facilities and get the clearing banks
together to form a one-stop shop. That is a very
interesting idea.

I look for something from the Government saying,
“We recognise that this is a responsibility, that this is
dangerous for the structure of society and that these are
the proposals that we intend to bring forward.” I am an
optimist, so I wait in the hope that there will be something
that will sort this out once and for all.

2.28 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I
congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North
(Ruth Smeth) on securing this debate. I am grateful to
the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.
This is an important issue, particularly in rural constituencies
such as my own. My constituency of some 250 square
miles in West Sussex consists only of small market
towns and villages—there are no large towns. If one of
those villages, which have high streets with a few important
shops and stores, loses its banking facilities, that will
immediately have a knock-on effect on the businesses in
the village or small market town and the neighbours. It is of little use to those businesses and indeed it is very inconvenient to be told that they have to travel to a settlement that is some miles away.

Very often, following such closures, there has not been an alternative retail high street banking facility in the same village or small market town. Therefore, I think we start off with a collective agreement that it is important that we maintain banking facilities in these areas. We do not yet have a cashless society. Small businesses still need cash facilities. Local charities, many of which are still wedded to collecting cash and cheques, also need these facilities. That said, there are two important points to consider.

First, we have to acknowledge the march of technology and the huge growth in the number of customers who are now using online banking services. This has entirely changed the shape of retail banking. The number of people visiting some of the high street banks that face closure in my constituency has fallen to an unsustainably low level.

It is analogous to the situation that existed for police stations in some areas. Police forces were confronted with the reality that often only a handful of people a week were visiting police stations, many at the instigation of the police themselves, who required reporting to take place at the stations. Some forces recognised that maintaining an underused building was not actually the best way for the police to maintain a footprint in their community, and that there were more innovative ways to maintain a presence in their local communities, including the use of shared facilities, setting up pop-up shops in places where lots of people were such as supermarkets and developing their online presence.

There has been a change in the nature of the business and shape of policing, and in how it has to respond to today’s needs. But police forces also recognised that they could not simply withdraw. There has to be accessibility and a policing presence in communities, although that presence may now take a different form.

We have the opportunity to ensure that local banking services can be provided in communities on an ongoing basis, by post offices. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) said, following the new deal that the Post Office has done with Lloyds, the coverage that post offices can provide for basic banking services is now very high. As he said, there will be 99% coverage for individual private customers and 95% for businesses.

I suspect that there is relatively low awareness that post offices can provide these services. I therefore agree with the hon. Members who said that it is important that there is a proper information campaign to explain to local businesses which services their local post office can provide when high street banks are lost. It is not good enough just to put out a news release and write a letter to customers to say that the bank is closing. The banks have a responsibility and they should exercise it.

Secondly, it is important to maintain the post office network, especially if post offices are to become local banking hubs as well as providing their other services. This is a great opportunity for the post offices. It is a useful way to maximise the asset and to ensure that the investment in the post office network can be realised.

Jamie Stone: I entirely take on board what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about post offices. But I have just outlined the case of one post office that is using a retail premises that is entirely unsuitable. It must therefore be up to the Post Office to negotiate premises that are suitable for the service he is talking about.

Nick Herbert: The hon. Gentleman has anticipated exactly what I was going to say. If the post office premises become the location of the only banking services in a village or small market town, we must ensure that they are suitable, and the Post Office needs to ensure that that is the case when it identifies premises. It must also ensure that the banking services can be provided. The online systems have been down in the post office in Arundel over the past few days and as a result there have been no banking services.

As suitable premises can often not be found, suitable post office sub-postmasters cannot be found in various villages and small market towns in my constituency. This means that there is sometimes a suspension of post office services for a period of months, even though the Post Office’s policy is that there will be a post office outlet in these communities. That cannot happen if the post offices become increasingly important owing to the fact that they are providing banking facilities as well as all the other important facilities that they provide for the local community.

We need some more creative thinking. We cannot just allow the banks to step away and absolve themselves from their responsibilities to ensure better services in this regard. To that extent, I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North. The Government do have a role to play, by stepping in where the market is not working properly. The market is not working because there is insufficient demand in some areas for banking services in their traditional form, but those services are still important to local communities.

We must remember that local high streets are already under great stress. High streets in rural areas have really been suffering from the impact of globalisation and competition from online retail services. It is very difficult for small businesses to keep their heads above water as it is, so banking services are very important for them. If the Government’s objective is to maintain the vibrancy of these high streets—and I think it is—we need some active measures to ensure that post offices are promoting the best banking services and that these services are well publicised. We need banks to step up to the plate and contribute to ensure that the banking services can be universal and just as good as the services that were provided before. All those things can be done.

I recently had a useful meeting to discuss the issues with the Post Office’s senior management and the Minister’s predecessor, who acknowledged all these points. I know that the Government are concerned to ensure that banking services are provided. We must look forward to what can be created using the existing post office network and ensure that services are provided properly. It does not help to look backwards and think that we can somehow set a retail banking model in aspic, when it is actually failing because it does not provide the services necessary for the wider community and only supplies a very small number of customers. We need banking services in these areas, and they could be provided more
creatively and innovatively. The situation needs a bit of Government help, but we also need the banks to play their part.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Just before I call the next hon. Member to speak, I ought to point out, for the sake of clarity, that we are in very unusual circumstances today because the timing of this business has changed and changed and changed again. I appreciate that this is the last day before a recess, and that Members—especially those with long distances to travel—are in some difficulty. I have therefore allowed far more leniency than is usual, first in the timing of people arriving for the beginning of the debate and, secondly, in the timing of their departure, either before or after the wind-ups. I would like to make it clear to the House that this does not create a precedent—absolutely not. We have a combination of circumstances today, which is highly unusual and is why I have allowed leniency. That will not be the case on other occasions.

2.38 pm

**Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): I am sure that we all heed your words, Madam Deputy Speaker, and thank you for your consideration this afternoon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate.

I listened very carefully to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), but I am afraid that he seemed to be talking himself into a bank closure. Of course, this debate is about banking services, but I hope that we can also focus on the need to think creatively about the sort of sustainable bank—a community hub—that is necessary. This is perhaps not necessary in our cities, where we can walk down the street and pass six banks in half a kilometre, but it is necessary for our small towns and semi-rural communities around the United Kingdom. For them, it is the bank’s presence in a new sustainable form that we are fighting for and championing today.

In August 2017, Reuters reported that bank branches across Britain had closed at a rate of 300 per year since 1989. The *Daily Mail* reported in December 2017 that over 1,000 branches had closed in 2015 and 2016, and a record 802 branches closed in 2017. The accelerating pace of closures appears relentless. In my constituency, the town of Tickhill lost its last bank in 2015. In 2016, the town of Thorne lost its HSBC branch. Then, in November 2017, RBS served notice that the town of Thorne will also lose its NatWest branch, and the town of Bawtry is to lose its last bank branch, also a NatWest.

The previous Government’s response to this relentless wave of bank closures was to announce an access to banking protocol in March 2015. It is now clear that the protocol was not what it seemed. It laid out a timetable for consultation about impact and the provision of alternative banking, but no—I repeat, no—mechanism to stop a branch closing. So the process for closure has non-existent. Communities have no more chance of stopping the closure than they did in 2015. The Government have done, and are doing, nothing to change this. “It is a private matter; it is a commercial matter”, we have been told on several occasions during Prime Minister’s questions in recent times. The Government decline to collect statistics on closures or on how many communities are now without any banking service. It is as though closures were an inconvenient truth.

The banks would have us believe that this is a story of enlightened pensioners managing their ISAs and direct debits on their smartphones. The truth is somewhat harder to get to. This House, I believe, is not nostalgic, nor opposed to telephone or smartphone banking. We are not against people managing payment on their PCs. But the selective figures provided by RBS-NatWest to justify closure give a completely distorted impression of their NatWest branch to each of the towns in Don Valley. For example, RBS was keen to tell me that 88% of Bawtry customers and 86% of Thorne customers now bank in other ways, and that only 48 customers in Bawtry and 69 in Thorne attend the branch on a weekly basis—although the time period for this estimate was not provided to me. Yet when a member of my staff went to the Bawtry NatWest midweek in mid-January—a quiet post-Christmas week—they saw a queue outside the bank before it opened at 10 am, and at 10.45 am they found a queue more than 10 deep in the bank, with several counters in use. But when I asked RBS how many transactions took place at the Thorne and Bawtry branches in the first hour of each day since the new year, the bank refused to disclose this information. It was “commercially sensitive”, I was told. Nor would RBS furnish me with information on what proportion of the customers are pensioners, how many transactions took place at each branch in the past year, or why neither branch opened on a weekend. On a Saturday morning, footfall could be more frequent.

So much for dialogue and consultation. Well, I say this to Ross McEwan, RBS’s chief executive, and to Les Matheson, NatWest’s chief executive. Personal and business lending: please do not patronise me with offers to meet a “senior representative” when you refuse to provide any information that may demonstrate that small businesses, pensioners or the community generally may need the services provided in the Thorne and Bawtry branches more than you care to admit. In response to a question about the possibility of branches sharing premises to make them more viable, I was told by Mr Matheson that NatWest’s arrangement with the post office means that the post office is now “the shared premises”. On that basis, why have any branches at all? The post office is the NatWest!

Where is the genuine attempt to find a model for sustainable banking? Instead of small counters in corner shops, why cannot post offices be located in secure bank premises, sharing them with more than one bank? Why cannot several banks have staff in Thorne or Bawtry on different days of the week, with banks sharing overheads in secure premises to create, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North said, a community banking hub? That could be a win-win situation.

Where is the attempt to bring young people into branches—some real outreach to make them see the bank as more than an app on a smartphone? I do not know about colleagues around the House today, but I am always being lobbied by banks about their latest wheeze to provide for financial inclusion. They are always telling me about how they want to do more in our schools and communities to give people the skills not only to press a button on a computer or click on an app, but to understand what financial literacy really means.
They are always lobbying us, but I do not see any effort to attract young people into branches to help them with financial decisions. Let us not stop at young people. Many of my constituents do not have a bank account at all and have never had one, and there are plenty of other people who still do not know quite how to go about getting a mortgage, how to run an ISA, how to save, or how to pay off debt.

Ged Killen: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the role of banks in attracting people into the branches. Does she agree that what many banks have been doing over a number of years is trying to drive people out of their branches by taking essential services away from those branches?

Caroline Flint: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. One would think that banks did not really want to foster demand for real branches, so the case for closure is made for them. They are creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Parliament needs to demand more from Government and more from the big five banks, beginning with support for local communities. While branches cluster in large cities in lavish offices, outlying towns and villages are being denuded of bank branches that are anchors for local businesses. We are told that the average customer travels just 2 to 2½ miles to their nearest bank branch. I worry about figures like that, because what they really mean is that the banks estimate all the access across the UK and then divide it, of course the figures will be distorted by the density of branches in our cities.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank my right hon. Friend. Friend for making such a passionate speech on this subject. One of my issues with the journey times quoted is that I do not believe that any of these journeys have ever been done on public transport. The figures do not take account of how many bus changes may be needed, nor the fact that some of these places are not connectable on public transport. The numbers do not make sense. Does she agree?

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend makes such an important point. There are so many assumptions about the way that people live their lives today that bear no relation to our own experience, let alone that of our constituents. In my constituency, people are 10 to 20 or more miles away from their nearest branch. We do not hear about the 10% to 20% of people across the UK who are in that situation. Customers in Thorne and Bawtry will each travel 10 miles if their NatWest branch closes. As my hon. Friend said, many of those people do not have access to a car. For many of my constituents, getting into Doncaster town centre takes at least two buses, and they are not necessarily running every five minutes—unlike the service that many of my friends benefit from in London and the big cities. The problem is simply not recognised.

Do the Government really wish to support our small towns to regenerate and develop? In both Thorne and Bawtry, the past 10 years have been tough, but—this is the irony—we are, I am proud to say, now seeing a renaissance in those towns. That is fantastic, but at this tipping point we are in danger of losing our last bank. It just does not make sense.

If we want to halt the growing gap between city and small town Britain, we need a policy to keep bank branches open in a more creative and sustainable way for the future. It cannot be right that towns with a population of 4,000 or 5,000 in the immediate vicinity, let alone the many thousands beyond that in even smaller villages, are losing not just the banking services but the presence of a face, rather than just a till, machine or counter in a convenience store for their financial needs.

Bawtry and Austerfield, which has 4,000 people, will soon have no bank. Strathaven is a market town with 7,500 people, Hornsea has 8,000 people, 40% of whom are over 60, plus thousands of tourist visitors every year, and Pencoed has 9,000 people—all those communities are soon to be left with no bank, and the Government need to do something about it. They could begin by collecting and reporting data on bank branches and the rate of closure, to face the uncomfortable truth about the loss of services in small town Britain.

The Government cannot be neutral on this matter. Their mandate derives from the British people, not UK Finance. This is not about neo-luddism. We are not anti-technology. This is about inclusion and equality. I urge the Minister and his Treasury colleagues to act before branch networks are a thing of the past.

2.49 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for bringing this highly topical issue before Parliament.

The announcement in December from Royal Bank of Scotland-NatWest that 62 branches would be shut across Scotland affected my constituency more than most, and I wish to concentrate my remarks on six branches that are set to close in Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk in the latest in a string of closures in the Scottish borders.

We all acknowledge that banking habits are changing and that branches are less well used than they used to be. However, what banks are failing to appreciate is that for those who do use them, they remain more vital than ever. I share Members’ concern that these closures will affect vulnerable customers as well as cash-handling businesses and community groups that need a local branch at which to deposit money.

The impact of bank closures is particularly acute in rural areas, for a number of reasons. First, alternative services are already stretched. The post office in Hawick, for example, is very busy and will struggle to take on extra banking services. Secondly, connectivity in rural areas remains a big challenge. East Berwickshire has some of the worst internet speeds in the whole of the United Kingdom, with more than a third of people unable to receive a decent connection. How can those people be expected to rely on internet banking as an alternative?

High streets in the Scottish borders are struggling, and Jedburgh and Selkirk in my constituency will be particularly badly hit. Selkirk is currently going through
a significant amount of town centre regeneration, only for the bank to now announce that it is going to leave. Another issue with one of the branch closures in the borders is disabled access. Duns is set to lose its RBS branch, and although the Bank of Scotland branch remains, it is only open three days a week, and both the branch and its ATM are not wheelchair-accessible.

Many people in the borders think that these closures have been decided by people with little experience of living outside the metropolitan areas of the United Kingdom. Someone has looked at a map without any knowledge of the local area and drawn red crosses all over it. There has been a complete lack of consultation. RBS simply announced these closures and told its customers to like it or lump it. There is a feeling in my area of the Scottish borders that enough is enough.

Opposition to the latest round of closures is unprecedented, and I have been contacted by a huge number of constituents. Tomorrow I will hold three public meetings on branch closures, spread across my constituency, such is the level of concern surrounding this news.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the announcement by RBS this week that it will keep some branches in Scotland open temporarily—I think one in his constituency, but none in my constituency—does not go nearly far enough and still leaves rural and more deprived communities at risk of losing their services?

John Lamont: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I will come on to the bank’s announcement this week shortly, but I share her concern that it goes nowhere near far enough to address the concerns that many people have raised.

I accept the Government’s position that this is a commercial decision for the bank. The public shares are not managed by the Treasury; they are controlled by an arm’s length company, UK Financial Investments, whose role is to manage the public investment, not to manage the bank. It would set a dangerous precedent if there were direct Government interference in a decision such as this.

Having said that, I do not believe that the arrangement with UKFI would have prevented the Government from telling the bank that it had got this decision wrong. The announcement this week from RBS, with its minimal concessions, is simply not good enough. A handful of branches will remain open for just a few more months, and in the Scottish borders, only Melrose will be given a stay of execution. No one really expects these branches to avoid closure ultimately.

I was therefore very surprised to read the comments of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), praising the bank for this announcement. I was equally surprised to read his comments at the weekend, when he seemed to be taking credit for what he anticipated would be good news from the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that while the deal done this week, with 10 banks being temporarily reprieved, is not good enough, the UK Government should be exerting their influence—their much greater influence—as the major shareholder on behalf of the taxpayer?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point, but if she had listened to what I said a few moments ago, she would have heard me say that while the Government own the shares, we do not have direct control over the day-to-day running of the company. Equally, I believe—I have argued this strongly to the Minister—that the Government should apply moral pressure on the bank to think again on these decisions.

The announcement by the bank does not go far enough, and although the bank has made some changes—minimal changes—it has not fully addressed the concerns that my constituents have raised. I was surprised by the comments of the leader of the Scottish National party at Westminster, who seemed to be trying to take the credit for what he anticipated would be good news from the bank. I was surprised because the bank made it clear that the changes to the plans it had previously announced were in response to concerns raised by politicians from all political parties, and because in the end the news was far from good. A cynic might think this had more to do with the right hon. Gentleman positioning himself ahead of the SNP deputy leadership election than trying to do what was best for his constituents or, indeed, the branch network across Scotland.

The truth is that the campaign against the RBS branch closures has been a truly cross-party effort—led, I must say, by the Scottish Affairs Committee at Westminster. I am pleased to see two other members of the Committee on the Opposition Benches today, and I know that they feel just as passionately as I do about the issue of branch closures. All Members who are losing branches in their constituencies share a desire to make the banks think again.

For the SNP, the loss of 52 branches across Scotland is a price worth paying to give 10 branches a very short temporary stay of execution. This is bad for communities in the borders, bad for rural communities across Scotland and bad for the elderly and the vulnerable. It is a bad deal to avoid further public scrutiny, made without consulting local communities.

2.57 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for awarding it to them.

I was elected in 2010, following the great financial crash of 2008. I thought at the time that MPs were tasked with two great challenges: first, how to ensure that the public never have to bail out banking failure again, and secondly, how to rebalance the economy geographically. In my view, both tasks required a fundamental rethink of how the financial system works. In reality, I am afraid we have made little progress over the past eight years.

I will speak briefly about moral hazard. The reforms, in my view, have been far too timid. We needed to break up the big banks, move away from the universal model and introduce Glass-Steagall provisions whereby retail and investment banking would be completely separated.
That is the only way to ensure that the public are protected from the irresponsible behaviour of city speculators. Splitting retail and investment banking activity would also help to drive forward a more plural retail banking environment, instead of a few major banks dominating.

Creating a more plural banking system is a key element of any strategy to rebalance the economy of the British state on a geographical basis. The banks, having been bailed out by the people—let us remember that we are talking about nearly £1.3 trillion in loans, grants and guarantees from the public—have now abandoned our communities. More than 200 bank branches have been closed in Wales alone in the past six years, and the closure rate in Wales is three times that of London and the south-east of England. I am sure the same can be said of the more rural areas in England, and indeed of Scotland and Northern Ireland. In my constituency, all the major towns—Ammanford, Llandeilo, Llandovery and Newcastle Emlyn—have faced bank closures, and some have been left without any banking provision at all. We are talking about a large chunk of the west of my country.

Since I was elected, HSBC has closed its branch in Llandeilo. The argument at the time was that services would be provided in Llandeilo. When the branch at Llandeilo was closed it said that services would be provided in Ammanford, but just a few months ago, the branch at Ammanford was closed. Centralisation is obviously a process, not an event. Just before Christmas last year, Lloyds announced its intention to close its branch at Llandeilo, and NatWest announced closure plans for branches at Llandeilo and Ammanford.

As well as meaning that towns lose their status as commercial centres, bank closures create four major problems for the communities we serve. First, job losses in our market towns are directly associated with the banks in question. Secondly, the loss of vital banking services can be a huge problem in rural areas, where poor digital infrastructure often renders internet banking redundant. In such areas bank closures particularly affect people who continue to rely on cash and cheques for financial transactions. Thirdly, the loss of banking services often leads to the loss of free ATMs in our towns—a number of Members have already referred to the problems that can create, especially for the night-time economy. Finally, the loss of banks undermines the financial underpinning of our local communities, despite the far-reaching consequences of the centralisation of business services over recent years.

Research indicates that bank closures dampen lending by small and medium-sized enterprises in their respective areas by 63%. That has a huge impact on economic performance, with businesses deprived of access to the lending that is so important to help them develop and maintain sustainability. That, of course, furthers geographical wealth inequalities and creates substantial productivity challenges in communities. As was said earlier, we are seeing a huge market failure with dire economic and social consequences, and policy makers must address the situation.

We can look across the world for numerous examples of what can be done to deal with the situation we face. In the Republic of Ireland the credit union movement has been mainstreamed to ensure that it provides vital banking services to the citizens of that country. In the US, credit unions also provide mainstream functions, including, critically, lending to businesses in the communities they serve. A strong network of community banks underpins the local economy. In Germany, strong economic performance is underpinned by the Sparkassen and Landesbanken network, which essentially are publicly sponsored community banks.

In my view we require action on three fronts. First, we need a US-style communities reinvestment Act to ensure that the big commercial banks have to invest their vast resources geographically and equitably, to ensure that businesses can obtain finance and wealth is shared evenly. Otherwise, banks will continue to concentrate on the City of London, and on socially useless investments that deepen sectoral and geographical wealth inequalities in the British economy. Secondly, we need the protection and enhancement of Post Office financial services, so that post offices can operate as all-inclusive providers and community banking hubs. For that to bear fruit, we must ensure that the obsession of successive British Governments with rationalising the network is resisted.

Thirdly, given that the British Government own 73% of RBS—which, in turn, owns NatWest—surely one option would be to change the business model and use that ready-made network. It appears, however, that the UK Treasury’s priority is to support bank closures and to prepare RBS for sale to City investors, but that would be an enormous missed opportunity given that we, the public, own a large share of that bank. Another option, put forward by my constituency colleague, Adam Price, in the Welsh National Assembly, would be for the Welsh Government to step into the breach by developing a network under a Welsh public bank brand.

The consequence of doing nothing is that we will not deal with the two major challenges that I set out at the beginning of my speech. When the next financial crash comes, I fear that the public will once again have to bail out failing financial institutions. Furthermore, there will be no hope of dealing with the grotesque geographical wealth inequalities that exist within the British state.
2015 alone. Things have changed: I remember back in the day my Mum paying in the supermarket with a cheque and cheque guarantee card. Now she uses Apple Pay on her iPhone!

To explain the decrease in demand, we must consider the purpose of banks. For some people, as Members have suggested, banks are more than a normal service. They are a part of the community, offering people a personal relationship and an opportunity to chat. They can prevent loneliness. That is why, for some, closures are not just an inconvenience or a sting: they can actually hurt. I know that that has been the sentiment in my constituency.

That view of banks, however, is decreasing, especially among younger generations, hence the need to specifically help and consider the elderly when banks close. I must note at this point, as other Members have, that provisions are already available to reduce the impact of bank closures. The industry’s access to banking standard, launched in 2017, makes a commitment to provide information about branch closures, along with options locally to continue to access banking services. It also includes specialist assistance to customers who need specific help. Importantly, it commits to providing a minimum of three months’ notice of branch closures. However, I do not think that three months is long enough for people to change their habits or prepare themselves. I ask the Minister to call on the banks to operate a six-month policy, which would be fairer and more adequate. It is vital that when banks make decisions on closures they review the transport network and infrastructure, and ensure that provision is available so that banks are accessible in the area.

Mobile banking is a perfect example of a halfway house, costing only 19% of a physical branch. RBS group and Lloyds have built a large network of mobile banks across the country, and HSBC has just started to do the same. They help in areas where there is no accessible alternative provision, and they can be used as transitional arrangements to enable people to adapt and have more time.

**Jamie Stone:** I take on board completely the point about mobile banks, but there are issues with them. The public have to queue up outside in inclement weather and get soaking wet, and they do not have the ability to handle paper transactions.

**Michelle Donelan:** I do not believe that mobile banks are the answer; I am proposing that potentially they are a part of the solution. I agree on the point about cold weather. That is a very valid and worthy consideration.

I have worked locally with Lloyds to reduce the impact and to manage the transition of the loss of branches in Bradford on Avon and Corsham. I am pleased to say that we have a provisional agreement for a mobile bank trial in Corsham. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will agree with me that the case for such a trial is just as valid in Bradford on Avon. I am sure the Minister, as a local Wiltshire MP, also agrees.

Turning to the impact of bank branch closures, each case is different in every circumstance. When severe it can support, alongside closure, a bank of measures such as training and support for older and vulnerable people. That is why I reiterate that a three-month notice period is not long enough. It takes time to build some people’s confidence in the security of digital banking. Alongside Lloyds bank and Barclays, I have run three fraud workshops, which were heavily attended, particularly by the elderly community. Support to vulnerable residents and the elderly is crucial. It is important to remember that about 4 million people—mainly the elderly—are not online at all. However, we must not write off older people as incapable of using the internet. We must support and manage them, and give them the tools and skills to make progress. More than 600,000 people aged over 80 already have online banking. They put me to shame, as I joined only last year.

Another stumbling block to digital banking can be deprivation, which can render people unable to own a computer or a smartphone. Mobile blackspots and patchy internet services are both common in the villages in my constituency. Banks should ensure that an alternative option is accessible, such as mobile banking or sufficient public transport to the nearest branch, and I again make the point that Bradford on Avon really needs mobile banking.

Post offices are not the answer, but they are part of the solution and can play an essential role. Our post offices have been struggling for years, but incorporating banking into their services is proving to increase their footfall and helping to engage people in their services again. The Post Office currently offers basic banking services to many bank customers and is expanding that to business customers. As has been noted, awareness is the key problem, but it is also about changing consumers’ habits. I was pleased that at the autumn Budget of 2017, the Treasury wrote to the Post Office and UK Finance to stress the importance of raising public awareness. I would like to hear the result of that from the Minister.

In conclusion, it is important that we do not resist technology, but that we accept and embrace change to enable progress, grow our economy and compete on the international stage. However, I want to be realistic. I believe that it is inevitable that all branches will eventually close. The supply of them has reduced by 60% in my lifetime, so I think that we should encourage a sustainable hub model to emerge—a one-stop shop—where post office and banking facilities can be offered, as well as debt advice and potentially even a citizens advice bureau. That will help to safeguard our high streets. The transition period is so important, along with the support available. Banks need to lead the way in training and supporting people who are currently unable to support themselves through their digital skills. We must also encourage the roll-out of mobile banking.

I hope I have outlined today that the banking world is changing, but that there is a process whereby we can improve the transition, so that everybody in society can continue to embrace technology. We must support our community.

3.12 pm

**James Frith (Bury North) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate. I would like to speak about Ramsbottom, which is frequently in the top-10 lists of best places to live and visit. Of the two market towns that I am proud to represent, Rammy has been hit first and hardest by the bank closure trend.
It needs a community banking offer. When I visited small businesses there in December, the shopkeepers, charities and businesses all spoke of the distinct mix of problems that they face in keeping their heads above water.

Community banks, and banks generally, bring tradespeople to the town. They increase footfall and help to determine a town’s future prospects. Paying in, cashing up, small impulse buys, floats, cash-only stalls, making deposits and general local bank services are all still part of business life and life and living in Ramsbottom.

However, first Barclays then NatWest closed, and now Royal Bank of Scotland is reducing its opening hours, with visitors to Ramsbottom, and customers reducing with them. A bank nearby is likely to determine the opening hours of any retail operation or business, as the proprietor will need to factor in the bank’s closing time with that of their business and the leaving time of their staff. It will be one of the things that a business proprietor considers in determining where to set up in the first place, and if a local authority is struggling to attract new shops, it will understandably opt for another eatery for the night-time economy or reach for a high-street name, thus risking diluting the independent offer of a town like ours, which is, in its first instance, the fundamental nature of the place and why visitors come at all.

It is all tied in to this proud community—one that has pulled together at a time of mourning recently, or a time of great testing—the Boxing day floods two years ago. There is always something fun to do and to see, whether at the chocolate festival, black pudding throwing competition—[Interruption.] It is true. Or the Head for the Hills music festival, the civic and town markets, or just a healthy mooch around the shops.

Of course, the problems cannot all be laid at the door of the banks, but they are a considerable part of the cumulative issues facing this community, including business rates, public transport links drying up, and less disposable income after making ends meet. It is the independent nature of Ramsbottom that gives it its zeal. These are our entrepreneurs, who are not denying the march of progress with broadband, with cash alternatives and online shopping; they are, as I am, rightly defending their modern but traditional offer. The butcher, the baker, the dressmaker, the art gallery, the coffee lounge, craft shops, pet shops, micro-breweries, chocolate factory and specialist food stores, family-run restaurants as well as charity shops, have all spoken to me of the impact on them of the drying up of available banking and a local bank.

The increasing risk of isolation for our older communities is also a consideration. Those for whom Ramsbottom is the nearest town with a bank, endure average broadband speeds 27% lower than the national average. My constituency is ranked 62nd of 75 constituencies in the north-west on that measure, and 467th of 650 constituencies in the UK. In Affetside, broadband is practically non-existent, and we all know that areas with no history of suitable broadband will also suffer from low-skilled internet use, which does not square with the inevitable claim that people can use internet banking instead.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend makes a superb point about access to broadband. In my constituency, some 30% of people either have very slow access or no access at all, and I can vouch for the fact that in Bawtry, where the last bank is in danger of closing, it is a nightmare either making mobile phone calls or getting on to the internet. Could not the Government say to the banks that until those areas have the pleasure of the fast broadband that our cities share, they should not close any services down to just online services?

James Frith: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Is it not true that too often, when we see the march of progress, people assume that the have-nots will simply catch up, and that no intervention is required from Government or statute to bring that about?

When I asked business owners in the town for their input for today’s debate, the following contributions stood out. Steven White, pet shop owner on Ramsbottom High Street, said that:

“we banked with NatWest—the direct impact is that we now have to queue at one counter in the post office”

while others are doing all sorts. He added:

“We get our weekly change here, and there is now a delay in the payment hitting our account, so when things are tight, as they sometimes are, we can no longer rely on getting our day’s receipts in to help”

with cash flow. He points out:

“We could move banks but there is no confidence that who we move to will stay open in our town” or nearby.

Mrs P’s Luxury Ice Cream told me:

“We have found it increasingly difficult to bank cash as the RBS is now closed two days during the week. I feel that there is very little consideration given to the elderly population”—

many of whom are their customers—

“who largely prefer face to face banking.”

Louise Isherwood of Ramsbottom Sweet Shop said:

“People used to pop in whilst in town using the banks...there are so many less people in town”

now

“on a daily basis...to make it worse, if the banks sell the building...for use as a wine bar”

people will not visit during the day—and they will not buy sweets at night.

In closing, here are some possible solutions. The Government should sponsor more challenger banks that operate at break even or not for profit. We should consider extending the role and mandate of credit unions. Labour’s proposed regional investment banks would ensure that community banking has a primary role in the service offer, and the Government should adopt that principle immediately. There should be rewards in the form of tax incentives for community banking operations when the “profit and loss” or “balance sheet” argument of the existing bank is that it only breaks even.

I rather fear that the Government will hold their hands up and say, “We are just the Government; what can we do?” However, there is a case for them to intervene, and for the industrial strategy to incorporate the experience of hundreds of thousands of businesses. They are the real employers, wealth creators and taxpayers. At least 80% of our economy is made by those people. They are job-creating heroes, sweating it so that the Government receive their taxes. The Government should not dismiss the argument that this is simply a commercial decision for the big banks.
I urge the Government, instead of propping up the Carillion model of employment, to stand up for these real employers, heed the concerns expressed about the withdrawal of banks, and make a commitment to new community banking so that everyone in our society can benefit.

3.20 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate.

This matter is of specific interest to me. Early in December, Lloyds bank announced the closure of three branches in the Waveney Valley area of north Suffolk: in Bungay, in my constituency, and in Halesworth and Southwold in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). I should declare an interest at this point, because I am both a personal and a business customer of the Halesworth branch. Shortly after the Lloyds announcement, NatWest announced the closure of its branch in Beccles, which is also in my constituency.

My main concern is that, if Lloyds proceeds with the closure of its Bungay branch, there will be no bank left in the town, and I believe that we need policies to prevent that from happening. Some may say that I am a luddite and that we cannot hold back the inevitable march of the internet and modernisation, but what concerns me is that some banks are closing branches in an indiscriminate, non-strategic way that will have an adverse impact on the elderly, the disabled, those without their own transport, small businesses, and the economies of the towns and hinterlands that will be left with no bank standing. In the last two years, Barclays and Norwich and Peterborough building society have closed their branches in Bungay. If Lloyds proceeds with its branch closure in May, there will be no bank left in the town. That has upset many people who transferred their accounts to Lloyds following the previous closures, and it will have a particularly negative impact on the elderly and disabled and on small businesses.

I have three specific concerns. First, if Lloyds proceeds with its closure, there will be no cashpoint machine with 24/7 access in the town centre. Bungay has three street fairs a year, which bring a significant amount of business into the town. Last Christmas an estimated 1,200 to 1,500 people came along, and there were long queues at the Lloyds cashpoint. Many of the traders who go to the street fairs only handle cash, and there is a real worry that, if it is not available locally, the fairs—which add so much to the vibrancy of the town—will suffer.

Secondly, it is important to emphasise that many businesses, both in the towns and in the countryside, still use cash and cheques. The lack of immediate access to cash and deposit points will, at least in the short term, cause considerable inconvenience and added expense. On the basis of my experience as a partner in a local family farm, I know that for several farmers the easiest way to handle payments from the grain merchant is still via cheques, and that quite often the rents paid by small businesses for farm buildings and workshops are still paid in cash. It should also be borne in mind that the change to internet banking in rural areas will require considerable improvement in broadband connectivity, an issue about which we have heard throughout the debate.

Thirdly, the lack of a bank in Bungay will affect the town’s ability to draw in customers from the surrounding area. Lloyds is redirecting its customers to its Beccles branch. That may mean that people who came into Bungay once a week to go to the bank, to do their shopping and to have a coffee or a meal may now do all that in Beccles. I met Lloyds representatives on 4 December, when I put those points to them. I asked them to reconsider their decision to close the Bungay branch. It is disappointing that I have not yet had a response from them, although I hope that that means they are giving the matter serious consideration.

With regard to NatWest’s closure in Beccles, I had a meeting with the bank’s representatives last month. I am disappointed with their decision, but they took me in some detail through why they reached the decision to close the branch and how they are now engaging with their customers. They are prepared to work with the local community. As well as a mobile bank and closer working with the post office, they have plans for a community banker who will have a base in the town at set days during the week, possibly in the library and the town hall.

I have mentioned that the closure of Lloyds in Bungay would result in there being no ATM accessible 24/7. With this in mind it is necessary to ensure that there remains a good network of cashpoints across rural Britain, where consumers and small businesses use cash to a greater extent than in urban areas. I thus urge the Government to support the Which? and Federation of Small Businesses campaign to get the Payment Systems Regulator to ensure suitable measures are in place to guarantee that consumers can easily access their money without charge.

It is important that measures are introduced that can help to avoid a situation where towns are left without a single bank. That could be done in a variety of ways, in particular by building on the post office network, which generally has a better rural reach than that of high street banks. The policies put in place, first by the coalition Government and then the current Government, have been successful in making the post office network more resilient.

In Bungay, the post office is in the newsagent and there is a drawback of lack of space. In towns at risk of having no bank, consideration should be given to providing additional funding to put in place a more substantial post office branch. Ultimately, I would look for this to be funded by the banks. Alternative options that could be considered are mutual societies or pop-up banks, where the high street banks join together to sustain a presence in the town.

Bungay was a pioneer of provincial banking, with Gurney’s, a precursor of Barclays, opening one of its first branches in the town in 1808. Some 210 years on, it will be a very sad day if the town no longer has its own bank and we must do all we can to ensure that that does not happen.

3.27 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) and all other contributors to the debate, but of course I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member
for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). I was intrigued by her description of her first experience of banking and I remembered my wonderful chequebook with a nice colourful kingfisher on it. I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), too, who secured this debate along with my hon. Friend.

I have to say that I am completely fed up, as are my constituents and many businesses in my constituency. We are fed up because we are a constituency of 240 square miles and we have a grand total of one bank branch left. I do not know what happened to all the rhetoric of the last bank in the community. Whatever happened, it did not work in areas such as mine and it is not working across swathes of the country.

I welcomed the banking protocol. In fact, I was part of a cross-party group of Members that went to see Professor Griggs about the protocol. I welcomed it and many of the suggestions in it. For example, I welcomed the fact that it highlighted the need for the collection of cash from businesses and the like and the co-ordination of that. I welcomed many of the things in that voluntary code, but it strikes me that not enough has been done subsequently. It certainly has not halted branch closures.

In 2016, when the last two branches were to close, at Chirk and Ruabon, a staff member and I took it upon ourselves to visit 126 businesses on the high streets of Chirk, Ruabon, Rhosllanerchrugog, Johnstown, Cefn Mawr, Plas Madoc and Acrefair—apologies to any constituents I have missed out—to ask about the many issues they face. Earlier in the debate reference was made to post offices. Having worked with local businesses and post offices in my constituency, I welcome any improvements where they have been made. I also welcome the work that the Treasury has done on standardisation, because we are no longer in the daft position where some things work for some banks, and other things work for other banks. There are post office branches where that works absolutely magnificently, but in others it simply does not work. If someone comes into a post office to buy a packet of crisps, and then someone else buys a bar of chocolate, but the person working there has to deal with a banking transaction in the middle of that, that is not a sustainable solution.

If we are looking to develop post offices in that way, that might be one exciting option to consider around the country. I know for a fact that post offices are doing all sorts of things, for example, granting credit union members access to their cash. I welcome that when it works, but we have to look at what provision is put in place when bank branches close.

Earlier in the debate it was suggested that the notification period for bank branch closures should be longer. I think that there is a case for that, but in too many cases we know that, when a bank gives notice that it is going to close a branch, that is what it is going to do. We can petition to our hearts’ content, with 38 Degrees petitions, petitions in this House, Change.org petitions—we could even create our own website and have some more petitions—but in most cases it does not make one jot of difference.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Lady agree that more time would allow people to hone their digital skills and that banks have a role to play in that to ensure that people are prepared for the closure? The branches might still close, but a longer notice period would give people time to prepare.

Susan Elan Jones: Yes, I would welcome that. I think that is a positive point.

We also have to consider what the banks have been telling us. My right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) spoke about some commercially sensitive information that she was not allowed to have. I, too, have asked for commercially sensitive information, such as how many people had accounts at the branch, and clearly the bank was unable to tell me. Better still, I asked how many people on a typical week went in with queries. I was told how many people on a typical week went in with queries that might not really be queries. I asked what that meant. I was told that, if someone goes into a bank, stands at the counter and asks a question, that might not be a query. I made the point that, for the customer asking the question, it very much was a query. I was told that, if there was no formal transaction, it was not a query. It is a parallel universe.

As we move at this juncture, we need to know what on earth the banks are planning to do next. An hon. Member has made the point that first we were fobbed off by being told that one could go to the next village, and then to the next, and then to the next, and that it was all right because it is just a little walk down the road—rather like an old-fashioned countryside treasure hunt. Suddenly, one realises that one has to go quite a long way to get to the next post. That cannot be the way to deal with the problem.

What we do about cashpoints and ATMs is of utmost seriousness. There are currently some 70,000 in the country, the bulk of which are free to use. At the start of 2016, the then Chair of the Treasury Committee, Andrew Tyrie, said that cashpoint charging and closures were of great concern. His point was that, if the ATM companies were not going to deal with the problem, this House needed to look at it, because people in rural communities and those on low incomes would be affected the most. As far as I can see, one problem with cashpoints is that the 38 or so banks and the like that are part of the ATM network are having a little scrap with each other. As they knock metaphorical spots off each other, each deciding that they are all paying too much, it is the customer who loses out.

Ruth Smeeth: My hon. Friend may not be aware that the price of an average transaction has not increased for nine years. The service is not costing the banks any more money; they just do not want to pay for it any more.

Susan Elan Jones: Where charges exist, the average cost of a single transaction is £1.70, and it is worrying that we are not looking more at free access to cash, which is a basic right. We do not say that about drinking water or many other things. It is nonsense that we are prepared to let banks charge money for us to visit a cashpoint, and there is no doubt that charging hits the poorest communities hardest.

I want to give credit to some examples in my constituency of where people are fighting against the system. I do not know whether Members have ever visited Corwen, which is a fantastic town.
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con) indicated assent.

Susan Elan Jones: Excellent. I do not know whether Members have been on the steam train, but Corwen is a wonderful place for tourism and has fantastic local businesses. The town really wants to consider and develop community banking, and people are adapting. We are not expecting to return to a previous era—we do not expect Captain Mainwaring and Sergeant Wilson to come back—but we need a type of banking that works for us and for communities such as Corwen and many others across the country. The Government need to step in if the banks are going to close branches or if the ATM companies are going to start charging. We need the Treasury to be tough on them and we need to stand up to them. At the end of the day, if the world’s local bank and other local banks mean anything by community banking, they have to mean it nationwide.

3.38 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing this debate. Technology has been used to modernise the banking sector for decades and, as an industry, banking has seized the opportunity to use technology mostly to improve the customer experience wherever possible. In the ‘90s, I worked as a technology procurement manager for a bank when we were upgrading branch infrastructure. Thinking back, the introduction of the ATM network was one of the first steps away from personalised, face-to-face banking, but what would we do without them? We cannot do without them, and I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Clwyd South about how important it is, as we face changes in the banking industry, that the ATM network and free access to it is preserved throughout the country.

The revolution in FinTech has forced another change in the banking model, and our banks no longer collect the income of merchants and disburse the cash to individuals. Our behavioural patterns have changed with technology. In 1988 we had more than 20,000 bank branches in the UK, and 25% of adults were paid in cash. In many respects, cash has had its heyday. Now accounting for less than 50% of transactions, we saw an 11% decline between 2015 and 2016 alone. Cash may still be king, but its crown is slipping.

That trend is set to continue. Already 6% of the population rarely use cash. Young people, in particular, prefer digital payment methods such as card, online and mobile banking. The model of branch banking as a conduit for cash movements therefore needs to change to ensure that banks remain commercially viable.

The speed of change has surprised many communities, with the uptake of digital banking being relatively recent, and it is important that adequate notice is given when changes are made to local banking services. In 2012 at least one of our major banks had no mobile users at all, but today there are more logins a day on mobile banking than via the web. Meanwhile, the average branch bank customer goes to the bank every two or three months.

Branch closures throughout the nation are predominantly a response to declining demand. In my constituency, Barclays closed its branch in East Wittering citing a 10% fall in transactions at the branch in a single year. However, Barclays has identified 80 customers who exclusively used the branch for their banking needs. Those people need alternative provision.

When a branch closes, it is important that it gets in touch to advise customers of all the services that are available online, via telephone or via mobile banking. Many banks go beyond that and offer training and support to customers, especially the elderly and most vulnerable, to ensure that they are not excluded by the shift to digital services.

Like everybody else in this discussion, I am concerned that there is an increased risk of financial exclusion due to either a lack of digital know-how or a lack of access to the technology. Personal banking is something that many people, especially older members of our society, greatly value, and in many cases the alternatives are not suitable.

We need to ensure those customers know that the Post Office offers branch banking services for all major high street banks and can facilitate all the things that people do in a bank, including traditional cash and cheque services. That is a good alternative, as more than 98% of the population live within three miles of one of our 11,600 post offices nationwide, which makes it Europe’s biggest retail network.

The structure of community services is changing, with our traditional high street names consolidating into shared services. Becoming a community hub is important. The Post Office has managed that well in Chichester and is collaborating with retailers such as corner shops and book shops. That is a win-win for sustainability. Many Members will have been involved in debates about post office closures. We need to make sure that the network of face-to-face branch services is secured in some way, and post offices are a good alternative.

It is important that such services are well designed, as other Members have mentioned. I recently visited the new Chichester post office, which is co-located with Sussex Stationers and British Bookshops. There are seats available for those who cannot stand in a queue for long, and staff are on hand to assist people who are using self-service kiosks or who are waiting for the cashier. Needed privacy is provided. The service is similar to that provided by the old bank branches. That is the right model, but these new post offices need to be well designed, and perhaps more could be done to promote best practice in design.

The Government have made significant strides in improving both mobile and broadband coverage, with 95% of households now able to get superfast broadband. Alas, in rural areas such as my constituency, many people still suffer from areas of poor connectivity, with some areas of my constituency ranking in the worst 10% in the country. As we increasingly rely on digital banking services, blanket connectivity is becoming increasingly important. We must continue our investment in digital connectivity to mitigate the impact of branch closures and to allow people to utilise the technology of today. It is clear though that for some of the older generation, the digital era will already have passed them by. Expecting them to bank digitally is simply not realistic and in cases such as these, the post office must be advertised as the new place for local face-to-face banking.
I am concerned that banks might be reticent to advertise post office banking as they may compete in some other areas.

All businesses must adapt to stay ahead of the game and the major banks are under increasing pressure to modernise their services, with new entrants disrupting banking models for businesses and individuals. FinTech firms are creating new and efficient financial platforms, offering lower prices to consumers for financial transactions. To keep up, our major banks have to move to a more customer-centric and digital model of working.

Changes in the banking sector have revolutionised how we do business and how we handle personal finances and, overall, I believe that that has been to the benefit of society. The advent of the microchip, the internet and mobile services have fundamentally altered many of our industries, and banking is no different. Banking practices had to change to remain commercially viable and banks have had to invest in digital banking platforms, which has made life easier for most of us, but of course we must take care of those who are not willing or able use the services. These individuals must be informed of the other service providers, such as the post offices, and banks that are closing branches have a moral obligation to do that.

3.46 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate.

At the end of June, four bank branches will close in my constituency of Sedgefield. NatWest is closing two branches, one in Ferryhill and one in Newton Aycliffe. Santander is to close its branch in Newton Aycliffe, which is just across the street from the NatWest branch that is to close, and Barclays is to close its branch in Sedgefield village. This recent round of closures will deprive every community in my constituency of a bank branch except Newton Aycliffe, which will still have a Halifax, a Barclays and a TSB. It is the biggest town in the constituency, with about 30,000 people living there. The local post office still operates in these communities and offers banking facilities, but it is hardly the place to get around without a car or other means of transport.

Much banking is now done online, on a mobile app, or on the telephone, but there are still those in our communities who need to be able to walk into their local bank branch because they are not online or do not have access to a telephone or mobile, especially the elderly. I know that the banks that are closing branches in my constituency say that they recognise those concerns. NatWest, for example, has a network of community bankers—I believe the number is 1,000—around the country who will be deployed to reach out to and support vulnerable customers when a branch is closed.

All the banks have pointed out to me that how people do their banking has changed radically over the past few years. NatWest told me that the number of people using its branch network has fallen by 40% since 2014. In the same period, mobile transactions have increased by 73% and, in the first half of 2017, 1.1 billion mobile and online transactions were carried out by the bank’s customers. Since 2012, in the two NatWest branches in my constituency, 88% of the customers in Ferryhill and 89% of the customers in Newton Aycliffe have banked in other ways. Transactions at the Ferryhill branch have fallen by 30% and at Newton Aycliffe the figure was 34%. The number of customers using both branches has fallen to between 60 and 100 a week, although whenever I speak to customers who use the branches they always say that there are queues and that they are busy. The reality for customers seems to be completely different from the statistics revealed by the branch. It is a similar story with Santander in Newton Aycliffe. Santander says that 91% of customers use other means of banking besides walking into the local branch. Some 45% use other Santander branches and 40% use their mobiles to do online banking.

I used to live near Sedgefield village, and I can always remember there being a Barclays bank there. I asked how long a branch had been there and was told that there had been a Barclays in that same building in Sedgefield for nearly 100 years. Now, Barclays says that 74% of its customers use other forms of banking. Of 5,000 customers, 22% use the branch exclusively for their banking. Barclays has identified 200 people it considers vulnerable and tells me that it is proactively contacting them to help with their future banking needs. Overall, the number of transactions at the branch has fallen by 17%, whereas in the wider region the fall has been 12%.

Every major bank is closing branches. The hon. Gentleman is giving a fine speech. Does he agree that the large number of closures throughout the United Kingdom have badly affected elderly constituents and those who are disabled? Soon, there will be no banks within large radiiuses around most of our towns and people will resort to putting money under the bed again, just as they had to do in my grandmother’s day. The humanity has gone out of banking.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is giving a fine speech. Does he agree that the large number of closures throughout the United Kingdom have badly affected elderly constituents and those who are disabled? Soon, there will be no banks within large radiiuses around most of our towns and people will resort to putting money under the bed again, just as they had to do in my grandmother’s day. The humanity has gone out of banking.

Phil Wilson: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. There has to be a social conscience in banking, and it should not just be for the public sector to sort out. The private sector has to be part of it.

We cannot deny the growing trend in banking being done online and by mobile phone and telephone. Barclays pointed out to me that on average its customers use mobile banking more than 28 times a month and visit a branch less than twice a month. The bank carries out 12 digital transactions a second and, since 2014, has started to use video banking.

The way we bank is changing. and it is not just a UK phenomenon; it is happening across mainland Europe, too. According to data from the House of Commons Library, by the end of 2016, the number of bank branches in Germany had fallen to something like 32,000, which was
a reduction of nearly 6% on the year before. In France, where there has been more robust opposition to branch closures—apparently, it is more difficult to close branches in France than elsewhere—Société Générale has announced the closure of 20% of its branch network by 2020. That bank is going to close one in five branches. However, the French bank branch network is still extensive, with six branches per 10,000 head of population, which I believe is the highest proportion in the EU. In Spain, 10,000 branches were closed between 2012 and 2016. Banking is changing, driven by technology that is obviously convenient to the vast majority of customers.

I would like the Minister to address two areas of concern. First, what more can the Government do and what work are they undertaking with the financial sector to encourage banks to look after their vulnerable customers so that they are not left behind? There is also a wider concern. Rural areas, such as County Durham, are seeing the destruction of rural bus services and there are issues with whether broadband provision is sufficient to allow customers to access the internet and therefore access online banking in the first place.

Secondly, the closure of bank branches highlights a key problem that faces our town centres. For example, the Newton Aycliffe town centre has been controversial for many years. Although Freshwater, the shopping centre's owner, has invested in the centre and won awards for its efforts, the closure of two bank branches will only add to the number of already vacant shops. This is not a story reserved for Newton Aycliffe; it is true of town centres throughout the country. Town centres need to be more leisure-focused, with bars, restaurants and coffee shops, as retail moves online, where people are more likely to shop—with Amazon being a case in point. As a consequence, we see many retailers quitting jobs and issuing profit warnings. I make this request to the banking sector: look at how you can change your offer on the high street; look at how you can make the physical bank presence more affordable and more accessible; and look at whether there is a way to merge banking with leisure, such as, for example, placing bank branches within a café.

The closure of banks does not happen in isolation. It affects vulnerable people, it affects our towns and their way of life. The banks must remember that, although there is a trend with new technology towards online banking, other people can be left behind; and there is a life that is offline as well as online. All I ask is for the banks to think creatively, because they, too, have a social obligation to their customers, not just to their bottom line.

3.55 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): We have had a debate of extreme unity, between parties, between regions and between countries. It is fair to say that every MP in the House is concerned about the rapid closure of the banking network. I particularly wish to salute the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth).

It feels like we are seeing a rapid change in high street banking, at a rate that I have never seen before. The reason for that is probably to do with us—the consumer. We have gone down the route that the banks have encouraged: taking the contactless route and using mobile and internet banking. We no longer use cheques for our transactions, because, first, we cannot find our cheque book, and secondly, we have to find an envelope and a stamp.

We have all fallen, probably rightly, for the seduction of the ease and speed of online banking. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) said very clearly, the volume of cash transactions in society is now below 50%. Even though we have the advance of the cashless society—I am sure that is warmly welcomed by the Treasury, because it means that most transactions can be appropriately taxed—it will be a very long while, probably a number of decades yet, before cash is completely out of the system.

There are a number of cash businesses; every constituency has them. My fear is that, when banking facilities move further and further away from those businesses, the amount of cash that is held in their premises and the homes of their owners, and perhaps in their safes, will become bigger and bigger, and with that will come security risks. There are security risks for the staff who are responsible for taking that cash to a bank that is increasing in size and further away.

Ruth Smeeth: One issue that has been raised with me by my constituents is to do with community groups that fundraise and hold big one-day festivals. They generate cash on that day, but, unlike businesses, which may be able to mitigate some of the problems, they may have volunteers who never have done anything like it before. That is a huge issue. Unfortunately, the post office will take cash deposits of only £2,000, which makes it even harder for them.

Craig Mackinlay: The hon. Lady makes the perfect point. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said very clearly that, when charities hold grand county fairs, there may be temporary traders who do not have contactless facilities and will not at any time that I can foresee, which makes it a very cash-based business. There are also clubs and societies that rely on cash and cheques for the small transactions among themselves.

I recall, not that long ago—I do not want to single out NatWest for any particular criticism—an advert that said, “We are open all the time. We are keeping our branches.” It was criticising its competitors, saying, “Ah, look, our competitor banks have made your bank into a new trendy wine bar.” I am afraid that we are seeing far too many of those across the country. I recall very clearly that my first bank account was at Lloyds 33 years ago. That branch, which had been there for 50 years or more, is now a quite nice Cypriot restaurant. That highlights the point that the network is disappearing in my constituency in particular. Broadstairs has lost NatWest and Lloyds in this last year alone.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) mentioned her petitions. I also generated a petition, and the regional director for NatWest very kindly came to my offices and I delivered it to him. I received the warm words, “We’re consulting.” But of course, the outcome was probably determined some time before the petition was even thought about. Sandwich, one of the best preserved medieval towns in the country, has lost HSBC, Lloyds and NatWest in the last 18 months alone. Broadstairs and Sandwich are both now left only with Nationwide and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said very clearly that, in my constituency is to do with community groups that

Clydebank Closures
Members, but whenever I pay in a cheque—my heart sinks when I receive a cheque in the post, because it means I have to wander somewhere to do something with it—the queues seem as long as they ever were.

Much has been said about the post office network, which is fantastic, but it is not always available and the queues are horrendous. The post office has closed in the small village of Ash in South Thanet—I say village, but it is getting towards town size, with a population of 3,500. We hope that the post office will be resurrected in a new branch or shop, but there is currently absolutely nothing available for the people of Ash, who are five miles from Sandwich, 16 miles from Canterbury and eight miles from Ramsgate.

Why do we not all use mobile apps and the internet? Well, that is all very well, but I do not want the elderly to be forced into accepting that type of banking, and people who have difficulties but are managing independent living need help with those kinds of facilities. My father is in his 80s, and is fit and well, but I do not want him to use mobile banking under any circumstances, because it is not uncommon for him to say to me, “Oh, I’ve had an email from Santander and I don’t even bank with Santander.” That is exactly the point. Many of us here, particularly those who are younger than me, are very internet-savvy and would recognise a scam banking email, but many of the elderly would not recognise it and might respond, giving up their internet banking details.

There are clarion calls across the House, mainly—dare I say?—from the Opposition, that it is up to the Government to do something. We often hear Members saying that the Government should do this or the Government should do that. In fact, we see it on the Order Paper on an almost daily basis. I do not think that this is a matter for the Government, although they can help to inform the debate. This afternoon, Members from all parties are saying loudly and clearly to the banks, “Stop what you’re doing and start thinking again about the communities you serve.”

Much has been said about the opportunity for joint banking facilities. That would be a very sensible route to take. I appreciate that a premises costs a lot of money, as it has to be heated and there are business rates, staff and security to pay. But surely three, four or five of the major banks could come together in some kind of grand banking hall, sharing facilities so that counter service is available. The call today is, “Banks, please do something.” They could also extend the availability of their mobile, caravan-type, irregular banking facilities that can go to smaller communities; I cannot see why that option should not be available.

We are all responsible for this situation. I am still a bit of a cash person. I even go into the bank and sign a cheque for cash. It was not many years ago that the cashier said, “Why don’t you use the cash point?” Of course, I do use cash points, but if I am passing the bank I often cash a cheque. I said, “Don’t put yourself out of a job. If more and more of us do that, you’re sounding the death knell of this branch.”

We see these changes here in the cafes in this House. I am always quite amazed that some of the younger people who work here will use a contactless card for their sandwich and a cup of coffee costing £1.90. I am not like that, but I can see that my own level of card use is increasing as the years go by. At the moment, I will use a card over the level of £20, but I am increasingly tempted to go for the contactless card under that £20 limit. I recommend that Members encourage our constituents to get into the banks that still exist and use their counter facilities, because then the banks will not be able to say, “We’re closing because we’re not getting used enough.” The cross-party clarion call from this Chamber today has to be: “Banks, please stop. Let’s think again. Let’s work together. We want more joint facilities and more mobile caravan-type banking facilities going to our communities.” We can all do our bit by getting into the banks and using them.
That was despite the fact that we had outlined the particular need for the branch to remain, given the needs of the rural community and those who are already isolated. In Kircubbin village, farmers and fishermen had banked at Ulster Bank for umpteen years. People from businesses in the village had strolled down to their bank, because it was within walking distance. We had an elderly population who looked on the bank as more than a bank, because they had a relationship with the people in it as well. Those things were lost. Now we have a credit union that has started up. I hope that it can fill some of the vacancy, but it cannot fill it all given the very nature of what it does.

I have real concern that these decisions are made by big banks that look only at the profit of the bank, not profit across the Province, and that they are not rural-proofing. Rural-proofing has to be part of the decision making process. Hopefully the Minister will give us some idea of whether, in his discussions with the bank, he has been able to raise the issue of rural-proofing and how it affects rural communities.

I believe that customers in Kircubbin who pay the same charges as customers in Belfast should receive a similar service. That is clearly not the case. It has once again come to pass that living in the country means being isolated and away from face-to-face interaction, which is an essential part of the banking trade.

Every one of us remembers our introduction to a bank. I remember well the first loan I took out from the bank. I will not go into detail, but the bank manager was most accommodating. To be truthful, the way we got our loan would never happen today. It was done very quickly, with the knowledge of me, and probably of my parents and their solid banking over some 30 or 40 years.

I put forward the case for Kircubbin, and particularly the needs of the fishermen and farmers in the area, and asked what would be offered to help those valued customers. I must say, I am still disappointed and annoyed. I was somewhat grateful that as opposed to walking away, as many banks have done with a “Too bad, so sad” attitude, the bank has committed to a leave-behind service that will take the form of a one-day-a-week community banker who will work from an office space or business in the town to help with one-on-one issues.

We have secured a mobile bank once a week in Kircubbin village and other areas in the peninsula—an option that the hon. Member for South Thanet referred to. The elderly can get to that mobile bank, and other areas in the peninsula—particularly in my constituency. We do not let children internet-bank because we attempt to protect their interests, especially in my constituency. We do not let children internet-bank because we attempt to protect their interests, and yet they are more computer-savvy than a 65-year-old retired fisherman who we try to force this new way on.

I recently spoke in the RBS debate—it is nice to see the Minister in his place again, and we look forward to his response—and I again make clear that this is not a witch hunt against any particular banks. I have been impressed with their aftercare when they have pulled out of an area, as they have in areas such as Kircubbin and Killyleagh. Time did not permit me in the last debate to read out my closing remarks, so I will use them today.

I call for a return to the old-fashioned codes of truth, honesty, fairness, common decency, integrity and transparency throughout the whole of the banking industry. I call for a return of the bank manager who has an intimate knowledge of his branch and the people who use it—they really had such knowledge—not one who glances at an online profile. Bank managers should stop closing branches, and instead get to know the people whose money they take.

I support the call for a public inquiry into the Global Restructuring Group scandal that has so terribly affected businesses in my constituency and throughout the UK. I call for compensation for small businesses and for a resolution for those in the midst of strife. I understand that RBS is a business and must run as such, but when it put its fate into our hands in this House, it was more
than simply about giving it a handout; it was a chance for us to look at how this had happened and ensure it would never happen again, and we must take this duty very seriously.

The pandemic—it is a pandemic—of rural bank closures must be addressed, and we have a duty in this place to address it. I intend to do so, and I know many others wish to do the very same. We must be a united House: united against the banks and against the closures.

4.16 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this very interesting and vital debate on a massive issue that affects communities across our nation. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made a particularly passionate and insightful speech about the impact the programme of closures will have on communities in his constituency.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this debate, and on speaking so passionately and knowledgeably in introducing it this afternoon. I also thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for his contribution, and for securing the debate through the Backbench Business Committee.

I speak with a degree of nostalgia and affection for community banking, given that I grew up around community banks. My mum has worked in retail banking for her whole career, and I remember vividly as a kid being taken down into the vaults of the Bank of Scotland in Charing Cross, where my mum worked. I also remember opening my Squirrel saver account at the Bank of Scotland, and my little plastic Bank of Scotland piggy bank, which was great.

I speak with great affection about community banks, but I also know how important they are, particularly for elderly customers and vulnerable people in the community. They develop a very close and affectionate relationship with the staff, who know them very well, understand their needs and are able to accommodate them. It is a form of personal interaction that builds affectionate relationships and a long-term engagement with banks, and those relationships are hugely valuable for the banks. I would have hoped that more banks recognised how important such personal interaction is for communities—it is vital—and how it contributes to them.

It is a shame to think that that bank in Charing Cross is now a Starbucks. That shows that this is a long-term process of withdrawal from communities, and we must challenge it because our communities are approaching a real cliff edge. My worry is that the programme of bank closures that we have observed, particularly in recent years, appears to target the poorest communities in our society disproportionately. Well over 1,000 branches have closed in the past two years alone.

In my constituency of Glasgow North East, where unemployment is twice the national average—I would add that it has had the lowest turnout in elections in any constituency, which perhaps shows the level of disengagement of many people—we have had the closure of the RBS branches in Possilpark, one of the poorest communities not only in Glasgow but in Scotland, and on Alexandra Parade in Dennistoun in recent months, followed by the closure of the Clydesdale bank in Springburn.

It was a cruel irony that, when I went down to look at the Clydesdale bank branch on Springburn Way, next to the shopping centre, I saw a branch of BrightHouse doing good business—it was doing a roaring trade. BrightHouse is a rapacious organisation that fleeces the poorest communities in our society by, I would argue, mis-selling consumer goods at outrageous rates of interest. That is also something we should challenge. As more people are forced out of normal commercial banking into the hands of these rapacious lenders, such lenders have to be challenged.

Ged Killen: My hon. Friend is talking about poorer communities being left behind by these banking changes, and he is absolutely right. Although the recent stay of execution for 10 branches in rural areas of Scotland is welcome, there are some of the wealthiest communities in Scotland, and three of the banks being saved are in the constituency of the Secretary of State for Scotland. The Government are the majority shareholder of RBS, so surely there is a role for RBS to step in and look after more such deprived communities?

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is correct, and that is one thing we do not see—I have tried to piece together the evidence, but it is not nationally recorded. What is the density of banking operations in the poorest communities in our society? Data is not gathered on that issue. Possilpark and Springburn fall into the most deprived decile on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, including for employment, health, education and housing. That seems to be the case for a lot of areas with branch closures, certainly in the Glasgow area, and it would be interesting if the Government could oblige banks to provide the data as a matter of national standards. By contrast, in the wealthiest parts of the city—I took the example of Byres Road, which is arguably the wealthiest postcode in Glasgow—every major bank is represented. Banks seem to be withdrawing from the poorest communities while maintaining their services in the richest parts of the city, and if that is extrapolated across the UK, it paints a dismal picture.

It has been argued that bank closures are a reality of technological change because more people are using online banking services. In reality, however, 2 million Scots do not use online banking, and they are disproportionately older people who are not familiar with the change in technology. We must be realistic about the rate of change and how practical it is, so as to reduce the harm caused to society and prevent the generational dislocation that is evidently occurring. More than one third of people who use the services of Citizens Advice Scotland have no or limited internet access. How will they access finance and banking if the major commercial banks disinvest in their local communities? Such closures are not just driven by technological change.

It is a great privilege to be a council member of the Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Scotland, and the banking sector is a huge driver of innovation in the society. As has been said, we have seen huge technological changes, and one great British innovation that sticks out for me is the ATM. In 2016, the Scot James Goodfellow was inducted into the Scottish
Engineering Hall of Fame for his work in inventing and patenting the first ATM in 1966. He did that in response to the desire by the major commercial clearing banks to close on Saturday mornings. People were trying to find a technological way to accommodate that desire, and that is how the ATM came into being and why it is so ubiquitous on our high streets today. We must harness technological change for the public good, not simply use it as a cop-out or an excuse to ridiculously disinvest from our communities at an inappropriate rate. We in the House must challenge that and adapt technological change for the public good; we cannot leave the banks to be judge and jury about the way that such change should occur.

I mentioned that closures are not just driven by technological change, and we must consider the banking sector in the UK. Five of the major commercial banks hold 85% of all current accounts, and personal banking services are combined with riskier investment banking activities. That is symptomatic of a very difficult and high-risk sector that in the last decade alone threatened our national prosperity with the banking crash.

The banking system in this country is an oligopoly and one of the most centralised systems in the world. As Adam Smith recognised, profit-seeking behaviour runs contrary to the common good and the creation of national wealth—we should always remember that when considering this issue. Germany has more than 400 local savings banks, known as Sparkassen, 1,000 co-operative run banks, and 300 private commercial banks, and that contrasts with the five massive banks in this country. Those banks in Germany are characterised by providing “patient finance”, not just to households and consumers but also—critically—to industry.

When James Goodfellow made his speech while being inducted into the Engineering Hall of Fame, he said that the greatest regret of his career was that ATMs were patented and invented in this country, yet they are not built or manufactured here. We have not benefited from this country’s industrial innovation, and our industrial strategy is symptomatic of our banking sector. We do not finance industrial growth because we are seeking high-risk, high-return profit in the City; we are not investing in the real economy, and that contrasts with the German banking system.

Why does Germany have the largest manufacturing sector in Europe, and one of the largest in the world? Because its banking system is resilient enough to underpin patient finance and allow real industrial growth and long-term economic resilience. We see that with German investment in machinery and a productive economy, and with their productivity rate—German workers produce in four days what UK workers produce in five. If we look at that as a broader symptom of malaise in banking and industry, we have to grip it and address it at all levels.

That is why I am so proud to stand here as one of the 39 Co-operative party Members of Parliament: the largest ever group of Co-operative MPs in Parliament and the third-largest party group in this House. The Co-operative party has long recognised the structural problems in society, which is why it proposes turning RBS into a mutual owned by its members and run in a not-for-profit manner in the public interest. The case for that is clearly self-evident and vital: we need that disruptive intervention in the sector.

We want to create a legislative mechanism to support the development of credit unions in the United Kingdom, one perhaps based on the US Community Reinvestment Act 1977, which I think was mentioned previously. The key innovation of the Act, introduced under the Carter Administration, was to combat discrimination and provide access to credit for low and moderate-income communities. If we reflect on the nature of bank closures in the UK, it is highly likely that they disproportionately affect the poorest communities. In the United States, that was known as “redlining”: banks essentially blacklisted communities they thought not worthy of investment. We can make the accusation that that is happening today in this country, albeit on an informal and opaque basis. It is about time a light was shone on the reality of the economic dislocation happening in our poorest communities.

Legislation similar to the Community Reinvestment Act would combat that discrimination by providing access to credit for low and moderate-income communities. It would apply a rating to banks based on their density of operation in poorer areas. In the US, investment credit unions are included as a CRA activity, meaning that the credit union sector is worth billions of dollars and it competes on an equal footing with commercial banks. Santander’s operations in the United States contrast with its operations in the UK: an £11 billion five-year commitment to support community benefits. An increase of 50% was announced in the US. It does not extend its American community reinvestment activity to the UK, because there is no legislative or regulatory imperative to do so.

The picture in the UK today is one of perilous dislocation, with banks withdrawing from our most vulnerable communities. It is the duty of this House and this Government not simply to capitulate to free market dogma, but to temper and control that market in the public interest.

4.26 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate, although I wish it were not necessary. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for securing the debate and for her comprehensive opening speech.

The speeches we have heard today show there are common concerns across the United Kingdom about the stampede of the banks out of our communities. We are all very concerned. We have had the announcement of yet more bank closures by RBS, with a further 62 branches closing in Scotland. Ten have been reprieved for the moment, following negotiations with the Scottish National party leadership. I agree that that does not go far enough. It certainly does not—

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: In a moment.

It certainly does not do anything for my constituency, but I am not mean-spirited enough not to recognise when progress is made. I know the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) would rather cut his own head off than give the SNP any credit for anything, but I really think he should be more gracious in this case. He said that this was as a result of concerns expressed by all parties, but the fact is that around the negotiation table there was the SNP and RBS—nobody else. So I really do think that he might perhaps put that in his pipe and smoke it.
John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will not give way. You’ve put the boot in and the boot’s been put back, so we will leave it at that.

I would be disturbed by the fact that the UK Government, despite being the major shareholder in RBS, has not lifted a finger—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman chunter from a sedentary position, driven by his hatred of the SNP and his lack of concern for communities who have been offered a reprieve. It really is quite sad, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is concerning that the UK Government, despite the taxpayer being the major shareholder in RBS, have not lifted a single finger to encourage or force RBS to pause its closure programme and carry out impact assessments or consultations with the communities affected.

John Lamont rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I think the hon. Lady has said she is not giving way. She has a short amount of time in which to speak.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is disappointing that the UK Government have not lifted a single finger on behalf of the taxpayer to do anything to protect the communities affected by the bank closures. I am disturbed that the UK Government, as the major shareholder, were not consulted about the closures either. That is deeply unfortunate and raises a lot of questions.

I am pleased—other Members may not be—for the communities whose banks have been reprieved, but it does nothing for my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, who still face the prospect of losing three banks in Saltcoats, Kilbirnie and Kilwinning. Vowing not to close the last bank in town is something that RBS has now sought to disassociate itself from. That sounded good at the time to the PR companies, but it has not bothered to continue—

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman is being extremely rude. As I said, he is driven not by concern about banking communities but by his hatred of the SNP. It really is rather pathetic.

It sounded good to RBS when it said that it would not close the last bank in town, but that has long been abandoned. As a result, Kilwinning—a town of around 16,000 people—now faces the prospect of losing three banks in Saltcoats, Kilbirnie and Kilwinning. Vowing not to close the last bank in town is something that RBS has now sought to disassociate itself from. That sounded good at the time to the PR companies, but it has not bothered to continue—

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: RBS intends to add Kilwinning to the list. I honestly do not think that any other constituency in the United Kingdom has been so adversely and cruelly hit. Indeed, the banks are stampeding out of Ayrshire at an alarming and staggering rate.

People have talked today about post offices picking up the slack, but the range of services that banks provide are not always available in post offices. Having a corner at the back of a Spar supermarket is no compensation for customers, who will get no privacy and not get the same level of services. Of course, it was only 10 short years ago that our post offices were under attack and stampeding out of our towns.

I cannot overstate the sense of anger and betrayal felt by these and similarly affected communities across the United Kingdom. From a bank that was bailed out by the taxpayer to secure its very survival, due to its own incompetence—a bank that is still 73% owned by the taxpayer—this is a bitter pill to swallow. That pill is made all the more bitter by the fact that, last year, that very bank paid out £16 million in bonuses. The culture of excessive bonuses lives on, while the customer and taxpayer continue to suffer.

The UK Government retain all legislative and regulatory powers in respect of financial services, so they do indeed have the authority to call a halt—a pause—to the devastating round of closures while banks, stakeholders and the UK and Scottish Governments consider how best to take account of the obligation to banking customers and our communities. Whatever the banks may say, they do have an obligation to our communities—a service obligation, a financial obligation and, I would argue, a moral obligation.

Let us be clear: the bank closures mean that the affected communities no longer have access to day-to-day essential banking services. They mean that my constituents in Kilbirnie must undertake a round trip of 18.8 miles to access their new so-called “local” bank, with most relying on public transport to do so. They mean that RBS customers in Saltcoats are being directed to the next RBS, which is a round trip of 12.8 miles, and Kilwinning customers are being asked to undertake a round trip of 6.8 miles to visit their new “local” branch.

All of that is before we even get to the impact on local businesses, which are increasingly finding themselves without access to night safes. If local businesses cannot bank their takings at the end of the business day, they must incur an extra insurance charge for keeping the cash overnight, with all the security implications of that. These small businesses are the backbone of our communities and our local economy. Make no mistake: to leave a town with no bank is financial and social exclusion.

I have been told by RBS that the branches closed in Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie in my constituency will be replaced by mobile banks. That is not what constituents want. The mobile banks are not reliable, are not disability-compliant and are a poor substitute for the presence of a bank in our towns.

We will continue to fight these closures. We will continue to collect our parliamentary petition signatures because RBS must understand that the people of North Ayrshire and Arran, the people of Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie, will not sit quietly and take the poor treatment that has been meted out to them. I urge the
Minister to use all the means at his disposal, as the majority shareholder, on behalf of us, the taxpayer, to sort this matter out and order the banks to pause, consult communities and do the right thing. This matter will not go away.

4.36 pm  
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing the debate, in collaboration with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). It has been an excellent debate. Many examples were cited, and there was cross-party acknowledgment of the devastating impact on all our communities of the closure of branches of a variety of banks.

The point about the impact on accessibility was well made. Members spoke about the impact on individuals and communities. As the Social Market Foundation points out, 11% of the population rely completely on high street bank branches, and that is typically the older and poorer parts of our communities. This is an example of financial exclusion, and it is a real problem throughout the country. Only 30% of the over-65 population use online banking. That is of particular importance in constituencies such as mine, which is in the top 20 of constituencies for people aged over 65. That is a real cause for concern, to which I shall return later, with examples from my constituency.

Individuals and businesses need banking services to suit their needs. A British Banking Association survey found that 58% of people surveyed stated that access to a branch—using a branch—was important to them, and 57% believed that face-to-face relationships with their bank were important. Those figures go up for businesses: for SMEs, the figures are that 68% believe that a branch is important and that 66% find that face-to-face banking is important. Therefore, the impact of branch closures is felt by individuals in their personal banking and for business banking, with particular impacts on our high streets—our communities. The Federation of Small Businesses warns that it is a great worry for its members that many now struggle to do the banking that they need.

In my constituency, in the last few years alone, we have seen closures of RBS, TSB, the Co-op bank, HBOS and HSBC branches. Alongside those we have seen significant post office closures. I agree with the Members who spoke about the important role that the post office network plays in providing banking services. Unfortunately, I see no evidence of co-ordination between the banks and the Post Office to ensure that post offices provide services in place of banks when there are closures.

In one of the three towns in my constituency—the town of Maghull, where I live—we have seen significant closures, adding Barclays to the list that I gave. The RBS branch in Maghull now opens for only two days, Monday and Friday. As was pointed out to me today by a constituent whose business has to bank the takings every day, that is absolutely hopeless. What are businesses to do on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday?

NatWest’s justification—it is online and anyone can see it—for the closure of its branch in Maghull includes the point that it is only 3.4 miles to the nearest bank, but that is hopeless if people cannot travel there by bus or car. For many older people, it is completely out of the question. NatWest also states that it consulted its local MP: it clearly thinks that everything is OK because it asked me whether it was all right to close the branch. I did not say that it was, by the way.

We have heard some excellent speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North made points similar to mine about closures in the towns that she represents. She spoke about the vital function of bank branches for businesses depositing the day’s takings, and about the impact of the proposed closure of the LINK network. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) spoke about NatWest closures, and said that his constituency now contains only one bank to serve all the communities there. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), among others, mentioned the lack of awareness of post office services. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley made a powerful case—

Caroline Flint: Right hon.

Bill Esterson: I am very sorry—my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley. I am pleased to be able to set the record straight.

Caroline Flint: I worked hard for that.

Bill Esterson: My right hon. Friend is working very hard on this campaign, as well as having worked hard to achieve that recognition in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) mentioned the RBS closures, as did other Members in all parts of the House. Some spoke in a very heated way and no love was lost on a couple of occasions. An important point was made about the limited response of RBS to the concern that was being expressed about the closures. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) drew attention to the key role of banks in attracting footfall and trade for other local businesses. He rightly spoke of the importance of Labour’s regional banking offer and the opportunity that it presents for community banking.

Like other Members who spoke, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) represents an area that contains only one bank branch to serve all her constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) mentioned bus services and said that many of his constituents did not have access to the internet or phone. He also spoke about the impact on his local town centres. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East said that bank branch closures hit the poorest communities hardest. He also rightly observed that we might do well to emulate and learn from the successful arrangements in Germany.

These branch closures are happening at a time when banks are making healthy profits. We have to wonder who the customers are, and whether the banks have lost sight of the fact that it is the personal and business banking customers who are their customers. I always thought that putting customers first was the way for a business to operate and succeed. That was certainly a lesson that I learned when I ran a business.

Has the time come to put public good ahead of short-term profit? The challenger banks—such as Metro, which is open seven days a week, and the Bank of Dave, which results from the entrepreneurial approach taken by Dave Fishwick in Burnley—have demonstrated that
it is possible to make a success of a bank branch. Is it time for banks and financial services to be seen as a utility, an essential public service that delivers for customers—for high streets, communities and small businesses? We regulate the financial services sector now, and I can tell the Minister that if the Government will not add to that regulation by addressing this issue, a Labour Government certainly will. We will ensure that no closure can happen without proper local consultation, and, crucially, without the approval of the Financial Conduct Authority.

I cannot conclude without mentioning the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who mentioned RBS and GRG: the systematic abuse, the intentional and co-ordinated approach of management, the clear RBS board responsibility for the mistreatment of small businesses. That serves as another reminder that the current attitude and approach of banks is not what is needed by their customers.

Government must intervene so that the banks work for us. As a number of right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, the banking access protocol has not delivered. There is an impact on communities, travel, public transport, the environment, economies and businesses from lowering footfall, and there is lower lending in places without bank branches. Some 10% of households do not have the internet, and only 9% of small firms approached their banks in 2016 for finance. All of these things are examples of why the banking system is not delivering.

This is not about the nostalgia of Captain Mainwaring or Walmington-on-Sea; it is about what is needed today. Face-to-face banking for business and personal customers matters, service matters, and bank branches matter and can be alongside the post office. If we put the public good first, we can be successful. The voluntary approach has not worked, and the only organisation that can ensure our banking system delivers is Government. It is time to act.

4.46 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
I commend the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for securing this debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it. We have had a lively debate with 16 Back-Bench contributions, and it has rightly aroused a lot of passion. It is the third such debate in the four weeks that I have been in post—two of them in Westminster Hall—and the banks will need to respond to what they have heard. From Strangford to Selkirk, from Newton Aycliffe to Sandwich, from Bradford on Avon to Bungay, we have heard the case made for banks to remain open, and in my constituency I will be meeting representatives from Lloyds bank tomorrow to discuss the closure of Wilton bank, which is scheduled for 19 March this year.

This is a very important issue, and I listened carefully to the observations from Members across the House on what the Government should do. They ranged from my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who, characteristically, was very reticent to see Government get involved, to the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) who, in a measured speech, held out the prospect of significant intervention from Government. I believe there is a role for Government in dealing with this issue, and I will talk about the Government’s actions to support those who require over-the-counter banking services and the Government’s commitment to widespread free access to cash.

I want to address the banking standard, too; I noted the observations of the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) about her perception of the inadequacy of the banking standard and I want to address that, as well as the concerns raised about the way that the banking services available at the post office work. I will also address the UK ATM operator LINK’s financial inclusion programme.

As Economic Secretary, I want financial services that deliver for all customers up and down this country, from Salisbury high street to the farthest reaches of the Hebrides. None the less, all hon. Members will appreciate that banking, like so many other industries, needs to respond to changing customer behaviour, which we have heard depicted by many Members in our debate. Change, which in this case is driven by the unrivalled speed of innovation in the financial services sector, is not easy to remedy. How many of us in this House regularly use our local branch, and how many of us, like me and others, manage our finances online or via our mobile phones? Ultimately, what I have repeatedly made clear in this place in the four weeks that I have been in post is that the management actions of banks are made without intervention from Government.

I hear the call from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) to intervene but, given that the Scottish Government own Prestwick airport. It is really important that we acknowledge that inconsistency and that the Government act through the regulator, and that is not a static dialogue. I have already spoken extensively to the head of the Financial Conduct Authority, and more can be done.

The Government firmly believe that these firms have a responsibility to minimise the impact of closures on communities wherever possible, which is why I am pleased to address the motion today. The Government already support a range of measures to protect access to banking services in local communities across the UK, but we must acknowledge the change that has happened. Branch footfall is falling year on year—it is down by a third since 2011, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) noted—and the number of banking app transactions has risen massively, to 932 million in 2016, which is an increase of 57% on the previous year. The Government cannot resist that; the question is what we can do with the tools available.

The access to banking standard commits all major high street banks to a series of outcomes when they decide to close a branch. There are three principal obligations. First, banks will give customers at least three months’ notice of closure. I note the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham to extend that period. They have a responsibility as soon as operational ready, and I note that RBS gave six months’ notice. Secondly, banks will work with customers after the announcement has been made to ensure that they
know how and where they can continue to bank. Thirdly—this is vital—banks are required to identify vulnerable customers and ensure that they receive all the help they need. That could mean helping customers get online for the first time, or it could mean showing them the facilities at the local post office, or ensuring that they have access to a mobile branch, a telephone banking service or a local, free-to-use ATM. Obviously, every bank will take a different approach, but the principle of the standard is that the outcome for customers will be the same.

As of July 2017, the Lending Standards Board has had responsibility for monitoring and enforcing the standard. I say to the right hon. Member for Don Valley that the board does have the power to cancel or suspend a registered firm’s registration and give directions to withdraw and deposit cash using a debit card, to use chip and pin facilities at the local post office, or ensuring that they can include the ability to check a balance, to withdraw and deposit cheques. There is an ad hoc cash deposit limit of £2,000, but the pre-printed paying-in slips, and to deposit cheques. Obviously, every bank will take a different approach, but the principle of the standard is that the outcome for customers will be the same.

Turning to the ATM network and post offices, I acknowledge that the Government have made great strides in bolstering the over-the-counter banking services available at post offices, and an extra £370 million to support that work was announced in December. UK banks and building societies reached a new commercial agreement with the Post Office that has set the standard for the banking services available in post offices, ensuring a uniform level across the 11,600 branches. Those services can include the ability to check a balance, to withdraw and deposit cash using a debit card, to use chip and pin or pre-printed paying-in slips, and to deposit cheques. There is an ad hoc cash deposit limit of £2,000, but the Post Office estimates that that covers 95% of all transactions.

We should not forget that 99.7% of people in this country now live within three miles of their local post office, and 93% live within a mile. At the autumn Budget 2017 my predecessor wrote to the Post Office and UK Finance and asked them to consider how they could fulfil the aims they have set out.

Caroline Flint: Where did the Minister get the figure of 93%—perhaps he can furnish us with the information after the debate—because I do not think that bears any relationship to the reality for many of our constituents?

John Glen: I am happy to do that.

I have written to the Post Office and UK Finance to impress upon them the importance of developing detailed joint proposals to achieve the objectives that everyone rightly requires of them. I am clear that those proposals must include the following: a shared vision for public awareness of the banking services available at the Post Office; measurable outcomes that the parties agree they can use to determine their progress in delivering that vision; specific actions that the Post Office, UK Finance and parties to the banking framework agree to take to achieve the outcomes, collectively and/or individually, and a timeline for doing so; and arrangements for measuring the impact of the specific actions on public awareness throughout the UK to ensure the outcomes are achieved. I know that colleagues from across the House feel strongly about this issue—I have heard that today—and I am determined to see progress, so I have asked for a response by the end of March. I will be happy to update the House in due course.

Several hon. Members mentioned access to cash, and the Government continue to work with industry to ensure the provision of widespread free access to cash. LINK, which runs the ATM network in the UK, has assured the Government that industry is committed to maintaining an extensive network of free-to-use cash machines and to ensuring that the present geographical spread of ATMs is maintained. On 31 January, LINK announced plans to bolster its financial inclusion programme, which ensures the provision of ATMs in certain areas where demand would not otherwise make one viable, and LINK has confirmed that that will include addressing instances where the closure of a bank branch is leading to a financial inclusion problem. LINK has also specifically committed to protecting all free-to-use ATMs that are a kilometre or more from the next nearest free-to-use ATM.

In summary, I again thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove and all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon. I hope I have been able to give some reassurance that the Government recognise the frustration and disappointment caused by bank branch closures. Ultimately, the Government cannot reverse market movements or customer behaviour, and it is right that the Government do not intervene in commercial decisions that respond to such changes. However, I will continue to work to ensure that everyone, wherever they live, can access the banking services they need. This Government have taken measures to maintain access to vital banking services and to ensure that banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close. Banks will need to continue to respect and respond to Members’ engagement in that process, so I encourage every Member to keep the dialogue open with their constituents about how they can take advantage of the many options already in place.

4.57 pm

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the Minister for his response. I have a great deal of respect for him, and I wish him more luck with Lloyds tomorrow than I had. We need more clarity on a few issues, and the emphasis should be on the banking sector to resolve them, but if they will not act—so far, they have not—the Government and Parliament will have to act to hold them to account. The banks are not being imaginative, so we may have to make them.

The first issue is with LINK and access to ATMs. While I welcome the new announcement and what that may mean for access, the evidence suggests that 3,500 ATMs may close. Given what we are already seeing, that could be a challenge, so I urge the Minister to consider that more closely in addition to using the post office network. Colleagues across the House have agreed that face-to-face, personal contact is vital, and the post office network, while helpful, does not currently provide what we need from it. We also need to start talking about public transport infrastructure, so that people can access alternatives.

I thank the Minister for the debate and look forward to working with him on this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the vital importance of community-based banking; believes that national banks have a responsibility to their customers; is concerned about the effect of branch
closure announcements by Lloyds Bank, RBS/Nat West, Santander, Yorkshire Building Society and the Co-operative Bank; and calls on the Government to support measures to protect access to banking services in local communities in the UK.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 17 January, in moving my ten-minute rule Bill on tightening the regulations on private landlords, I should have declared that my wife owns two houses that she lets out. I regret that oversight, and I take this opportunity to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting his point on the record.

Superfast Broadband: North East Hertfordshire

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

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I asked for this debate to enlist the Minister’s help in getting North East Hertfordshire up to speed with superfast broadband. My constituency contains towns such as Letchworth and Royston, which already have good broadband speeds, but there are also many small rural hamlets that do not yet have superfast broadband.

North East Hertfordshire is, geographically, by far the largest constituency in Hertfordshire, yet we have a far lower level of superfast broadband coverage than other parts of the county. I ask the Minister to help me push coverage in my constituency up to the Hertfordshire average of 95% this year, and then to complete the job of reaching the target of close to 99% in 2019.

I have been pressing hard on this, and in the last year, according to the House of Commons Library, coverage in my constituency has gone up from 67% to 77%, but that is far from good enough. We need sustained efforts from Ministers, Openreach and Hertfordshire County Council’s delivery organisation, Connected Counties, to push the figure higher and quicker.

In the last few months I have discussed this matter personally with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; the managing director of Openreach, Mr Steve Haines; and the previous and present leaders of Hertfordshire County Council, the late Rob Gordon and David Williams.

Long ago it was agreed by the Government and this House that the Government would have to fund the roll-out of superfast broadband in non-commercially viable areas such as my local hamlets. Indeed, I was one of the MPs who persuaded the Government that they had to be involved. I remember lobbying Secretaries of State, including my right hon. Friends the Members for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) and for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), for such funding and being pleased with their recognition, in successive phases, of the strong case for such coverage being essential infrastructure akin to other utilities. Money was made available.

Despite my part in securing that funding, it has been disappointing and frustrating to watch the lack of progress in connecting up my rural areas. Although successive Ministers have assured me that the county as a whole has achieved first 92% and then 95% coverage, it has only recently been acknowledged that the coverage in my area has edged up at a snail’s pace to the current 84%. It is galling for my constituents to learn that ultrafast broadband is being piloted in Bishop’s Stortford when they are languishing with no coverage or with a few crumbs, such as 0.8 megabits per second. To give an example, 61% of the village of Little Hadham, which is three miles from Bishop’s Stortford, is receiving under 10 megabits per second.

It should not be forgotten that this is not a remote area. Some of the places with the worst coverage, such as those in the Hertford Rural South ward, are less than 20 miles from London. Many people now work from home for some of the week, which is encouraged for
London workers to take the strain off the transport system. My constituents, particularly those with caring responsibilities, would like the opportunity to work from home, but they cannot do it without broadband.

There is also a high number of small businesses in those areas, many encouraged by the offer of office space in former farm buildings. Diversification on farms is encouraged by our local councils and by the Government. To give another example, the villages of Weston and Sandon lie close to Stevenage. Stevenage has drawn speeds of close to 70 megabits per second, whereas 83% of Weston and Sandon is unable even to receive 10 megabits per second.

I am grateful to the Which? organisation for pointing out to me that recent data from Ofcom showed that the average download speed in North East Hertfordshire is 47.8 megabits per second, whereas neighbouring constituencies are at the 60 megabits per second mark. However, Which?’s analysis of speed tests found that the median download speed in North East Hertfordshire is only 13.9 megabits per second and a quarter of speeds recorded were less than 6.8 Mbps.

I would like to offer the Minister my analysis of the problems in the roll-out process. Connected Counties has operated with Openreach to identify areas that might not be commercially viable, with Connected Counties then offering Openreach subsidy to do the works. When take-up turns out after all to be commercially viable, Openreach returns the subsidy to Connected Counties and it can be used for less commercially viable areas. I am told this return of subsidy has happened in about 50% of cases. It seems to me that it clearly demonstrates that the subsidy has been used for many areas that are in fact commercially viable, meaning that less viable areas have had their roll-out delayed. This overcautious assessment of commercial risk has meant that those like me who pressed for subsidy for areas that are not commercially viable, such as the North East Hertfordshire hamlets, have seen it delayed and been disappointed.

Have Ministers met the chief executive of Openreach, Clive Selley, and the chief finance officer Matt Davies to discuss this and tighten up assessment procedures? Since my latest push on speeding up broadband roll-out, further progress has been made, and it has continued since the last House of Commons Library information became available. The leader of the county council has told me this week that the latest assessment puts coverage in my constituency at 84%, but it is all by fibre to the cabinet, rather than the fibre to the premises that is needed in many small hamlets.

I was staying with friends this weekend in a very rural location in deepest Suffolk and was surprised to learn that they have fibre to the premises with high speeds, when my constituents 20 miles from London have none. I have already taken up with Ministers, Openreach and Hertfordshire County Council the particular case of Wellpond Green and Westland Green, near Sandon, whose residents petitioned the House about their situation. In early 2016, many residents signed up with Gigaclear, a competitor of Openreach, for superfast broadband to be installed by March 2017. In about June 2016, Connected Counties, along with Openreach, announced that it was to install superfast broadband in those hamlets by March 2017. The effect was that many residents withdrew from Gigaclear, which decided not to go ahead.

Then in January 2017, to the anger and dismay of residents, Openreach announced that the roll-out had to be re-mapped, and in June 2017 a timetable of 2018-19 was given for superfast broadband. That caused understandable outrage, as the residents had only decided not to proceed with Gigaclear because Openreach had offered the same timetable of March 2017.

I have discussed that unacceptable situation with all those involved and was pleased that Steve Haines of Openreach agreed to bring forward the start of works in the hamlets to June 2018, but the Minister should be aware of the great unhappiness locally with what has happened. Anything she can do to encourage Openreach to bring forward the works even further would be very helpful.

I recognise that the national roll-out is an enormous undertaking with a limited number of providers in the field. Nationally, a great deal has been achieved. However, the subsidy for which I campaigned was designed to ensure that areas that were not commercially viable were connected up. In the past year we have seen coverage in my constituency driven up from 67% to the current 84%, up 17%, but I want to see us hit the county average before the end of 2018 and the national target as soon after that as possible. In this day and age, people living in rural locations near London expect superfast broadband, and it is in the Government’s interest to achieve it. I hope the Minister will ask Openreach, Connected Counties and Hertfordshire County Council to do all they can to ensure that North East Hertfordshire comes up to speed this year and that the unfairness for Wellpond and Westland Greens is addressed now.

5.9 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) for securing this debate and for his extremely well-informed speech, from which I learned a great deal and which I shall read again after the debate. He has clearly been involved in this issue for a long time and has outstanding knowledge of the problems. This debate gives me the opportunity to update the House on the Government’s plans and progress towards ensuring universal high-speed broadband.

Broadband connectivity is crucial, even more so in rural communities throughout the UK than in our urban centres. The Government and local partners are investing £1.7 billion in the superfast broadband programme. The programme has provided superfast coverage with speeds of more than 24 megabits per second for more than 4.75 million premises in areas that otherwise would not have been covered by a commercially funded roll-out. Some 95% of homes and businesses in the UK can now access superfast broadband, up from 45% in 2010. As a result of efficiency savings in the initial roll-out, at least £210 million of funding will be available to support further investment. Because of the high levels of take-up, we will also have gainshare funding from the additional profits from the network, projected to reach at least £527 million. That means that a total of £737 million will be available to support further roll-out.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire will recognise that improvements have been achieved in his constituency over the past few years, and he quoted some figures. Since the beginning
of last year, superfast coverage in his constituency has increased from 71% to 84%, while 92% of premises have speeds of 10 Mbps or above. The Connected Counties project, to which my right hon. and learned Friend referred, is delivering across both Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and has to date provided superfast broadband access to more than 71,000 premises that otherwise would have been left behind. That equates to more than 96% superfast coverage across Hertfordshire. Additionally, 23,000 premises are still to be covered through the project’s current roll-out plans.

Beyond the scope of the Connected Counties project, Hertfordshire County Council is progressing the option of a new procurement exercise. I understand that the council has already undertaken an open market review to understand the latest commercial plans in the county. That is evidence of the council’s commitment to ensuring that areas are not left behind.

I recognise that the communities that have not yet got coverage—my right hon. and learned Friend referred to some of them—will feel left out. In the case of Hertfordshire, the local authority has managed the current delivery contract with BT to maximise coverage to as many premises as possible, as quickly as possible. That can sometimes leave gaps on the ground where some areas are covered and adjacent areas are not, as my right hon. and learned Friend outlined in his speech. However, the alternative would have been to prioritise some communities over others during the roll-out, which would have been less efficient and would have involved the local authority in making invidious choices to determine which communities should get covered first. In that context, the approach taken by Hertfordshire County Council seems reasonable. Broadband Delivery UK has managed the programme effectively. Very few major infrastructure projects achieve their delivery target on schedule and with so much funding being returned.

I recognise the need to ensure that new housing has superfast coverage. Openreach has committed that all new build developments with at least 30 properties will have fibre to the premises. That will ensure that almost all new houses have full fibre access. We are also continuing to focus very much on the remaining 5% of premises that do not yet have superfast access. Across the UK as a whole, we are confident that at least half the remaining premises will get that superfast coverage through the continued roll-out.

However, even with this further delivery, some premises will remain without the superfast broadband that they need. We are therefore working hard on our commitment to ensure universal high-speed broadband of at least 10 Mbps by 2020. We will shortly set out the design for a legal right to high-speed broadband in secondary legislation, alongside our detailed response to the consultation. Ofcom’s implementation is expected to take two years from when we lay secondary legislation, meeting the Government’s commitment of giving everyone access to high-speed broadband by 2020.

In the meantime, the Better Broadband Scheme is available for any home or business with speeds below 2 Mbps. This provides a subsidy of up to £350 for any eligible premises for satellite broadband or, where available, other fixed wireless and 4G fixed. This scheme has now supported more than 13,000 homes and businesses.

Communities that currently do not have superfast broadband can also consider the option of undertaking their own community project. Community projects can either be completely self-managed and delivered, or can involve communities co-funding with providers such as BT, via the community fibre partnerships scheme. Our focus until now has been on extending superfast broadband coverage, but we also need to move to ensure a transformation in the UK’s digital infrastructure, so that it is based on fibre, or full fibre, to the premises. Currently, only 3% of premises have a fibre-optic connection. We accept that that is not good enough. We have a target of at least 10 million premises having a full fibre connection by 2022. Recent industry announcements show that that is achievable.

In answer to my right hon. and learned Friend’s question, I have met Clive Selley, the chief executive of BT Openreach. When I next meet him, I will raise with him the debacle that my right hon. and learned Friend described when residents turned down the offer from Gigaclear on the basis that BT Openreach was apparently going to deliver on their needs in a timely manner, only for them to be let down. I do take that to heart; the residents must be deeply frustrated and upset by that, and I will raise it with Mr Selley when I next meet him.

Virgin Media, KCOM, Hyperoptic, Gigaclear and others all have plans for significant new fibre coverage. Last week, Openreach announced its plan to reach 3 million premises by 2020 and its proposals to get to 10 million by 2025 if the conditions are right. I was very pleased to hear today the TalkTalk announcement that it will reduce its dividend in order to connect 3 million new premises with full fibre. I congratulate the board of TalkTalk on that decision.

The Government have a number of measures to support full fibre roll-out. The Government’s local full fibre networks programme has six wave 1 projects under way and bids for wave 2 were received on 26 January. We expect to announce the successful wave 2 projects in March, and, in line with our manifesto commitment, we will also make full fibre connection vouchers available for companies across the country in 2018.

The digital infrastructure investment fund is now in place with Amber Fund Management Ltd and M&G Investments to provide £400 million of investment capital, alongside private capital, for new expanding providers of fibre broadband. Our barrier-busting taskforce is also now established and tackling the barriers to fibre roll-out across the UK. We are also introducing a five-year relief from business rates in England for new fibre infrastructure.

We are therefore making good progress in providing rural broadband coverage, but we recognise that we need to finish the job and it is our intention to do that fully. We will also be pushing hard on full fibre coverage. I welcome the continued interest and support from the Members of this House, and their expertise—particularly that of my right hon. and learned Friend—as I continue to drive this work and ensure that we deliver against our goals.

Question put and agreed to.

5.19 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 22 January 2018

[Ms Madeleine Moon in the Chair]

Leaving the European Union

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 200165 relating to leaving the European Union.

The e-petition states:

“Leave the EU immediately

The Government should walk away from the Article 50 negotiations and leave the EU immediately with no deal. The EU looks set to offer us a punishment deal out of spite. Why wait another 18 months when we could leave right away and fully take back control of our country, lawmaking powers and borders?

The EU looks set to offer us a punishment deal out of spite, insisting we pay tens of billions of pounds as part of a ‘settlement fee’ and continue to accept the jurisdiction of EU courts even after we’ve left. Meanwhile pro-EU MPs in Labour, the Lib Dems and the SNP, along with unelected Lords, are attempting to block Brexit, the longer we remain a member the more opportunity they have to interfere. Why wait almost another 2 years when we could just leave right away?”

Mrs Moon, I think we have two firsts today. It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship for what I think is the first time during my time as a member of the Petitions Committee. Secondly, I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), to her place. I was delighted to see her promotion. I know she will do a fantastic job at this important time.

We have now debated a number of petitions on the EU—I think I have become the EU specialist on the Petitions Committee, mainly because I can grab hold of the issue and speak about Brexit until the cows come home—but clearly there is still an appetite for this type of debate. The last time I looked, there were 137,542 signatures on this e-petition, and the constituencies with the highest numbers of signatures seem to be in Cornwall and a deal.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I intend to talk about the need to be optimistic. Just looking around the Chamber, I know that those gathered here to participate in the debate differ in our opinions, but we must be united in being optimistic for our prospects, whatever deal we strike with the EU. We have to talk up our economy, because the best way of creating, fostering and building up uncertainty is to talk down our economy.

That is not to say that we should be arrogant. We need to move on from this stereotypical idea that we are some sort of post-colonial power, sweeping everyone before us; that is not what we are saying at all. What we are saying is that the arguments in the referendum essentially centred on three areas: first, sovereignty and taking control of our laws; secondly, migration and making a fairer immigration system that we could better manage and better control; and thirdly, our prosperity and trade. When we leave the EU, we will take the first two back into our control. We will have a fully accountable Parliament and we will decide the laws that we pass, even if we give away or decide to share some of the responsibility for the decisions we have to make with groups such as NATO, or in areas such as environmental collaboration with relevant institutions. None the less, we will choose to do those things, so they will all come down to the UK and the UK Parliament. The position on migration will be similar. Having had the clear steer from the Government that we are ending freedom of movement, we will choose to what extent we extend visas and invitations to people with the skills and the qualities that we need and want in this country.
The one thing we cannot do on our own is build up trade partnerships, because trading, by definition, needs two sides—someone to buy and someone to sell. We are looking outward and the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade is doing a fantastic job of building up relationships with other countries; we should grab hold of the opportunities that Brexit and our ability to handle free trade agreements offer, but nobody is suggesting that we will just leave Europe, pull up the drawbridge and fail to trade with our closest partners, the 27 remaining member states of the European Union.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a responsibility for the public, industry and the Government to make the case that, if we were to crash out, the impact would be immediate in, for example, the car industry, which is a big factor in my constituency? Switching to World Trade Organisation rules immediately would lead to an increased tariff of 10% on that industry’s products, which would have a very damaging effect.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, but I challenge the language he used—“crash out”—as it goes back to what I was saying about a sense of optimism. We are right to plan for no deal, because it would be patently ridiculous if we did not have every avenue covered as we seek to build our relationships with the rest of the EU; but saying that we will “crash out” suggests that there will be no planning at all, and I just do not share the pessimism of that view. Regarding the car industry, the hon. Gentleman gives a strong argument for why we need to do a deal and why countries such as Germany, which sells 10% of its cars to us, would want to do a deal with us. We can set our tariffs as we see fit, whether that is 10% or not, if we leave without a deal, but then we would have to have a equal tariff with other countries, unless we have a free trade agreement with them.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): This is not a competition, but not only did I vote for the Referendum party in 1997, I was a member of it before I joined the Conservatives, not necessarily because I thought the negotiation would pan out. In it, he talked about how it was going to be absolutely sunny. We know it will be somewhere in between. That is a fact of life.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As a London MP like me, has the hon. Gentleman had representations from people who work in the City and are worried—based not on reading The Independent and The Guardian about Brexit because you will be going to hell in a handcart whatever you do, and don’t necessarily read things like the Daily Express, because everything is going to be absolutely sunny. We know it will be somewhere in between. That is a fact of life.

Paul Scully: Yes, I have had people talk to me about financial services. The financial services industry is important for Sutton and Cheam, for London and for the country—about 11% of our entire tax take comes from that industry, and it creates a lot of jobs. That is another good reason not to leave immediately without giving any thought to what happens to every single industry, including financial services, manufacturing, education and the medical sector. It all needs to be put in the pot.

On the idea that we need to panic about financial services, there are things we can do. This year the European Union is bringing in MiFID II—the second markets in financial instruments directive—and we had already been talking about a number of regulatory equivalence issues, at the behest of the UK, before the referendum. There is plenty more we can do, and we need to ensure that we develop that in our talks, to demonstrate that the financial services industry in London has the rule of the law that the EU is looking for, and the right time zone, language and support systems, so that it continues to be an attractive place in which to settle and remain for not just European financial institutions but worldwide ones.

On how we think the negotiation might pan out, we have to be really careful of the rhetoric. We knew how it was likely to pan out in the first place. A friend of mine, Syed Kamall, the MEP who is the leader of the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament, wrote an article—I have also heard a few of his speeches on this—in which he detailed how he thought the negotiation would pan out. In it, he talked...
about how we need to be clearer about our priorities, but not necessarily reveal our hand, and that we need to set the right tone regarding co-operation. No one is talking about the need to break up the EU; all we have said is that we are leaving the EU. We are not leaving Europe. We want to work with Europe as one of a number of trading areas around the world.

We need to understand how the EU negotiates as it tries to grab some of our markets and close down some of our discussions. That is natural: we have talked about trade, but there is an element of competition. Trade is very much a partnership; competition can get a bit more feisty, because we are looking after our own interests. We must bear in mind, of course, that not all the negotiation will be rational. To be frank, the debates we have in this place are not always rational, so imagine multiplying that by 27, with all the competing priorities in the EU. It is no accident that many free trade agreements have not been dealt with speedily. The Australian trade agreement has primarily been delayed by Italian tomato growers, and the Canadian agreement has only just come to fruition—Romanian visas were one thing stopping it. There are many little competing priorities.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The main thing is that on a number of occasions, the European Commission has been keen to press on with international trade deals but has been unable to because one member state or another has prevented it. Does that not destroy the argument that the European Commission has been imposing laws on the United Kingdom against the latter’s wishes? Is it not the case that in every major decision regarding approval of European Commission proposals, the United Kingdom has played an equal and often decisive part?

Paul Scully: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman about certainty. That was why I was explaining that we need to look at every area and sector, and every permutation and possibility. We talk about how we must do a deal—ideally, a bespoke deal that works for as many people as possible in the UK and the EU—but it may not be within our gift to do a deal. We talk about walking away, but if we do not sort out article 50 within the two years, we will walk away and no longer be members of the EU. That is what article 50 says and that is how it is.

People may talk in this debate, as they have in others, about whether article 50 is reversible. Now, I am not a lawyer but I am not too bad at grammar, and when I read article 50 I can see clearly that there is one way effectively to reverse it, and that is by getting the unanimous agreement of all the European countries to extend the deadline. That could be to something like 50 years—it could almost be like the lease on Hong Kong, with the issue pushed away to a time so far in the future that effectively we remain in the EU. Essentially, that is the only way.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a very fair speech, but does he accept that the view of Lord Kerr, the author of article 50, and the weight of legal opinion in the United Kingdom is that article 50 is unilaterally revocable by the United Kingdom?

Paul Scully: I have read what Lord Kerr said, and I accept that he has said that article 50 is revocable, but that does not make it revocable. He may have written article 50, but he is not a lawyer. He may look back and wish he had written it a bit clearer in the first place.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What about the weight of legal opinion? What about the fact that it is not only Lord Kerr, who wrote article 50, but the weight of legal opinion that says the United Kingdom can revoke article 50 without anyone’s permission but our own?

Paul Scully: There is some legal opinion that says that. The hon. Lady talks about the weight of legal opinion, but I do not agree that it is the weight of legal opinion. There are arguments about it. It is such a short paragraph, and it is pretty clear to my mind that we cannot unilaterally revoke article 50.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Is it not ironic that the lawyers who brought the case under the guidance of Gina Miller to require Parliament to enact the article 50 notification decided that article 50 was not revocable? The entire case was premised on that.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for making that powerful point.
Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The lawyers conceded that point, but it was not directly relevant to the case that was being argued.

Mr Jenkin: It was the premise of the judgment.

Antoinette Sandbach: I hear the chuntering from my hon. Friend, but the reality was that it was not the issue that was being decided on. If there was any merit in that point in the judgment, it was clearly obiter dictum, as it is called.

Paul Scully: That exchange is interesting, but it is moot, because we are off. The point is whether we are off tomorrow, as the petitioners want, or whether we are off at the end of the two years under article 50.

I sum up my remarks by saying that I understand the petitioners’ frustration and why they want to leave now. We need to speak to them, but we also need to speak to the people, some of whom are here today, who want the future situation to be as close to the status quo as possible and for us to find a middle path. We can only do that with a sense of agreement, a sense of proportionality and a sense of optimism that wherever we go in the world, we will still be trading, partnering and collaborating with Europe. Environmental pollution does not stop in the channel. Terrorist threats do not stop in the channel. We will clearly need to collaborate with our European partners.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I totally concur with him and his summary, and I urge the Government to speak out to the audience who put forward the petition, because leaving now would have such an immediate and seismic effect on our industries, such as the car industry, which is already well down—14% down on 12 months ago. Leaving now would be absolutely catastrophic. The public need to be told just what the impact would be if we jumped out tomorrow.

Paul Scully: There is plenty of uncertainty that we need to get rid of. I do not have time to start attacking some of the #DespiteBrexit things that we might otherwise go into. Yes, we need to speak to both sides. My concern is that while people are feeling disaffected on one side, we have the extreme version on the other that wants to unpick the referendum, and that is not helpful. Not only will it not happen, but it is creating even more uncertainty, particularly for EU citizens. The rhetoric around EU citizens on social media is invariably from people who want to unpick the referendum saying, “See what has happened,” and jumping on the bandwagon of things that may or may not be covered in the press, rather than being from people creating some sort of division and making others feel unwelcome. We have to be careful with the language, be optimistic and talk up our economy.

We should have confidence that we will be a single nation dealing with our own free trade agreements. That will make this country the buccaneering, maritime trading nation that it can be. As someone who has run a small business for 25 years, I know the agility and nimbleness we can have. That will stand us in good stead, but the Minister has a challenge over the next few months, because it is not going to be easy. It will be a complex negotiation, and I wish her good luck. I know we are going to get a great deal. I am optimistic that we will get a bespoke deal that will work for everyone.
non-EU citizens in the countries where they resided. Furthermore, those situations would change overnight. It would cause great uncertainty and alarm for the million-plus Britons living in the EU. People who have set up their lives in another country, who are living there peacefully and legally, would have to uproot everything if the suggestions in the petition were followed.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) that we should support the Government in trying to achieve their aims in the negotiations. I support the Government’s commitment to building a deep and enduring partnership. The announcement of sufficient progress last month throws this petition into sharper relief as it shows that a deal should be possible and that it could be more favourable than the cliff edge or crashing out. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) stated that he wanted the eventual deal to be, “of greater scope than any such existing agreement.”

That is encouraging, as it is apparent that existing trade deals such as the deal with Canada or the CETA deal do not go far enough to meet our demands, needs and interests. The issue is vital as the WTO working paper found that an ordinary FTA would cut UK exports of both goods and services to the EU by 40% relative to the current regime.

I welcome the commitment to building a global Britain, a nation committed to free trade across the globe. However, to have better arrangements with a country on the other side of the world than with the EU just the other side of the channel would be unwelcome. For Brexit to be worth it, we must see new trading partners come in in addition to, not as a replacement of, existing partnerships. I press the Minister to make sure that any deal includes the free movement of services as well as goods. The British economy is reliant on some of its financial and professional services industries for jobs and for tax revenue. Financial services exports to the EU, worth, as I have already outlined, £51 billion, are vital to our prosperity. London’s global pre-eminence and the financial services sectors in Liverpool and Manchester benefit the country as a whole.

On plan B of the WTO, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam spoke about using our time imaginatively, sensitively and constructively to make sure we do not crash out. I agree with that, and there is an alternative plan, a back-up plan, should no deal be achieved. An off-the-shelf deal of any nature would require compromise from Members of all parties. None of the options is perfect, but nor is any pragmatic proposal or plan. In fact, the European Free Trade Association would allow us to fulfil our commitment to respect the will of the people and the referendum vote. We would be outside the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. We would be free of the risk of ever-closer union, which concerned some remainers as well as leavers. Some people, even some Members, raised concerns that they were misled over the risk of ever-closer union, which concerned some and the common fisheries policy. We would be free of our services sector a significant degree of protection. The negative impact would be small, as compared to no deal on financial services, the costs of which I outlined earlier. I cannot think of a better way to demonstrate that we are leaving the EU but want to remain engaged with Europe than by joining EFTA.

Likewise, joining EFTA would have a beneficial impact on our long-term agreements with the EU, as many EFTA institutions are already recognised by the EU and relationships already exist between them. It might seem strange, but I am not alone in my positive view of EFTA. Indeed, many notable figures from the other side of the referendum debate were very positive about this arrangement.

“Wouldn’t it be terrible if we were really like Norway and Switzerland? Really? They’re rich. They’re happy. They’re self-governing”; said Nigel Farage.

“The Norwegian option, the EEA option, I think that it might be initially attractive to some business people” said Matthew Elliott from Vote Leave and Business for Britain.

“Increasingly, the Norwegian option looks the best for the UK”, said Arron Banks.

Daniel Hannan even wrote a paper for the Bruges Group entitled “The Case for EFTA”. My constituents were told that the single market was not being put at risk, that there was an option to be self-governing and to take back control and have all the benefits of the single market. They were told to vote leave because we could stay in EFTA, so I do not understand why the WTO is now plan B and not EFTA.

I hope I have made it clear from my remarks that I view the proposal of this petition as potentially devastating for jobs in my constituency. It would be a road to ruin. It endangers our prosperity and our international standing, as well as putting in jeopardy the rights of our countrymen who live on the continent. I am pleased that the Government are moving in the opposite direction to the petition, with their ambition for a deep and enduring partnership with the EU. I very much hope they are able to meet their goals and I will do what I can do support that.

I would, however, caution that this agreement must include a deal on free movement of services, especially financial and professional services, which are the basis for so much of our prosperity. Should the deal not be everything that the Government hoped and promised, the solution would be closer involvement with other international bodies such as EFTA, and not to turn our back on the liberal international order and try to go it alone.

5.8 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. When I speak in these petition debates on a Monday afternoon, it is usually because of the weight of popular opinion and the number of signatures that have been recorded in my constituency, but in the case of today’s petition, with 137,409 signatures, only 132 people in Ealing Central and Acton signed it. I had intended just to intervene, but I agreed almost 100% with what the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach)
said, which is unusual because she is on the other side, and her speech made me want to say a little more than a one-sentence intervention.

I have a couple of points to make. First, 132 out of 137,409 is 0.09%—a tiny number of people. I am a self-confessed remoaner or remainiac, as are more than 70% of my constituents. That is not even the highest percentage in Opposition seats. In the 2015 election—I have not seen the figures for 2017—we had the 25 most pro-remain seats and the 25 most pro-leave seats. The percentage of remain voters is even higher in the 25 most pro-remain seats. I do not think that anyone, even ardent leavers, could think it is a good idea to pull the plug on the negotiations—to cut the cord, put up the white flag, exit the stage, and throw in the towel—at this stage, when the negotiations are already under way. My constituent, Ruben Kenton-Harris, who is an intern in my office this term as part of his degree and whose opinion I trust on these matters, has said that he cannot understand why anyone would ever sign the petition. It makes no sense at all, because when jumping out of a plane, it is surely best to have a parachute. Going to WTO terms, with no say whatsoever, seems suicidal.

Paul Scully: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: Okay, I will. My speech is really just an outgrown intervention, so I will not take loads of interventions, but I will take the hon. Gentleman’s, because he took mine.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady. She says that she cannot see a reason why people might sign the petition. Although she might not agree with the petition, can she not see that disaffection and disassociation with this place, and some of the arguments that are being put forward, may be a good reason to sign the petition?

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman makes a wise point, which shows the danger of standing up and trying to make a speech on the spot. I agree that discontent with the system and with politics has made people sign the petition. Arguably that also explains things such as the Trump phenomenon, which was kind of a vote for “none of the above”. When people are so frustrated with elites and people in ivory towers who seem removed from their everyday lives, I can see why they might sign such petitions. However, like many things in the Brexit debate, what might look good on first glance starts to fall apart after a close look at the detail. The promise of £350 million for the NHS is one such example. I think we had a one-off injection of that amount for the winter crisis, but it was meant to be every week. That is what was promised on the side of the bus. It sounds good, but in reality it falls apart.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) talked about certainty and predictability. We live in uncertain times, so people want some sort of predictability. I do not read The Guardian in isolation—I mainly read it on Saturday for the TV guide—and I have been taking soundings from small businesses in my constituency. Park Royal, which at one stage was the biggest industrial estate in western Europe, is in my constituency, and I have visited various businesses there. Savoir Beds, in NW10, used to make hand-stitched mattresses and things for the Savoy hotel. I think it still supplies the Savoy, but its products are now available on the open market. Savoir Beds said to me early on, “Can you reverse Brexit?”

When I go to businesses I say, “Is there anything that I should be doing for you?” They all seem to be saying, “Can you reverse Brexit?” Initially, they found that their orders were going up because of the falling pound, but now that they want to buy more supplies that has come back to bite them. They have staff from all 27 member states. ChargeBox in Chiswick is really worried about that. When people go to a shopping centre, they can plug in their phone into a ChargeBox machine to charge it. Apparently, it makes sense to buy those machines, because people spend £35 more per head if there is a ChargeBox machine in a shopping centre. I visited ChargeBox the other week, and its representatives made those points to me about the talent pool from the 27 nations. That is in addition to the fact that businesses are finding the falling pound very difficult to work with, even though at one stage it might have looked like a correction.

Antoinette Sandbach: I have a business in my constituency that manufactures paper cups. I think £400,000 of investment has been lost, and more than 50 jobs could be at risk if we do not get the deal right, because 55% of its manufacturing output is exported.

Dr Huq: I completely sympathise and agree with what the hon. Lady says; I have found the same thing. There is a small business called Mooch on Northfield Avenue, near where I live. It sells knock-knacks and gifts—a bit like Paperchase, but a small-business equivalent—and it opened just before 23 June. When it had to restock, the price of everything had gone up. It has not chosen the same lines again because people think that it has just opened and already hiked up its prices. Its suppliers are based in Europe, and because of the pound, everything costs more, so Mooch deliberately had to adjust its stock. I completely agree with the hon. Lady’s point about the paper cups, and take her word for it.

It looks as if the EU negotiators have said, “Non, non, non”—that was meant to be a Belgian accent—to “Canada plus, plus, plus”, so that will not work. We have heard about the agencies and companies that are going to Frankfurt or elsewhere, such as the European Medicines Agency. I have not even got into the arguments about the impact on our regulatory framework, workers’ rights, environmental protections or many other things if we just came out with nothing in place—not to mention the impact on the 13,000 EU nationals in my constituency of Ealing Central and Acton.

In addition to Lord Kerr’s statement that article 50 could be revoked by only one side, there was a headline in Saturday’s Daily Telegraph—I accept not making exactly the same argument—which read: “UK could rejoin EU in future, says May deputy”. The argument that we could rejoin is already being entertained. Surely it would be cheaper and less troublesome simply to not leave in the first place? As I pointed out in my intervention, we were never part of the euro. I am talking in the past tense, even though we are still in the EU. We also had a generous rebate, and we were never part of the Schengen border agreement, so we were not even 100% in the EU anyway—we were perhaps only 60% in.
Some people argue that it was an advisory referendum, and only the other day the Speaker of the House of Commons said:

“People who are on the losing side are not obliged to accept that their view has been lost for ever”.

He also said:

“Democracy is not just about one vote...Democracy is a dynamic concept.”

I believe Nigel Farage has been saying that there might be a case for revisiting the decision. I imagine that he wants to do that quickly, so we do not see how bad things might really get. We used to be the world’s fifth-largest economy; we are now the sixth. The value of the pound seems to be tanking, and we have not left yet; it is early days.

Mr Speaker said:

“Commons said: ‘If a democracy cannot change its mind, it ceases to be a democracy.’”

The idea of leaving now, even before the negotiations are complete, is the opposite of that. There is a long list of people who are coming round to that perspective.

We need to indemnify ourselves. The points made by the hon. Member for Eddisbury about the single market and the customs union were very wise. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has done some modelling of what might happen in future; apparently, it may need 5,000 new staff, with a training process that can take six months. If we leave now, how would that work out? I also wonder how many of the people affected are on the Irish border. In Dover, unemployment is not massively high, so if we left right away, that would be a car crash. Moreover, Kent could turn into a huge lorry park.

Until the 2017 general election campaign started, it was almost as if the phrase “the will of the people” was deployed to shut people up. I welcome the fact that we are now having a healthy debate about the terms of Brexit, and that people such as the hon. Member for Eddisbury have voted with the Opposition on some matters. It seems as if a lid has been lifted, a genie has been let out of a bottle, and a Pandora’s box has been opened. Up until that point, it felt as if nobody was being allowed to criticise any aspect of Brexit because it was “the will of the people.” It is very important that we look at other options, such as EEA or EFTA membership. To coin a phrase used by a former Labour Prime Minister, “the will of the people.” It is very important that we look at other options, such as EEA or EFTA membership. To coin a phrase used by a former Labour Prime Minister, “the will of the people.”

That should be painted on the side of a red bus! We should always uphold our principles in this place.

5.20 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mrs Moon.

Brexit is obviously one of the biggest issues of this Parliament, and I can say as a parliamentarian of seven months’ standing that it has certainly dominated a lot of the speeches, votes and sittings I have been at so far. I will keep my contribution to this debate on e-petition 200165 relatively short.

The EU referendum was a UK-wide debate. I voted to remain, as did most of the constituencies in Scotland—we managed to get 1.4 million voting remain, against the 1 million leave voters in Scotland. Other parts of the UK did so as well, such as London, Manchester, Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Belfast. It was a UK-wide vote.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Luke Graham: I will progress the point a little further first.

There has been some talk about potential options for separation, especially in areas where we have devolution, as in Scotland or even London, which has the London Assembly—I have heard some interesting debates there—but this is not the time for more separation or driving wedges between different parts of the UK. It is a time for us to come together and work on making the best possible deal.

The e-petition highlights some of the frustration felt throughout the United Kingdom. Certainly in the lead-up to the referendum, when we were involved in some of the campaigning, it was clear that people felt forgotten and that the EU was not the only target of the day. People felt forgotten by this place, by their local councils and by their devolved Administrations, and they felt that they were not getting the right level of focus. The result came about through that and the lack of engagement by the EU—as we all know, it is not a perfect institution and at the weekend even President Macron admitted that France would probably vote to leave were that left to an open referendum. So even prime European leaders recognise the EU’s faults. In time we hope it will evolve, and even from a distance, I hope that we can still contribute positively.

As I was saying, this is a time for a little more unity and a little less division. I say to colleagues across the House, when they are talking about what kind of Britain we want to produce and how we want to move forward. Stephen Hawking when we look at the type of Britain we want to make when we leave the EU, I hope that we update our inventive, move away from 17th and 18th century references and talk more about the 21st century—I want a little less Sir Francis Drake and a little more Stephen Hawking when we look at the type of Britain we want to produce and how we want to move forward.

In my constituency, barely 0.1% of the population supported this petition, so although I welcome the debate, I do not support the view expressed in the petition—that we should “walk away” from the discussions. The negotiations we are having are fundamental to the kind of country that we want to be and a Pandora’s box has been opened. Up until that point, it felt as if nobody was being allowed to criticise any aspect of Brexit because it was “the will of the people.” It is very important that we look at other options, such as EEA or EFTA membership. To coin a phrase used by a former Labour Prime Minister, “the will of the people.”

Some of our media have been mentioned, such as The Guardian and the more left-leaning papers, but others such as the Daily Mail and the Telegraph have been really distasteful in some of their commentary. For example, putting the hon. Member for Eddisbury and others on the cover was reprehensible and appalling, as was calling for people’s heads, as it was a crazy person who went for the head of one of our own number, our friend and colleague Jo Cox—we should never lose sight of that.

I will finish with another quote from Mr Speaker, who said that

“in voting as you think fit on any political issue, you...are never mutineers...never malcontents...never enemies of the people.”—

[Luke Graham]

watching us in the negotiations; other countries and potential partners in the Commonwealth and elsewhere around the globe are watching too.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said earlier on EFTA and some of the other opportunities we might have during the negotiations, it is important that all Members do not get caught in the binary debate between, “We leave and it’s WTO,” and, “We have to be in the single market and the customs union still.” A range of European politicians have expressed the opinion that a bespoke deal is possible and other models are in place, such as EFTA, or free trade agreements that offer methods of arbitration so we do not need to use the ECJ; we could use other international mechanisms to arbitrate between the EU and us. Those options need to be explored fully, and I hope that the Minister and the Government will be looking at them completely, as well as planning for a worst-case scenario, should it arise.

For my part, since I was elected I have held Brexit updates around my constituency, in south Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Clackmannanshire, to ensure that people get some frontline feedback from Parliament and hear some of the detail from our debates. I am also a member of the Public Accounts Committee and we have been looking into the real implications for day-to-day life through not only legislation but the operation of our borders and the customs and trading regimes that might apply after Brexit. We will obviously continue our work—a raft of new reports will be coming from the Public Accounts Committee—and, for those who do not already follow the committee on Twitter, please do, because it is a riveting feed to follow.

As I said, I understand some of the frustration felt in the country when the petition was set up, but that was before the first stage of negotiations was completed just before Christmas. We can welcome some of the successes, such as the agreements on EU rights or the direction of a financial settlement—we were clear that it would not be worst-case scenario—and some of that progress before Christmas was heartening, whether we are on the leave or the remain side. I was pleased that Members from across the House welcomed some of the progress made by the Prime Minister and her team in those agreements.

For us as MPs, for Ministers and for the Government as a whole, it is important to engage constructively, to stay in the trade talks and other negotiations in Europe, and to pursue them with the same intensity and tenacity seen in the EU referendum itself. We need to ensure that we get a good deal on trade, that the right customs arrangements are in place and that we continue to be part of and contribute to security, science and overall cultural and social co-operation throughout the European Union and the United Kingdom, as well as, we hope, new trading blocs and partners around the world.

People do not want us to go back and forth on referendums. Colleagues such as the Members of the Scottish National party probably appreciate that in Scotland—people want to have a democratic event and then for politicians to take responsibility for it and deliver it.

Christine Jardine: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way. Does he accept that the question is not so much about going back and forward, but about development? We have had one decision to leave in principle, but we do not know what the deal will be. Do the people not deserve the right to look at that decision and say whether that is what they wanted? That is not going back and forwards; that is progression, a democratic progression on the decision.

Luke Graham: In my view, we had a clear vote on whether to be in or out of the EU and the decision has been made about leaving. Now it is about making the best possible deal and ensuring that we get the best possible outcome. When the agreement emerges as we go up the timeline to March 2019, as we have heard from Ministers, we will have a meaningful vote in this House, as the democratically elected representatives of our constituencies. We need to engage with the negotiations. The decision has been made and we have to honour the democratic choice of the United Kingdom. Let us have a bolder, brighter and more prosperous UK as a result.

Christine Jardine: I fully appreciate why they feel that way. All the life decisions we make mean we want to move on, to go up the timeline to March 2019, as we have heard from Ministers, we will have a meaningful vote in this House, as the democratically elected representatives of our constituencies.

It is fair to say that the petition did not have a lot of support in my constituency. Fewer than 100 people signed it—93, in fact—which is not a huge surprise in Edinburgh West, because at the referendum the vast majority voted to remain in the EU, as was the case throughout Scotland. Although I take the point made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) that the referendum was a UK-wide vote and I agree with him entirely that it was, I do not accept that the result had a significant majority—it was the narrowest of majorities. Again, that is a source of frustration for a lot of people and a reason why we should be extremely careful about what we do. The phrase “crashing out” worries me: the implication of crashing in any form, whether physically or financially, is always serious, because there is no control. We cannot know what the outcome will be.

Paul Scully: Does the hon. Lady agree that the phrase “crashing out” tends to come from the people who want to unpick the referendum? I did not use that phrase and it is important that we do not use it. We are planning for the possibility of no deal, but not crashing out of anything.

Christine Jardine: That would be the reality, though: we would simply say, “We’re going.” That would be like a crash because if a car skids in the winter, the driver...
does not know the outcome until they stop. If we were to leave the European Union without a deal in place, a plan or a route map of where we were going, we would have no control over the future of this country’s economy.

I ask the people who signed the petition to think about it from the other perspective. There is an implication that the European Union is somehow being vindictive—that it is not dealing with us and giving us the best possible deal. Surely, if the roles were reversed, we would expect the European Union to protect our interests from France, Germany, Italy or any of the other 27 countries. We would expect our interest to be preserved, so we should respect their right to negotiate the best terms for them. For me, the impact on this country of leaving the European Union without that route map, agreement or deal is more important. Where would we go? What would we do? What would be the impact on our trade, and on the tens of thousands of jobs in this country that depend on our trade with the European Union?

There has been a lot of talk about the car industry: what would happen to companies such as BMW if we were to just walk away? What would be its arrangements? How would it get the spare parts from Europe, which suddenly would be in a foreign market? BMW is a vital British employer, and it would suddenly be cut off from part of its own company. There are others, too. We would stop them from moving goods about the EU. How would the borders operate under those circumstances? They are not ready—there is no customs arrangement. How would we trade? There has been a lot of talk about queues at the ports. I ask Government Members to think about the impact on the farmers in north-east Scotland if there were no customs or trading arrangements with the European Union. How would they sell their beef? I am sure that hon. Members agree that the impact would be disastrous, because they could not get their products to Europe.

What about our airports? In my constituency, there is a lot of concern about the impact on the airport—a vital link that provides Scotland with connectivity not just within Scotland, the UK and Europe, but to the rest of the world, too. There are fewer than 18 months to go before we leave the European Union—that is the period of time that most international carriers look ahead, to negotiate their routes. There is acknowledged hesitation among foreign carriers, particularly American ones, to commit to routes from the UK because they do not know whether they will be able to fly to Europe. If we leave the European Union without a deal, what happens to the open skies policy? That is not covered by WTO rules. What would they do—a separate deal? How would we have a separate deal if we walked away? Walking away means no deal.

There is a potential impact on the pound and on trade. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, the pound plummeted more than in the devaluation under Harold Wilson’s Government. We hear a lot about it recovering, but it is recovering from a very low base. Some people say that that is good for exports, but it is not good for imports—for buying goods—and for our tourists going abroad. Where would we derive the benefit that we were told there would be from leaving the European Union if we just walked away without a deal?

It is not a secret that I am not in favour of leaving the EU. I do not believe that it is certain by any measure that it will go ahead. I believe that the triggering of article 50 can be revoked. The weight of legal opinion is that we can say that we do not need Europe’s opinion, so we can revoke it on our own. Brexit is not a done deal yet: we can still repair our relationship with Europe. But if we have to leave, we have to get the best possible terms for the United Kingdom. We have to be as close to the centre of Europe as possible. We have to be part of its trade, in the customs union and in the single market. We have to do what is best for the people of this country.

Royston Smith: Does the hon. Lady agree that comments such as the ones that she makes about staying in the single market and the customs union and having a second referendum are precisely why people started the petition and why so many people signed it?

Christine Jardine: One point about democracy that we have not touched on, other than mentioning that we should have unity, is that, whether in politics, business or family life, good decisions come from discussion and debate. We have to move forward in a way that allows everyone’s opinion to be heard. That way, we will reach a good decision. We have to have a fairer relationship with the European Union. We did that when we were during the debate before the referendum, when our future was decided by a big red bus with made-up numbers on the side.

For my constituents and many others, simply to walk away would leave us vulnerable, immediately cut us off from our major markets and present us with a bleak future. I appreciate that some people would like to walk away now, but I caution that they should know where they are going before they try to leave anywhere.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

Last Thursday, I had the pleasure of attending a conference at the Assemblée Nationale in Paris, along with other young and nearly young politicians across Europe. Among the attendees were representatives from En Marche! and Les Républicains from France, liberals from Spain, conservatives and liberals from Poland and many others from all political backgrounds across the continent. Quite contrary to the statement in the petition that “The EU looks set to offer us a punishment deal out of spite”, my feeling from talking with delegates from all political ideologies and traditions from across the continent was resignation, disappointment—there is genuine sadness in many quarters that we are leaving—and a genuine desire to make the best of it. They all recognise that a good deal between the UK and the EU is essential, not only for the establishment of good relations in the post-Brexit world, but for the economies of their respective countries as well as our own.

The running argument between the assembly member for Calais and me, about which of our two countries was the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world, belied the underlying truth that the UK economy—we are fifth, by the way—is one of the strongest in the world, and it continues to grow. Our intelligence services work together and are closely intertwined with others on the continent. Our navies work together, combating
illegal people trafficking in the Mediterranean, and our soldiers stand shoulder to shoulder in NATO, facing common enemies from Afghanistan to the Balkans.

Many Europeans have made Great Britain their home—my wife included—and they contribute to our communities and our economy, just as Brits do across the continent. We have shared values, a shared cultural heritage, a shared commitment to democracy and freedom in the rule of law and, ultimately, we are all Europeans. In my case, I am mightily proud to be so.

The UK is leaving the political construct of the European Union—that is beyond doubt. The people of these islands chose to do so in the biggest single act of democratic participation for more than three decades. There were 35 million votes, representing 72.2% of the registered voters of this country who took part in the referendum. That is a higher percentage turnout than at any general election since 1992, and it is higher in percentage terms than any election to the Scottish Parliament, and the referendums on the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the alternative vote. In nearly 30 years, in percentage turnout by eligible electors, the EU referendum was beaten only by the referendum on Scottish independence, which had an 84% turnout and a result that I know everyone here agrees was conclusive and settled that argument for a generation at least.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I would be delighted to.

Joanna Cherry: I am sure it will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that I do not agree that the argument is settled for a generation. Does he, like me, recall that Scottish voters were told during the independence referendum campaign that the way to preserve their EU citizenship was to vote to remain part of the UK? Does he accept that that turned out not to be the case?

Andrew Bowie: I absolutely accept that. That was the case at the time, of course, but the people of Scotland went to the polls in 2014 in the full knowledge that a referendum on our membership of the EU was on the table. It was January 2013 when David Cameron made his speech at Bloomberg stating his intention to hold a referendum on our membership of the EU if the Conservatives secured a majority at the 2015 general election. The people of Scotland went to the polls in September 2014 in the full knowledge that that would happen if we won a majority.

Peter Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman remind us how David Cameron’s party got on in Scotland in 2015, when it put that referendum promise in its manifesto? How many MPs did the Tories get elected in 2015?

Andrew Bowie: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that I tend to reflect more favourably on the result this year, when 13 Scottish Conservatives were returned to this Parliament and, sadly, the Scottish National party lost 21 seats to various Unionist parties. As much as I would like to continue that debate for the entire evening, I must carry on.

In June 2016, 17.5 million people voted to leave the EU and 16 million people voted to remain. That was a conclusive result, which must be respected by all who claim to be democrats. We are leaving the EU, but we are not—this is absolutely key—leaving Europe. That has been recognised on countless occasions by the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister. We will remain the closest of friends and allies outwith the single market, the customs union and the political bodies of the European Union. It is evident from my discussions last week and from discussions at a far higher level than mine that our friends in Europe recognise that, too.

Joanna Cherry: I too attended a summit at the weekend in the wake of the Franco-British summit. It was a summit of British and French politicians and businessmen. The French businessmen told us that they are exasperated with Britain, that they want to know what Britain wants out of Brexit and that, if we do not say what we want soon, decisions will be taken that go against the UK’s interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we require clarity rather than to crash out with no deal and no indication of what we want?

Andrew Bowie: I do not advocate, nor do I think anyone in the Government advocates, crashing out. The negotiations are ongoing, and what we want out of the negotiations is key to our getting a good deal from them.

Christine Jardine: Does that mean that it is now accepted that the argument that no deal is better than a bad deal is completely mistaken?

Andrew Bowie: I will come to this in a second, but I am saying that I believe a good deal is very much on the cards. I have complete confidence that our negotiating team and the European Commission’s negotiators will get a deal that benefits both us and our friends and partners in the European Union.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Gentleman able to provide the clarity that his colleagues in the Government have so far not been able to provide about what it is that Britain wants? What are the UK Government’s negotiating objectives? What kind of deal do they want with the EU27? Does he know the answers?

Andrew Bowie: I refer the hon. and learned Lady to the Prime Minister’s speeches at Lancaster House here in London and in Florence, which underlined absolutely what we are asking for from our negotiations with the European Union. I have full confidence in our negotiating team’s ability to achieve those objectives.

Despite the disappointment among our friends and allies on the continent that we are leaving, they recognise that that will free them up to take the EU down a path of their choosing—namely, further integration and co-operation—which would have been opposed and obstructed by the UK at every juncture. Let us be clear: a strong and united Europe is in our national interest. That is why we should do all we can to support it and to assist and work with our allies when and where we can.

They know that a strong UK is in their interests. That is why a deal can and will be made, as President Tusk, President Juncker and various Heads of State have made clear.

Andrew Bowie: I do not advocate, nor do I think anyone in the Government advocates, crashing out. The negotiations are ongoing, and what we want out of the negotiations is key to our getting a good deal from them.

Christine Jardine: Does that mean that it is now accepted that the argument that no deal is better than a bad deal is completely mistaken?

Andrew Bowie: I will come to this in a second, but I am saying that I believe a good deal is very much on the cards. I have complete confidence that our negotiating team and the European Commission’s negotiators will get a deal that benefits both us and our friends and partners in the European Union.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Gentleman able to provide the clarity that his colleagues in the Government have so far not been able to provide about what it is that Britain wants? What are the UK Government’s negotiating objectives? What kind of deal do they want with the EU27? Does he know the answers?

Andrew Bowie: I refer the hon. and learned Lady to the Prime Minister’s speeches at Lancaster House here in London and in Florence, which underlined absolutely what we are asking for from our negotiations with the European Union. I have full confidence in our negotiating team’s ability to achieve those objectives.

Despite the disappointment among our friends and allies on the continent that we are leaving, they recognise that that will free them up to take the EU down a path of their choosing—namely, further integration and co-operation—which would have been opposed and obstructed by the UK at every juncture. Let us be clear: a strong and united Europe is in our national interest. That is why we should do all we can to support it and to assist and work with our allies when and where we can.

They know that a strong UK is in their interests. That is why a deal can and will be made, as President Tusk, President Juncker and various Heads of State have made clear.
All effort must go into securing that deal for our farmers, our fishermen, our traders, our bankers, our industrialists, our exporters and our importers, for British subjects in the EU and for European citizens in the UK. We parliamentarians must rally behind those negotiations. A good deal is in all our interests and in our constituents’ interests. Our negotiators are not best served by threats of a second referendum, flip-flopping over the single market or continual threats of another independence referendum in Scotland.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I will not, because I have given way many times. I apologise.

Of course, we must be prepared to walk away if it looks like the deal is bad—it would be a strange sort of negotiation if we were not—but I do not believe that will be the case. However, to walk away now as the petition suggests would clearly be folly. I say to the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition, including the 163 in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine: please have patience. The Government are determined to strike a good deal. The EU is determined to strike a good deal. The nation states on the continent are lobbying for the best deal, which they know is in all our interests. I know that, when the negotiations with our friends in Europe are complete, we will have formed the basis of a new special relationship that complements the one we already have with the United States and the ones will have with our oldest allies in the Commonwealth, and that we will be able to move forward together as Europeans into a brighter, less rancorous future.

5.45 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

During the 2016 referendum, I campaigned to leave the European Union, and I voted to leave. Despite our campaign having to battle the beast of the Scottish political establishment, we managed to achieve more than 1 million leave votes. To my frustration, far too often those leave voters are airbrushed out of the picture and Scotland is presented as Europhile, Eurocentric and keen on further integration with Europe. That just is not the case. To my disappointment, the Scottish Government’s Minister for leaving the European Union, Ian Blackford, told an event in Brussels that 5 million Scots voted to remain. That just is not the case. The picture is different from how it is often portrayed.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, I would like to make some progress first.

Scottish attitudes are actually similar to those in the rest of the United Kingdom. We just have to look at the Scottish attitudes survey, published merely a couple of weeks ago, to see that, when it comes to leaving the single market, Scots are in line with the rest of the UK: they want to leave. We also want immigration to remain at UK level; we do not want divergence.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, I would like to make some more progress, but I will take an intervention from the hon. Lady in a moment. She said that good decisions are made by discussion and debate. We had months of discussion and debate in Scotland during the referendum campaign, and I believe that a good decision was made as a result.

Christine Jardine: Does the hon. Gentleman accept, then, that we should discuss and debate? Is it not the Opposition’s job to scrutinise what the Government do rather than simply to get behind them and allow them to make bad decisions because there has not been discussion and debate?

Ross Thomson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: every Opposition should hold the Government to account and hold their feet to the fire, but there is a difference between accepting the result and holding the Government to account, and simply trying to frustrate and overturn the result by arguing for another referendum.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, I would like to make some progress on addressing the point of the petition. It asks us: “Why wait?” Well, we have been able to do some waiting since the petition was created in September. It is worth considering what has transpired since then, because that helps to answer the question.

Take last month’s phase 1 agreement, which was a great success for the Government and testified to the fact that the EU wants a good deal, too, and is willing to make concessions to achieve it. After the referendum, a strange doom-monger alliance of ultra-remainers and Nigel Farage ran around insisting that we would have to pay a punitive “Brexit bill” of more than £50 billion—that was before anyone had included the implementation period until December 2020—yet last month the overall settlement, including the implementation period, turned out to be much lower. We were told that the EU would insist that its courts had jurisdiction over the enforcement of EU citizens’ rights here, yet last month we got a time-limited option for our courts voluntarily to refer unclear cases to the European Court of Justice. On the Irish border, we were told that Northern Ireland would have to have a separate deal and, in effect, remain part of the EU for customs purposes.

Wera Hobhouse: I am a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, and when we took evidence it was clear: the experts told us that the can has been kicked down the road. The joint statement may have made a hard Brexit scenario very much less likely. Basically, nothing has been resolved.

Ross Thomson: That proves the point: we have seen nothing constructive from the Opposition. Actually, in the same way as they were confounded by the phase 1 agreement in their argument, we can bet that they will be confounded in their argument again at the end of phase 2. All we have had from the Opposition on leaving the European Union is perpetual pessimism and talking Britain down. I am talking Britain up, because we can achieve so much more when we leave the European Union. We have a bright future ahead of us.

Royston Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that, first, it seems the overwhelming majority of people who want a second referendum are remain voters? Secondly, I do
not recall anyone—remain or otherwise—saying that if the referendum result was to leave the European Union, we would need a subsequent referendum on the deal. Does he see it like that as well?

Ross Thomson: I agree. If the result had gone the other way and the United Kingdom had voted to remain in the European Union, we would have accepted the result.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Ross Thomson: I would like to make some more progress. I do not think we would have seen a call for another referendum to leave the European Union.

On the border with Northern Ireland, it was made clear last month that when we leave, we will leave as one United Kingdom. Now, the doom-mongers will say, “Sure, phase 1 was fine, but they’re going to punish us in phase 2.” After being wrong about the economic effects of a leave vote, the economic effects of article 50 being triggered and the outcome of phase 1, we might think they would have given up on “Project Fear” by now, but apparently not.

Peter Grant: How can anyone know what is right or wrong about forecasts of the economic impact of Brexit when we have not left yet and the Treasury has not done an impact analysis? What is the source of the figures that enable the hon. Gentleman to say that it will not cause an economic problem?

Ross Thomson: I vividly remember being told during that campaign that, according to the Treasury, not just leaving the European Union but voting to leave the European Union would lead to an emergency Budget and a mass sense of panic. The world was going to collapse around our ears because of the economic devastation caused, but that simply never came to fruition.

What should be considered is this month’s analysis by the EU committee of the regions, which demonstrates why we have leverage in the Brexit negotiations. It found that—unsurprisingly—no deal would be not ideal for major industries in the EU 27, to put it mildly. It transpires that the EU cannot afford to be blasé about no deal or intransient in the negotiations, because a good deal is in our mutual interests. That is why I am confident we will get exactly that.

I believe in Brexit. I believe we will make Britain more prosperous and more democratic. We will be able to: equip our economy better to face the challenges of the 21st century; develop agriculture, fisheries and immigration systems better tailored to this country’s needs; decouple ourselves from the fortunes of a routinely crisis-hit EU; restore our democracy; enhance devolution at home; and become a global leader in free trade. Getting a good deal with the EU is part of that last goal.

The truth is that we are not waiting but laying the groundwork for the best Brexit possible: one that maintains free trade with our European neighbours while allowing us to reap the benefits of leaving. The past few months have shown that a good Brexit deal is not just achievable but highly likely. The fears of those who want us to ignore the referendum result and remain, and of those who want us to walk away immediately, have proved to be unfounded.

I understand why some Brexit supporters are upset by the efforts of the Opposition—the Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrat politicians who undermine Brexit—but successive votes have shown that, in this elected House, we have a Conservative-led cross-party majority for democracy. We will deliver Brexit, both here in Parliament and in the negotiations. There are now just 14 months until we leave, so we are closer to exit day than to the referendum day. After 45 years of EU membership, there is not much longer to wait, and we will be better off for it.

5.54 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to begin the summing up of the debate. Interestingly, no one wanted to speak about how a no-deal Brexit would be a good idea. That is not surprising: I suspect that all 650 Members of the House know, deep down in their hearts, that leaving the EU without a deal would be almost criminally incompetent on the negotiators’ part.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who introduced the debate, did what a representative of the Petitions Committee should do: he presented both sides of the argument. I commend him for that. I would be a bit concerned if one of the benefits of Brexit was that we went back to being what he described as a “buccaneering maritime trading nation”. Buccaneers were the state-sponsored international terrorists of their day. The fact that we can hark back—even jokingly—to days when part of Britain’s power as a trading nation was founded on piracy, theft, murder and similar crimes may be an indication of how we have got into the state we are in now.

There is a tendency—certainly in sections of the right-wing media and the right wing of the Conservative party—to build up the days of the empire, when everything was wonderful, and say, “Can’t we just go back to the days when Britannia ruled the waves and waived the rules? Everything will be fine.” No, we cannot, because 6.5 billion to 7 billion people on the other side of the water are saying, “No—this is our country. You are not getting to run India, Pakistan or Kenya in the interests of a handful of British businesses in the way you did before.”

Andrew Bowie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I call Ross Thomson—sorry, Andrew Bowie.

Andrew Bowie: I have been called much worse, Mrs Moon. I may be wrong—forgive me—but I did not hear anyone in this Chamber, the House of Commons or anywhere else say that we should go back to the days when we ruled India or that we should rule the waves and bring back the empire. That is simply not what we are debating.

Peter Grant: Perhaps I have misunderstood what a buccaneering maritime trading nation is or what period in history it refers to. If so, I am happy to apologise, but
the days of the buccaneers were those of international pirates and terrorists sponsored by businesses in one country in effect to terrorise the interests of other countries.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antinette Sandbach) made a powerful, well-put-together contribution. Importantly, she did not talk just about trade. Because trade is such a vital part of the United Kingdom’s relationship with the European Union, it is easy to forget all the other benefits that come from EU membership, such as open skies. There was recently an interesting suggestion that MPs should be allowed to know which of their constituents sign petitions as well as how many of them do so. I would like to go back to the 107 of my constituents who signed the petition—that is 0.12% of the electorate—and say, “Have you heard of open skies? Did you know that it existed when you voted to leave the European Union, or when you signed the petition saying we should leave without a deal? Did you really understand that, without a deal, British-owned and operated airlines will not have automatic authority to land their aircraft or even cross over European airspace after take-off? The only way they will be allowed to do that is through getting a deal.”

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the accusations about “Project Fear” are way off? We should talk about “Project Realism.”

Peter Grant: To be honest, some of the claims made by those who claimed to be on the remain side before the referendum were nonsensical. In the past couple of weeks I think I have heard five Members on the Conservative Benches say, “You can’t believe what the Treasury tell you during a referendum campaign.” We know that, and perhaps some in other parts of the House need to remember that.

At the time of the referendum, and I suspect even now, an awful lot of people in the United Kingdom did not understand—and they still do not fully understand—how complex our relationship with the European Union is. It is not just about being able to buy bananas with as much or little bend in them as we like or being able to prevent these so-and-so foreigners from coming over and taking our jobs or claiming our benefits—which they do not do. It is much more detailed and complicated than that, and to extricate ourselves from that relationship in a way that does not harm the interests of the people of these islands is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. Time alone will tell.

Royston Smith: Going back to my earlier comments, would the hon. Gentleman agree that continually saying we should leave without a deal? Did you really know that, and perhaps some in other parts of the House need to remember that.

At the time of the referendum, and I suspect even now, an awful lot of people in the United Kingdom did not understand—and they still do not fully understand—how complex our relationship with the European Union is. It is not just about being able to buy bananas with as much or little bend in them as we like or being able to prevent these so-and-so foreigners from coming over and taking our jobs or claiming our benefits—which they do not do. It is much more detailed and complicated than that, and to extricate ourselves from that relationship in a way that does not harm the interests of the people of these islands is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. Time alone will tell.

Peter Grant: No, I do not agree at all. I remember when one of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues in the main Chamber turned talking about people not being well informed into a claim that they were stupid—and, of course, the Daily Express, as is its wont, put me on the front page saying that people who voted to leave were stupid.

I would never question anyone’s sincerity or intelligence when they cast a vote in a referendum or election, but the fact is that many people, at the time they voted, did not fully understand the implications of what they voted for. People will sometimes do that in an election, too. They vote for the party they usually vote for, and do not really look into the issues in any great depth. If someone does not like the outcome of a general election, they get another chance in a few years. Calling the referendum as the Government did, so quickly, and having it deliberately in the middle of important council and parliamentary elections in almost every nation of the United Kingdom, so that the referendum campaign ran at the same time, prevented debate of the length and detail that was needed.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not time that we all admitted that there were things we did not know about the European Union? When I listen to what is said in the Exiting the European Union Committee, I hear so much information about the European Union that we did not know. It is not necessarily a question of a mistake or fault, but if even we did not know all the details and all the ins and outs of the European Union that are emerging in the debate now, it is time we said so. That would make both remain and leave voters comfortable about saying that they did not know about some aspects of the EU, but that they know them now, which is why it is healthy to have a debate.

Peter Grant: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. However, I want to make it clear that I respect the wish of the people of England and Wales, as expressed in the referendum. I insist—I demand, as do my constituents—that the wish of 62% of the people of Scotland, as well as the wish of the majority vote in Northern Ireland, should be respected too. That does not have to mean that some should be in the EU and some out, but it must mean seeking—not necessarily reaching—a solution and deal that, as far as possible, could recognise the diverse views in these islands. We keep being told that we are a partnership of equals. It would not be acceptable for the express wishes of 62% of voters in England to be cast aside in contempt, as is happening to the express wishes of 62% of voters in Scotland.

I was pleased that some speakers in the debate discussed the absolute need for a deal on Northern Ireland, so that we know what the status of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will be. Most people in the United Kingdom did not think that that would be an issue during the referendum; it was hardly raised in any debate. It was a major issue in the debate in Northern Ireland, but in most of the rest of the United Kingdom, if it appeared anywhere, it would be at the bottom of page 22 of someone’s submission. Incidentally, I include myself in those comments: I did not appreciate how fundamentally damaging a hard border and a no-deal Brexit could be to the Northern Ireland peace process. That does not mean that people in mainland Great Britain voted stupidly; it simply means they did not have the information at their disposal.

Would that knowledge have made a difference to their votes? We do not know. It is too late: that horse has gone.

It is not too late to make sure that there is a deal that protects the promises that the Government of these islands made to the international community and the
[Peter Grant]

Government of the Republic of Ireland at the time of the Good Friday peace agreement. There is a guarantee that there will be no border controls on the Irish border. That is what everyone whom the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee spoke to in Northern Ireland desperately wants. The Committee spoke to senior police officers who are still leading the fight against terrorism, representatives of community organisations, and politicians—any elected politician who came to see us, including a number from Sinn Fein.

It was perhaps surprising how much unanimity there was across the spectrum about the fact that we cannot afford a return to the days of armed border checkpoints across the island of Ireland. Many of the people we spoke to—and not only on the nationalist-leaning side—believe that if we leave the European Union without a deal it will be almost impossible to prevent border posts from returning, and to prevent the return of other things from the sad history of that island.

There were several contributions by Scottish Conservatives, every one of whom, completely unprovoked, tried to reopen another referendum argument, which is not on the agenda just now. The Scottish Conservatives want a public debate involving the whole population of Scotland, about its future place in the world. I am ready for that, but it is interesting that no matter the subject being discussed they always manage to talk about that.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: My goodness—what a decision! The hon. Gentlemen are almost identical. I give way to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson).

Ross Thomson: I am grateful. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman accepts that is not the Scottish Conservatives wedging the issue into the debate. The fact is that before anyone could even digest the European Union referendum result, the First Minister was immediately in front of the television cameras in Bute House putting a second independence referendum back on the table, against the wishes of the people. We are not crowbarring it into the debate; it is the First Minister.

Peter Grant: I am afraid what the hon. Gentleman says about its being against the wishes of the people is completely inaccurate. The First Minister of Scotland did that a few weeks after being re-elected, when the people of Scotland had voted for a Government who explicitly said in their election manifesto that, if we face being dragged out of the European Union against our will, that could trigger a referendum.

The people of Scotland can choose whether to respect the wishes of the 55% who want to be in the United Kingdom or those of the 62% who want to be in the European Union. As I have said, I am happy for that process and debate to start at any time when the Scottish Conservatives can get their act together. I do not want to labour the point, because the present debate is supposed to be about the European Union. I simply want to say that the Scottish Conservatives have once again shown their obsession with independence. They cannot even talk about an important matter such as membership of the European Union without bringing the independence argument into it.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman mentions the choice between the 55% who want to stay in the UK and the 62% who want to stay in the EU. Things do not have to be so mutually exclusive: we can stay in the UK and, hopefully, we could stay in the EU as well.

Peter Grant: I think that that prospect is becoming much less likely as time goes on. We certainly can retain a lot of the benefits of EU membership. We can do that by staying in the single market. There has never been a referendum vote by the people of the United Kingdom to leave the single market, so it is perfectly legitimate for the Government to admit that they have got that wrong, and to go back on it.

I was quite interested when a Member—I think it was the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie)—referred to the high turnout in the EU referendum and used that as a basis for treating it as binding, conclusive and final. It might surprise some people, but the percentage of eligible voters in the UK who voted to leave the European Union was lower than the percentage of eligible voters in Catalonia who voted to leave Spain. I suggest that if the EU vote is binding, conclusive and final, the future of Catalonia has been determined by its people. Of course, the Government do not want to fall out with Spain, so they will not recognise that.

Andrew Bowie: The difference between those two referendums is that the one on our membership of the European Union was legal, whereas the one on Catalonia’s membership of Spain was not legal in any way. It was an illegal referendum, as has been recognised by the European Union and the United Nations.

Peter Grant: It was legal according to the wish of the people of Catalonia. The referendum in Gibraltar was illegal, but the United Kingdom was quite happy to recognise it and act on its result—and I think it was right. We must be very careful about quoting the European Union as the arbiter of what is and is not acceptable as a way for any nation or people to seek to determine its own future. That does not quite sound like taking back control to me.

To go back to the matter we are supposed to be debating—the petition signed by just over 137,000 people across the United Kingdom—part of the issue I have with it is that some of the statements of fact at the start are quite simply untrue. The European Union is not, and never has been, intent on deliberately punishing the United Kingdom for a decision by its people. For all its faults, at its heart, the European Union wants to see itself as an organisation that respects democracy. That is why, despite the comments from the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who has not been able to stay for the rest of the debate, it will not be easy to get back in after we leave. The United Kingdom would be disqualified from applying for membership of the European Union because we are not democratic enough, since more than half of our legislators in the UK Parliament are not elected but appointed on patronage.
The European Union sees itself as an organisation that wants to recognise the will of the people, whether in elections or referendums. What it has said, and will continue to say—I do not think the Government have quite got this yet—is that under no circumstances will the European Union allow the United Kingdom to have a better relationship with the EU by leaving than we would have had had we stayed. That is perfectly understandable and logical; it would be astonishing if it did anything different.

The petition also talks about a “settlement fee”. There is no settlement fee. There have been discussions to agree the liabilities that the United Kingdom has accrued through commitments it made as a member of the European Union, and any liabilities due to come back to the United Kingdom in the same way. Although it is on a bigger scale and more complex, it is a bit like somebody deciding to leave the house they rent before the end of the month and expecting to get a couple of weeks’ rent back because they decided not to stay until the end of the rental period.

If we scale that up several million times, that is what the European Union has been saying to the UK and what the UK has accepted in its relationship with the European Union. Talking about it as a settlement fee or a divorce payment, as many in the media have done, is misleading and steers people down the path of saying, “This is clearly unfair. Let’s just leave without even bothered to wait to fulfil our international legal obligations.”

I think the reason that the petition has attracted so many signatures has been mentioned. There is a clear malaise about politics in these islands. People are fed up with politicians and political parties. They are fed up with the notion that someone can tell blatant lies during a referendum campaign and it does not matter as long as they still win at the ballot box. People do not want that any more. They are fed up with politicians who make promises when everybody knows the promise will be broken.

I am sorry to say that we have not seen any change in that practice from the present Government; we only have to look at the backsliding on the firm commitment that there would be changes to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill in the Commons on Report to avoid any undermining of the devolution settlement. That was a clear promise given by the Secretary of State for Scotland, which was completely ignored when the crunch came. When politicians are allowed to break promises like that and get away with it, it is no wonder that the public begin to lose faith in all of us.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman has made a few valid points in his speech about ensuring honesty and clarity over the course of this debate. He made specific reference to clause 11, which was debated in the main Chamber just last week. In the interests of clarity and honesty, does he accept that amendments were not made because there are ongoing negotiations between the devolved Administrations and Her Majesty’s Government? An agreement has not yet been reached and when it has been we can table amendments and make them? Does he also accept that it is not over yet? The Bill goes to the House of Lords but it will come back to the Commons, when both he and I will have the chance to approve, reject or propose amendments in lieu.

Peter Grant: That prompts the question as to why the Secretary of State for Scotland made those unconditional guarantees at the Dispatch Box. There was a time when a Minister who made promises at the Dispatch Box and did not keep them could not possibly remain a Minister. Perhaps, if we were prepared to go back to those days, we could start to rebuild some of the trust that has been lost.

One of the great ironies is that, while a lot of the emotion linked to petitions such as this is the result of a lack of trust in politicians, both the hard Brexiteers and the not-so-hard Brexiteers on the Government side are asking us to trust the entire future of our nations to a small and not particularly accountable group of Government Ministers and advisers in the negotiations. To me, that seems completely illogical. If the process has been driven by people’s loss of trust in their politicians, the one thing we should not be doing is passing legislation that allows a few Ministers to go off and do what they like, with little or no effective scrutiny or holding them to account.

I will not say “blame” because I do not like using the word, but I think certainly the Conservatives, and the Labour party for a number of years, deserve to be strongly criticised for not standing up to dismiss the EU myths. I know that Labour have begun to do it more recently, but by that time it was too late. Instead of David Cameron saying that as part of his EU negotiation he would put an end to benefits tourism, why could he not have just told the truth and said, “We don’t need to put an end to it because it doesn’t really exist to any noticeable extent in the first place”? Why did he not say, “We’re going to use the rights we already have to prevent benefits tourism in its entirety”? Why, when there was so much talk about the damage being done to our economy by immigration, did no one in the Government stand up and say, “Immigration is good for our economy”?

Antoinette Sandbach: It is all very well to explain that, but when we look at the signatures on the petition, they come from areas that have had very large impacts from inward migration from the European Union. That was largely caused during the period when former Prime Ministers Blair and Brown could have put restrictions on the number of EU migrants coming in, and did not. That is what has caused the issues, because the volumes coming in meant that it was difficult for local councils to adjust to the demands on their services. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s point on that matter.

Peter Grant: The hon. Lady makes a valid point, and I have a lot of sympathy with her. However, the fact is that under the existing freedom of movement rules within the European Union, if the UK Government determined that there were particular geographical areas of high unemployment, for example, they would have the authority to take steps to restrict freedom of movement in those areas. That is just one example.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about the difficulties that local authorities, health authorities and so on have had in dealing with a significant number of people, whether they have come from the UK or elsewhere. A significant increase in the population of an area in a short time does cause difficulties, which were made much worse by the complete inadequacy of the system of Government funding for local services, certainly in...
[Peter Grant]

England: I do not know whether it applies in Northern Ireland or Wales. Local authorities simply were not given the powers they needed to take decisions to cope with increased demand for their services, because it was easier for some people to blame it on immigrants than on a failure of Government policy.

We have seen the EU myths that were never properly challenged; we had the myth again today about the all-powerful European Commission, able to impose laws on the United Kingdom. It is not. The Parliament of Wallonia was able to hold up the comprehensive economic and trade agreement deal. The Parliament of the United Kingdom tried to prevent the relevant UK Minister from signing it, but they went off and signed it anyway, against an explicit instruction from the European Scrutiny Committee acting with the full authority of the House of Commons. The Scrutiny Committee said to the Minister, “No, you don’t sign it.” The Minister went and signed it anyway.

The lack of parliamentary control and scrutiny over what has been happening in Europe for the last 20 years is not down to problems with the European Union. It is down to this Government and previous Governments being prepared to ride roughshod over the will of the House when it suited them.

If we were to accept just walking away from the European Union right now, none of these great international trade deals, which we are told will suddenly come out of the pipeline a few days after we leave, will be possible. Who will go into a major trade deal with anybody who says, “Oh yes, we had the biggest trade deal in the economic history of planet Earth, and we walked away from it and didn’t even stay to comply with the obligations we’d adopted and agreed to under that. We welched on the last trade deal we had; can we have a trade deal with you, please?” That is not going to happen. Even as a matter of self-interest and to present ourselves as an honest trading partner to future trade deals, we must ensure that we fulfill the obligations of our existing EU membership.

I do not have to hand figures for the rest of the United Kingdom, but in Scotland, we currently have £15.9 billion-worth of exports that go either to the EU or to countries to which we have access because of our EU membership. That is 56% of all Scotland’s international exports, and the figure is likely to rise to between 80% and 90% by the time we actually leave the European Union, because of the number of new trade deals that are coming on stream. We are looking at a potential drop in Scotland’s GDP of £12.7 billion if we leave without a deal. Actually, there is no scenario of leaving the EU that does not cause a reduction in Scotland’s GDP, but leaving with no deal is by far the worst. People would on average be £2,300 worse off. Who was it who said that nobody voted to make themselves poorer when they voted to leave the European Union? Perhaps they did not vote for that, but if we leave without a deal, it is what is going to happen.

I respect the views of the people who have signed this petition. I take offence at those who say that I am accusing people of being stupid. I would never use words such as “traitor” or “disloyal” to anybody simply because they voted or spoke in a way that I disagreed with. It is mainly Conservatives who have had those terms thrown at them, and worse, simply for following what they think are the interests of their constituents. That is despicable and should be called out and condemned by us all whenever it happens. I have spoken out previously when people who claim to be on the same side as me have used similar inflammatory language about people they disagree with. There is simply no place for that in any democratic and free society.

That said, I genuinely do not understand what people who signed the petition think would happen if we were to leave the EU tomorrow without a deal. Let us say that we did leave tomorrow without a deal. There is no agreement on the future of the 3 million EU nationals living in the UK or the 1.5 million Brits living in the European Union. There is no deal about no border in Ireland, and that quite possibly means there is no longer a peace process in Ireland. There is no deal that allows our planes to continue to fly to the EU’s airports and its planes to bring us back from our holidays afterwards.

I think that the Prime Minister was highly irresponsible in coming up with the cheap line that no deal is better than a bad deal. The final sentence of the last report from the Exiting the European Union Committee was that it could not envisage, or it would be difficult to envisage, any scenario that the negotiating team would bring back that could possibly be as damaging as leaving the European Union without a deal, so let us get rid of that terminology, the sloganising, and the sound bites. They might sound good and get a few cheers on the front page of the Daily Mail, but they are contributing to a negative part of the whole debate. No deal is not better than a bad deal. No deal is the worst of all possible deals. This Parliament should have the courage of its convictions and send that message out, and each of us should be prepared, if need be, to say face to face to those of our constituents who signed the petition, “I know that you have done this sincerely and this is what you believe, but I cannot support it, because I am convinced that it is a recipe for complete and utter disaster.”

6.23 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve again under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

We have had a good debate. Much of it has been very familiar in subject and theme, but the petition has succeeded in achieving something that I never thought I would see, which is that everybody who has spoken has been in agreement on the undesirability of accepting the instruction contained in it. I have been in so many Brexit debates during the past year and a half and that has never happened before, so we should at least acknowledge it. We have managed to find many things to disagree about, none the less.

It will not surprise anybody to know that I fundamentally disagree with the petition. The very first line says that we should "walk away from the Article 50 negotiations and leave the EU immediately with no deal.”

We have agreed to take part in negotiations, as we accepted we would when we triggered article 50. It is suggested that we should walk away and not complete that task. I do not think, and clearly nobody here believes, that that would be the right thing for the United Kingdom to do.
I speak as somebody who campaigned for remain. We all seem to have to tell our little Brexit biography when we make these speeches. I campaigned for remain; my constituency voted 56% to leave. To be completely honest, that caused me to reflect, to think and to listen incredibly hard to what my constituents were telling me through that vote and what they expected me to do about it. Having promised throughout the campaign that I would honour, respect and abide by the outcome of the referendum, that is what I intend to do and what I have done through the triggering of article 50 and the process subsequently. But the listening is two-way. I have had to explain to my constituents that this is a process and it will take far longer and use up far more energy than I think any of us would really like, but it needs that energy, focus and attention from Parliament and the Government in order to result in a good deal.

I have days when I pretty much think, “Oh my goodness, why are we doing this?” You want it to stop. I think the public are bored with much of this, if I am honest. There was a time when Brexit was the first thing that people spoke about, it was the topic of heated conversation down the pub, but I think that for many people that is declining now. Since the general election, the debate has been moving on and there is growing acceptance that Brexit is going to happen, but that makes the responsibility all the more keenly felt by us that we must deliver a deal that is worthy of our country.

Whenever we discuss these things, we inevitably talk about the impact on financial services and the immediate loss of passporting, which enables banks to do business across the EU without regulation and red tape. The Government have done one could say that not much would change in terms of regulation and red tape. The Government have done that, although we think they are doing this process incredibly badly. One could say that the Government are doing it deliberately in this way so that a deal can be made more easily once the withdrawal Bill has passed and we reach the end of negotiations.

All the Bill does is enshrine EU regulations in law, but it does not provide on its own for reciprocal recognition; that would need to be part of a future relationship agreement. It is not properly understood that the withdrawal agreement the Government are negotiating and the future relationship agreement or deal, which is probably of the most interest to our constituents, are separate things. There is a good chance that we will not know the future relationship—the future trade deal or whatever form it happens to take—by March 2019, so it would be very dangerous indeed to leave the European Union now, before that process is complete.

**Vera Hobhouse:** The hon. Lady has admitted that we had a good and constructive debate about how we all need to have a good deal. Is there not a danger that we end up with a good deal that we all agree with, but it will look very much like being a member of the European Union? In the end, everyone who voted, for leave or remain, will look at it all and say, “What was all this about and why did we go through all this pain when the end is similar—just a little bit worse—to what we had as members of the European Union?”

**Jenny Chapman:** I do not know what deal the Government are going to make. I hope that they are capable of making something better than no deal. If the phrase “No deal is better than a bad deal” ever meant anything, it is losing whatever credence it had. I do not know how little confidence they have in their own negotiators that they would come back with something that bad. It is important that the deal we reach protects jobs and the economy. I think that is what the hon. Lady wants, but the Labour party recognises that it is also important that the deal recognises the outcome of the referendum. That is a difficult thing to achieve and a difficult thing to encapsulate in a single sentence. That is where the negotiations will succeed or fail, because the deal that is reached must settle the relationship we have with the European Union for 20 or 30 years, perhaps longer. We cannot have a perpetual state of negotiation and renegotiation, and referendum after referendum.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** Does the hon. Lady agree that, from that point of view, EFTA membership is very attractive? One of the big concerns and reservations my constituents have is around ever closer union. EFTA gives the misleading statements that were made about whether or not there are impact assessments and what they consist of, and the embarrassment that must surely have been felt by the Department about that whole saga.

Another thing that is said is, “You have voted now. You have triggered article 50. What about the withdrawal Bill?” The reason we are undertaking the whole process of the withdrawal Bill is so that we can align our rules with those of the EU once the Bill has passed. It has not passed yet, so were we to leave before that Bill has passed, we would have massive holes in our book of rules—how we run the country. Even when it has passed, one could say that not much would change in terms of regulation and red tape. The Government have done that, although we think they are doing this process incredibly badly. One could say that the Government are doing it deliberately in this way so that a deal can be made more easily once the withdrawal Bill has passed and we reach the end of negotiations.
us the benefit of a close relationship and a trading relationship without the political institutions, but still delivers that close and special partnership with the European Union.

Jenny Chapman: Well, it could, but we should not be so lacking in imagination that we cannot conceive of alternatives that may also offer benefits, without being tied to an existing form or treaty. Sometimes we disappear down the rabbit hole of the customs union, the single market and existing forms of arrangement. Actually, we might be able to do better than that. Let us keep those on the table, rather than do what the Prime Minister thought she was doing in the Florence speech and take them away. It is conceivable that something else may be possible. The option the hon. Lady outlined does have the benefits she describes and it should never be written off without proper debate and negotiation. I fear that that is what the Government initially attempted to do. Although post-phase 1, one could argue that that is back in play—we shall see.

Another thing that frequently comes up in these debates is the plight of UK citizens in Europe and EU citizens in the UK. People have been described as bargaining chips in this process, so what would happen to those bargaining chips if the negotiations did collapse because we walked away? They would be left in a very precarious situation indeed. They would have no status and no rights, and that is not a situation that we should take lightly. I am pleased that hon. Members have made that point in this debate and it ought to be something we consider very carefully.

There are also the issues of crime, counter-terrorism, exchange of data, the arrangements we have with Europol and the European arrest warrant. We are a member of all of those things by virtue of the fact that we are part of the European Union. It may be that we can have separate deals on those issues—who knows? But we certainly would not if we just walked away, as the petition urges us to do. We would also become less attractive to future trade partners. The public perception of the incompetence of this Government would only be enhanced were they to take that route—so perhaps there is something in it—but it is difficult to imagine a worse outcome for Britain than failing to agree a deal.

The issue of Northern Ireland and the Irish border may be the most difficult to solve. Looking at the approach the Government intend to take, I do not think anybody should have anything to do with these negotiations until they have been to the border and spoken to people who live there, community leaders and business leaders in Northern Ireland, because it is the most critical issue for anybody living in that part of the world that there is no return to any form of infrastructure on the border. One can conceive of any number of possibilities, such as a digital border, light-touch border checks and arrangements for small businesses but not for others. All those things are possible, but I tell the Minister that any kind of infrastructure on that border will make peace and the conduct of daily life in that part of the world impossible, and that must not be allowed to happen.

It is good that phase 1 rules out the prospect of a separate deal for Northern Ireland and some kind of border down the Irish sea. That is welcome. There needs to be a solution that preserves the integrity of the Union, but one cannot then say that we will have any other kind of border infrastructure on the island of Ireland. I am very interested to find out quite how we solve that, in the context of what was agreed in phase 1. The statements made on the alignment of regulations are fascinating. Now that those things are going to be put into a legal document, we will have to get some real resolution to these questions and not the fudge and clever use of words we have seen so far.

I have heard other people say, “Oh, you are catastrophising when you talk about Northern Ireland in that way.” We are not. There are still shootings in Northern Ireland—61 incidents last year. There are still people active in that part of the world who are prepared to use those methods. That is not something we should take lightly. Many of my constituents fought in Northern Ireland and they understand what this means. Whether they voted to leave or remain, they understand that this is not a question that can just be skirted over or somehow dismissed. It needs a proper resolution and any outcome that reinstates a hard border would be fought against by my constituents, even those who voted to leave.

Another reason for us to reject the petition is consistency. The Labour manifesto in 2017 said that “leaving the EU with ‘no deal’ is the worst possible deal for Britain and that it would do damage to our economy and trade. We will reject ‘no deal’ as a viable option and if needs be negotiate transitional arrangements to avoid a ‘cliff-edge’ for the economy.”

Some of the Prime Minister’s words can be interpreted as almost agreeing with that sense of needing a transitional period and being willing to negotiate in that way. That is welcome, and we should say that it is, but she now has to deliver that and keep the confidence of her parliamentary party while she does so—let us hope that she can.

Nobody voted to be poorer, to lose their job, for chaos or to be less safe. That is what would happen if we accepted the petition, as we are urged to do. It is very good indeed that everybody here agrees that that would be a bad outcome. If we can take anything away from today, it is that we accept that a deal is the best outcome and that walking away with no deal would be a disaster for the UK and is something that we should resist as far as we can.

6.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): Thank you for your stewardship and chairmanship of this worthwhile and interesting debate, Mr Hanson.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for leading the debate, on behalf of the Petitions Committee, on whether the UK should leave the EU immediately. I must say that I very much enjoyed listening to his contribution and those of many hon. Members. Members today. He has been a passionate campaigner for Brexit for many years. I applaud the sensible, pragmatic and optimistic message that he voiced with regard to the UK’s departure. Members who took part in the debate.

I was particularly struck by the chord of unity and agreement and the consensus that emerged from this debate. From Members who took opposing sides in the referendum debate, from all over the country and from different political parties, there has been a total consensus that the UK should not walk away from the negotiations
now, should continue to build on the progress that has been achieved and should work towards seeking that new, dynamic relationship with the EU through an agreement. I share that optimism and pragmatism that has been expressed today by many Members. I also share their call for unity, which was particularly expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham)—a unity that unites all of us behind a shared vision of a Britain of the future: one that is global, open, dynamic and prosperous.

Combined with that optimism and that call for unity is a shared acknowledgment of the need for patience. Again, that has been voiced by many today, including the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). Time is needed so that we can make the best of Brexit and strike a successful and prosperous agreement with the EU.

The Government’s position has been very clear: the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and there must be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it through the backdoor and, importantly, no second referendum. To do so would undermine our democracy and destroy the vital trust that lies between citizen and state, between voter and representative. That commitment to leave the EU is steadfast on the part of the Government. It means leaving the customs union and the single market when we leave the EU. It means regaining control over our laws, our border and our money. It means restoring our ability to be a leader in global trade and to set our own independent immigration, agricultural and fisheries policies. It means benefits for consumers, businesses and our democracy.

The Prime Minister has also been very clear that the UK will leave the EU at 11 pm on 29 March 2019—a date that is fixed as a matter of law under the article 50 process. This will reduce uncertainty to businesses and the public: we will leave the EU no later and no sooner than that fixed point.

Antoinette Sandbach: I just want to take the Minister back to her point about democracy. Does she accept that no Parliament can bind another parliament and that, although I am not advocating a second referendum and it is not something I support, as a matter of principle it is not anti-democratic to hold one?

Suella Fernandes: The referendum that we saw in 2016 was a brilliant example of a thriving democracy. That vote, whether it had been to leave or to remain, although the majority vote was to leave, was a vote of confidence in our democratic process. It was a vote of confidence in Britain, and it is incumbent on all of us to respect that result and deliver that outcome.

The position respects the vote of the people in the referendum of 2016 to leave the EU. It also reflects the will of Parliament. The Government have successfully triggered article 50, pursuant to an Act of Parliament passed last year in the Commons on Second Reading by 498 votes to 114—an overwhelming majority—and they are negotiating for a good outcome that works for both the people and businesses in the UK and those in the EU.

As someone who campaigned to leave the European Union, I understand that those who signed the petition are impatient to leave the EU and are asking the Government to leave the negotiations before 2019. However, the Government are responding in a responsible manner, balancing the needs of adapting to our new post-Brexit landscape with ensuring that we are in the best possible position to really grasp all the advantages that Brexit will bring, so that we can have a smooth and successful Brexit. That is why an implementation period is so important.

Furthermore, we do not believe that the “punishment deal” mentioned in the petition will come to pass. Striking a free trade agreement with the European Union will be mutually beneficial to both parties. We want a rich, prosperous new partnership with our European friends and allies, and we believe that that is eminently possible. Seeking the best deal for the UK and maximising the benefits of leaving the EU, while maintaining the greatest possible access to EU markets and continuing to work with our European neighbours on common problems such as terrorism and security, is vital if we are to ensure that we manage the prospects of life outside the EU.

In addition, after withdrawal the UK will bring an end to the direct jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. As the EU has confirmed, we have already made significant progress towards a good deal, as was set out in the Government’s joint report in December, striking agreement on citizens’ rights, on a financial settlement and in relation to Northern Ireland. For me, and for the Government, that provides great confidence that we can achieve a more positive deal going forward, and significantly reduces the chance of a no-deal scenario.

However, let me be clear: while we want and expect a good deal with the EU, the Government have a duty to plan for a range of eventualities, including the unlikely scenario where we leave the EU without a deal. That is common sense and it is prudent. Our plans are carefully developed to provide the flexibility to respond to a range of negotiated outcomes and to prepare us for the unlikely eventuality of not securing a deal.

Some of the Government’s planning has already become evident. Each Department has a clear understanding of how withdrawing from the EU may affect its existing policies in a wide range of outcomes. To support Departments, the Treasury has already given those such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Home Office, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department for Transport, nearly £700 million to prepare for Brexit, and is making an additional £3 billion of funding available over the next two years.

On a legislative front, as well as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the Government are already introducing other legislation, such as our Trade Bill, which will allow the UK to develop an independent trade strategy. The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill will lay the groundwork for an outstanding international sanctions regime, and the customs Bill will set a framework for delivering an effective customs regime. Legislation on nuclear safeguards arising from the UK Parliament will deliver a regime for the future landscape on nuclear safeguards.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the Minister accept the recommendations of various Committees, including the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, for example, that we should seek to rejoin Euratom, or seek associate membership? It would cost around £4 million,
which would be a far cheaper option, and would instantly align us with a nuclear safeguards regime that is worldwide, rather than just European, permitting our power stations to keep providing electricity for our homes and constituents. Although I appreciate that the Bills are being introduced, does she see that that is a sensible option?

Suella Fernandes: No. The Government’s policy is to leave Euratom, because although it provides some benefits, it also subscribes us to a jurisdiction and legal framework that are not aligned with our objectives in leaving the European Union. Our Nuclear Safeguards Bill provides us with an opportunity to combine exactly the objectives that my hon. Friend set out with honouring the legislative requirements of leaving the European Union.

Peter Grant: Does the Minister not accept that the Government might have got things the wrong way around? They decided that they wanted to get away from any influence from the European Court of Justice, and despite the damage that that is now doing to our future nuclear safety regimes, for example, that red line has become almost an obsession. Regardless of what disadvantages it brings with it, the Government seem to be hell-bent on not moving any of those red lines by as much as an inch. Is that not just silly?

Suella Fernandes: A vote to leave the European Union entails an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is what this Government are committed to and that is what will be delivered. It is essential if we are to regain the benefits of leaving the European Union.

Although the Government do not want or expect a no-deal scenario, we have a duty to plan for all eventualities, so we continue to develop those plans to ensure that we are prepared when we leave the EU at in March 2019. Alongside the necessary legislation, we are procuring new systems and recruiting new staff where necessary to ensure a smooth exit regardless of the outcomes. However, to walk away from the negotiating table now and leave immediately would be counterproductive and unnecessary, especially in light of the progress made in December on the first stage of the negotiations.

First, consider the financial settlement. Far from the punishment deal anticipated by the petition, we have achieved a good deal for UK taxpayers. Britain is a nation that honours its obligations, and we will honour our share of the commitments made during our membership while ending the vast sums of money going to the EU every year. Crucially, we have ensured that our rebate will continue to apply, and that the EU will reduce the settlement accordingly. The settlement may be paid over the course of several years, but the Government estimate that it will be between £35 billion and £39 billion, equivalent to roughly four years of our current budget contribution, around which two of which we expect will be covered by the implementation period.

As the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) pointed out in his speech, the money is not a divorce bill. We have agreed a fair financial settlement with the EU, enabling us to move to the next stage of negotiations. We will soon see significant savings from our payments to the EU, compared with what we would have paid had we stayed in. We will continue to benefit from EU programmes under the budget plan. No UK region will lose out on EU budget funding, and anyone who gets European funding—local councils, regional bodies, UK businesses, scientific researchers, Erasmus students or charities—can continue to bid for and receive funding until the end of their projects.

From the beginning, the Prime Minister has been clear that safeguarding the rights of EU citizens is her priority. In her open letter in October, she made it clear that we “hugely value the contributions that EU nationals make to the economic, social and cultural fabric of the UK”, and that we want them to stay. We are pleased that that commitment is reflected in the joint report of December. The agreement reached in principle will provide citizens with certainty about their rights going forward, enabling families who have built lives together in the EU and UK to stay together. The agreement gives people more certainty not only about residence but about healthcare, pensions and other benefits. The agreement will cover only those people defined in the withdrawal agreement. Anyone arriving in the UK after the specified date who does not fall in that category will be subject to future arrangements.

Those who signed the petition may well have had concerns about the European Court of Justice. At present, the UK is bound by all ECJ decisions; hundreds of decisions every year have effect in the UK, whether or not the case originated in the UK. That will end. The UK will take back control of its laws, and UK courts will have the final say on UK cases. EU citizens’ rights in the UK will be upheld by implementing the agreement into UK law.

Antoinette Sandbach: Of course, we will still be subject to the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. My constituents have a great deal of difficulty understanding the distinction between the two. Will the Minister confirm that it is Britain’s intention to remain bound by the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights? The judgment in the Abu Hamza case, for example, prevented us from deporting him.

Suella Fernandes: As my hon. Friend rightly points out, the European Court of Human Rights arises from the European convention on human rights, totally separate from the European Union and its legal structures. It is a source of much of our rights culture here in the UK, transposed through the Human Rights Act 1998. She is right that we are, and will continue to be, bound to honour that document and the decisions of that court.

Jenny Chapman: I am listening to what the Minister is saying, and I have a lot of time for the interventions from the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). I represent a leave seat and, to be completely candid, nobody has raised concerns with me about the ECJ being involved in issues such as nuclear safeguards or even EU citizens’ rights in this country. In those limited respects, and possibly much more widely, no one has raised it with me. It is slightly misleading to suggest that there is huge outcry and dissent about that particular issue. I do not believe that it is true, and it is not borne out by any of the discussions in my leave seat.

Suella Fernandes: I must disagree with the hon. Lady. I think that sovereignty, whether it is parliamentary or legal sovereignty, were key factors in the referendum.
Jenny Chapman: On nuclear safeguards?

Suella Fernandes: On many issues. Whether on immigration, on which the ECJ has the final say, or on nuclear safeguards, ending the ECJ’s jurisdiction is integral to leaving the European Union, and the two cannot be divorced.

To resume my point—in the UK, EU citizens’ rights will be upheld by implementing the agreement in UK law. In the interest of the consistent interpretation of citizens’ rights, the UK has agreed that a narrow group of issues will be referred to the ECJ for interpretation, with due regard to whether relevant case law already exists. That will be up to our courts and they will make the final judgment, not the ECJ. In practical terms, that is a very limited role: our courts refer only two or three cases of that kind to the ECJ every year. In any case, there is a sunset clause after which that voluntary reference to the ECJ will come to an end. In short, any continuing role for the ECJ in our legal system will be voluntary, narrowly defined, and time limited.

A further reason why the Government seek to continue their negotiations with the EU rather than to leave before March 2019 is the advantage gained by securing an implementation period, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech. The implementation period will be strictly time-limited and mutually beneficial—it will be in everyone’s interests. Let me be clear: it is about not delay, but preparation.

An implementation period is essential to make the most of Brexit. We want to leave the EU, but we want to leave successfully. We want to base the long-term trajectory of our country as an independent nation outside the EU on prosperity, growth and taking back control. The best way to achieve that is by causing the least disruption.

An implementation period is important because businesses and public services will have to plan for only one set of changes in the relationship between the UK and the EU. At the end of that period, all our systems, procedures and structure will be in place and ready to go. There will not be one set of changes in 2019 and one at a later date. Many hon. Members have spoken on behalf of the business community, which has been clear about the importance of the implementation period to its planning. An implementation period provides certainty, which is a clear advantage and one of the key reasons why the Government are seeking to make a beneficial deal with the EU, rather than to leave prior to March 2019.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions to this interesting debate. To reiterate, there is no doubt that we are leaving the EU, the customs union and the single market. We are seeking a new future partnership with the EU in the second phase of negotiations, and we neither want nor expect a “no deal” or a “punishment deal”. We are confident that we can achieve a mutually beneficial deal that delivers on the will of the British people.

The next phase will not be easy—far from it. We can expect difficult moments and challenges.

Jenny Chapman: Will the Minister give way?

Suella Fernandes: I will not, because I have been generous in giving way and accepting many interventions.

It is now important for talks to move forward so that we can work towards agreeing the terms of our future relationship. We want to maintain the beneficial trading relationship between the two parties. We aspire to continue to co-operate on an array of areas. We also want to lead the world in global trade by striking trade agreements with countries outside the European Union. We need to devise our own independent immigration policy and restore judicial sovereignty to UK courts. As the Prime Minister set out, we will leave the EU on 29 March 2019 in accordance with article 50. We want to give businesses and the public the certainty that they need to ensure a smooth transition.

As elected representatives, we all have a duty to honour the result of that historic 2016 vote. It was a vote of confidence in Britain, in our democracy, in our country forging a new path, and in a country free to harness its people’s abilities, talents and genius—

Jenny Chapman: On a point of order, Mr Hanson.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I very much hope it is a point of order.

Jenny Chapman: I would not let you down, Mr Hanson. Is it in order for a Minister to decline to take an intervention when she has 25 minutes remaining and she has not addressed many issues that have been discussed, including Northern Ireland and the border?

David Hanson (in the Chair): I am grateful for the point of order, but the Minister has the Floor. She can give way or not, according to her preference.

Suella Fernandes: Thank you, Mr Hanson.

Our country will be free to harness our people’s abilities, talents and genius to develop a new, dynamic and beneficial future for our country. It is eminently possible that we will strike an agreement between the EU and the UK. Let us get on with the job and deliver for the British people.

7.5 pm

Paul Scully: I pay tribute to all hon. Members for such a good-natured debate—unlike some other debates and headlines. I am dismayed at some of the words spoken to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). They are demeaning and deplorable, and frankly, they do not get anybody on either side of the debate anywhere. For that reason, I am pleased that the words chosen in the debate have been useful and careful. To the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), I say that I chose the word “buccaneering” carefully and used it as an adjective about being adventurous.

When it comes to Brexit, my eyes look to the future, not the past. I am pleased to hear the Minister say that there will be no second referendum. That would weaken our negotiating stance, prolong uncertainty and fuel the very divisions that the people who are calling for that referendum complained about in the first instance.

It is important that we understand the petitioners and that our approach is not patronising. Many people up and down the country signed the petition. They are not too old and they are not stupid. We have had a long
debate. They have the facts that the Committees have come up with since the referendum, but they still signed this petition. We must appreciate what they are saying.

The petition says, "Why wait?", but as we have heard, we are not waiting. We are working hard, whether that is on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill to ensure that we leave in an orderly fashion, or on the negotiations in which we know we have to compromise at some point. I appreciated President Macron's interview over the weekend. Although I do not agree with everything that he said, he said it in a fair way. He was representing the views of French people, which is his job. It is up to our Government and us as parliamentarians to represent our people in the UK.

We are making the decision for 40 or 50 years—it is not a short-term decision—so although I am counting down the days to 29 March 2019, it is important to get it right and to concentrate on getting the best bespoke deal that we can. I ask petitioners to stay with us, to remain patient, to talk up our abilities as a country and as an economy, to believe in Britain and to know that our best days are ahead of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 200165 relating to leaving the European Union.

7.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Skills Devolution (England)

Tuesday 23 January 2018

Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered skills devolution in England.

What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I hope to have the pleasure of hearing your speech later. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on skills devolution in England. I am especially grateful to the Members here from outside London, as I am keen to hear about the reality in their constituency regarding how we can tackle the national skills gap as flexibly as possible.

Across our country, we face an enormous challenge in ensuring that we have the skills that we need to operate the economy, and that we are doing all we can to enable people to secure such skills, and support them in doing so. The issue is particularly acute in London, where my constituency is, but it also exists in the larger cities throughout the country and, indeed, in the regions, and the situation has worsened since 2010, when further education colleges faced cuts—they now receive 50% less funding. The centralised skills system needs to be looked at again, in London and in all parts of England. I will set out the problems seen by us on the all-party parliamentary group for London—and by the all-party group for Greater Manchester, with which we have done work on this—and the recommendations outlined in our report, “Bridging the Skills Gap”, which I recommend colleagues read.

Significant steps have been taken since the devolution project started in 2000, but there is a pressing case for specific devolution in this area, and a need to explore ways in which such devolution can be achieved in regions that do not have devolved Assemblies or metro mayors. Although recent economic growth has led to substantial reductions in the numbers of people on jobseeker's allowance, an estimated 628,000 Londoners are not in work but would like to be—enough people to fill the city of Nottingham twice over—and youth unemployment is high. In 2016, 9.4% of 16 to 24-year-olds in London were unemployed, compared with 3.6% of 25 to 64-year-olds. For both adults and young people, that represents a huge waste of human potential.

The problem is very unevenly spread across London, a city of 8 million people; there are constituencies where very high numbers of young people face larger problems from unemployment and a lack of skills. Almost a quarter of all vacancies in London—23%—are due to a lack of applicants with the right skills. In addition, almost half of firms—42%—are not confident they will be able to recruit people with the higher-level skills that their organisation needs over the next five years. In the London borough of Haringey, where my constituency is located, 35% of 19-year-olds do not have a level 3 qualification, yet London is an increasingly highly skilled economy. There is a clear skills mismatch.

My local college, the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, now merged with City and Islington College and with Westminster Kingsway—mergers that took a lot of energy and money out of the sector when we could least afford it—tells me that many students were held back following the sharp reduction in funding. That has led to too many Londoners being in low-paid and often insecure employment, and there has been an increase in the number of low-paid jobs in the capital.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): To highlight my hon. Friend's point, in my constituency we send the lowest number of young people on to higher education in the country, despite having two universities in the city, and Bath and Exeter nearby. It is critical that the further education sector pick up such youngsters and support them in their skills and education, not just in London but in places like Bristol.

Catherine West: This needs to be looked at specifically in Bristol, where we have seen such a sharp increase in the population of under-30s.

Many people, once in work, fail to get salary and career progression, and 700,000 Londoners are paid less than the London living wage; that has a real impact on families. Recent research by Trust for London shows that people are more likely to be in insecure employment in the capital or in other large cities than elsewhere in the UK.

The population of London continues to grow rapidly—by 1.3 million since 2005—and the demand for basic skills provision grows alongside it. That population growth has increased demand for specific areas of skills provision, such as English for speakers of other languages, or ESOL; the Workers Educational Association has done excellent work in that area. Founded in 1903 and working for a “A better world—equal, democratic and just”, the WEA serves people within a two-mile radius and we can see the importance of that local provision throughout the country, not just in cities. However, our cities need to grow their own talent and get businesses to invest more in skills. Levels of business investment are unfortunately at an all-time low and we need a flexible and responsive skills system to respond effectively to the challenges the capital faces. They are urgent challenges and, if ignored, could significantly hamper economic growth, not just in the capital but elsewhere.

There has been criticism from business. Mr Quinn, chief executive of Balfour Beatty, has said that the apprenticeship levy system is very “Yes Minister”, which says something about where we are in thinking through how to enhance the human potential in our economy.

The skills system does not provide the flexibility and responsiveness needed, because providers are often incentivised and rewarded solely on the basis of the quantity of learners achieving a qualification, not according to the quality of the outcomes from getting that qualification, such as higher earnings. The system is market-based and is built on learner choice, but careers advice in London is patchy and inconsistent, which limits learners' ability to make informed choices and understand the opportunities in the London economy. When I speak to headteachers, they talk about teachers often not being able to put aside valuable time to
perform the crucial role of helping students decide which subjects to choose—say, whether to take a foreign language—not just at A-level or when they go on from school, but right back in year 8 or 9, so that they can have ready the skills that we so desperately need in workplaces.

Employers do not engage enough with the skills system to ensure that vocational courses are relevant to their needs. The creation of a Greater Manchester employment and skills board has resulted in the co-designing of apprenticeship courses that can be delivered locally, improving local responsiveness to skills shortages. That was replicated in Sheffield’s city deal and in several other cities, increasing the engagement of small and medium enterprises and delivering on local skills priorities.

It might be too early to tell what impact the apprenticeship levy has had, as it was introduced only in April 2017. I am sure that the Minister has a bit of time to get across that brief—her predecessors had not quite caught up with it. I am sure she will tell us her plans for the levy’s review. April 2017 is not that far back, but I am sure that the Department has plans to review its introduction and effect. Initial statistics from the Department for Education indicate a sharp drop in the number of apprenticeship starts across the UK. Between May and July 2017, they had decreased by 59.3% from the same period in the previous year—in numbers, from 117,800 to just 48,000. I am sure we would all agree, across this Chamber, that that is a crucial area that needs the Government’s attention.

Employers in the public and private sectors report issues with the system’s inflexibility, and it appears that many organisations will fail to spend significant amounts of their levy contributions. It seems highly unlikely that the Government’s aim of 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020 will be achieved. That is another example of the skills system failing to respond adequately to the current and future needs of our economy.

The skills system in the UK is very centralised, leaving London with few tools at its disposal to cope with London-specific issues, such as the higher demand for English as a second language, historically low levels of apprenticeships and the reliance on incoming labour in key sectors. The picture is potentially worse in other fast-growing cities, such as Coventry and Exeter, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) mentioned; they do not have the same system of devolution that we have in the capital. I am hoping to hear more about those regions of the UK later in the debate.

The system simply does not respond well enough to our growing cities’ needs and priorities. Coventry, for example, is in part of the country that is seeing greater economic growth, although that is coming from a lower base. Our skills system is not matching that growth and is failing behind. The OECD predicts that without significant improvement, the UK will fall to 28th out of 33 OECD countries for intermediate skills by 2020. That would see the UK overtaken by Ireland, Israel and Belgium.

London faces myriad challenges: a rapidly rising population; an over-reliance on migrant labour; skills gaps in many key sectors; low numbers of apprenticeships and an inflexible apprenticeship system; patchy careers guidance; and poor match-up between skills spending and outcomes. The forthcoming devolution of the adult education budget represents an important first step in creating a more efficient skills system, but the Government must be bolder and go further and faster on skills devolution to have the impact needed. Devolving greater powers on skills to London and the metro mayors would enable cities to create a system that meets employer need, not just learner demand.

What about the impact of Brexit? Businesses have met an increasingly large share of their labour needs through immigration. Nearly one in three of London’s workforce is non-UK born, and 90% of London’s businesses recruit EU citizens. Workers from the EU play a vital role in many of the capital’s key sectors, including construction, financial services, hospitality and health and social care. In London, in construction, hospitality and the tech sector, just under a third of all workers are EU nationals. Any fall in EU immigration following Brexit or during the uncertainty that Brexit is producing has a significant impact on not only London, but the UK. We know that London’s economy is a driver of things and has knock-on effects on other regions. Many agricultural areas are over-dependent on the supply of EU labour. The outcome of the discussions and negotiations over Brexit could have a knock-on effect.

The capital attracts highly skilled graduates from across the UK. A significant drop in EU labour could increase that trend, undermining the Government’s industrial strategy and attempts to rebalance the national economy. There is a genuine desire across the House of Commons for every region to grow and for London not to attract all the high-achieving graduates. That could happen for a period, perhaps, but there is a real need to rebalance our economy.

The drop in EU labour could also have a knock-on effect on other key policy areas, such as the need to build more affordable homes in London. A chronic shortage of skills in construction, for example, will create higher project costs and diminish the ability of the sector to deliver the new homes required to tackle the chronic housing shortage facing the capital and the rest of the country. We can think of best practice in public procurement: in many boroughs and city regions, the local authorities are getting much better at using public procurement to ensure that for every £1 million that is spent, say, we get one or two apprentices back from the providers of that crucial capital work. That is mainly in construction and the renovation and refurbishment of social homes, but also in other areas.

All the factors I have outlined suggest that London government and the metro mayoralities need the ability to take a strategic, all-age, whole systems approach to skills. There should be greater engagement with employers and better access to and use of data. The system should allow a more localised approach that works at two levels. In the capital, for example, we should tackle pan-London issues while also having more targeted activity at a sub-regional level to take into account the variations of skills, needs and demand across cities.

The all-party parliamentary group’s report set out eight key principles that should underpin a future skills system. They were:

1. It must be labour-market led, and include high quality labour market intelligence that captures the needs of individuals, employers and local economies informing learner choice and the provider offer.
2. It must have strong employer engagement in order to identify skills needs and sector priorities.

3. It must have strong local accountability, with joint governance agreed between the GLA and London boroughs via sub-regional partnerships.

In that regard, we know that other sub-regional areas function much better than London. With a population of 8 million, it is very hard to match the economic partnerships with the various areas. In other sub-regions, we should be able to do much better on local accountability and buy-in from local authorities. The report continued:

“4. It must be outcome-focused, with strategic coordination across all aspects of post-16 professional and technical education to drive better outcomes. The system should focus on and reward delivery of positive outcomes covering jobs, earnings, progression”

I emphasise that point; too many people are sitting in entry-level jobs way into their 40s and 50s, unable to get that progression that is so crucial—

“personal development and wellbeing outcomes.

5. It must include stronger incentives to encourage provision that meets London’s economic needs and supports progression.

6. It must be flexible to enable London government to have the ability to commission provision based on analysis of need.

7. It must include effective, impartial information and advice to ensure learners can make informed choices that will lead to future employment opportunities.

8. It must take a whole systems approach to ensure that skills policy and commissioning are effectively aligned.”

What would that mean in practice? The Government need to go further, faster, to give local government and metro mayors the levers to address the considerable skills challenges I have set out. They should consider devolving all 16-to-18 provision to combined authorities in other parts of England. The Government should provide commissioning freedom and the ability to set outcomes and incentives for the whole skills system. That would better serve the progression and economic priorities of different areas in England. The Government should give London government control over all vocational capital investments, such as 14-to-19 capital provision and institutes of technology, alongside existing further education capital responsibilities. That would capitalise on local ambition, expertise and intelligence, and align adult education and 14-to-19 capital investment.

The Government should devolve careers funding streams to London government, so that it can build a seamless, single, integrated careers service. The concept of a careers service is something that many people in local government would love to see return, so that they can match aspirations and assist parents, who are so key to helping young people decide what to do next. It would also allow older people to get back into the workplace—or change what they do, now that we are all meant to be working until we are 70. / [Interjection.] You have loads of time, Minister. Through those things, we can have a proper system that we can be proud of.

We would like the devolution of careers funding streams to a local level, to build a seamless, single, integrated careers service. The Government should devolve the capital’s future share of the UK’s shared prosperity fund to London government, and ensure that future skills funding settlements take into account each area’s unique needs. We also need short-term flexibilities around the apprenticeship levy. In the longer term, we need to devolve the levy to London. That will be quite a difficult trick to master for a new system, but we need it to be as flexible as possible, so that we can use the resource quickly and build in the ability to develop that longer-term devolution. We could get longer-term value by getting together with local areas to work out the best way forward.

The other voice that needs to be listened to is that of small and medium-sized enterprises. They provide many of the job starts for young people, and older people entering the labour market who need their skills updated. It is difficult for SMEs to communicate with Government. Members of Parliament and the wider system, so that relationship with SMEs must be developed in a special way. We want more flexibility in the levy; for example, it could allow an increase in the amount of levy funding that employers can pass on to their suppliers. That is currently capped at 10%. Local authority areas increasingly use their contracts to have suppliers generate apprenticeship opportunities, but capping that at 10%, particularly in the short term, might mean we are not getting as much value as we could in our timeframe. In 2016-17, for example, London boroughs created 60% of their apprenticeships through contracts and suppliers, as I mentioned earlier.

The Greater London Authority and the Institute for Public Policy Research, a think-tank, have developed a proposal for a skills and progression pilot project, which I recommend the Department look at. A strand of the proposed pilot is to work with employers to pool the 10% that can be passed on to non-levy-paying employers, and support them in developing good-quality apprenticeships through that. The pilot wants to test out increasing the 10% cap as well. There is a strong push for that proposal. In the longer term, the Government should consider full devolution of the apprenticeship levy, as has happened in Scotland and Wales. Obviously, London and other key areas would need to bid and make the case for that, but the Government should not rule that out.

A recent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey found that 53% of employers who pay the apprenticeship levy would prefer a training levy; just 17% support the apprenticeship levy in its current form. I am keen to hear the Minister’s feedback on that proposal.

In conclusion, the proposals might seem radical and far-reaching, but London, Manchester, Birmingham and other major UK cities are experiencing severe skills challenges that could be exacerbated significantly by Brexit. The Government need to act now and allow the skills system to deliver in flexible, responsive ways that the current centralised system does not. The Mayor of London has already indicated that London government is keen to work with central Government to deliver on this agenda, and there is a clear appetite from many of the elected mayors to do the same, as there is from leaders of local areas. I hope we can all work together to improve skills outcomes for all learners and businesses across England.

[IAN PAISLEY in the Chair]

9.52 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood
[Priti Patel]

Green (Catherine West) on securing this important debate and on her thoughtful speech, which covered the whole gamut of skills policy. She had some good initiatives and suggestions for how we can start to address the ongoing skills shortage across our country and our economy in a wide range of sectors.

I remember often discussing young people here in 2010. We talked about a generation excluded from employment and about the employability barriers facing them. We had a system that was simply not functioning and not getting them the engagement that they needed to help them get the skills necessary to join the workforce. During those years, when we had had a recession too, we found that older workers were finding it difficult to retain their jobs and also to find new employment as the economy changed. There was more part-time employment as demands across the economy fundamentally shifted. One of the things that I feel strongly about, which the country and our Government should focus on, is the agility that is required to sustain the flexible economy. We must ensure that people of all ages, all skills and all backgrounds can still remain active in the labour market. To do that, we need to look at education.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a strong case on the economic benefits of addressing the skills shortage, but there is also a moral case to do with social mobility, aspiration and allowing people to fulfil their potential in society generally.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to the ladder of opportunity, the moral obligation and responsibility, and the progression pay that the right hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green mentioned earlier. In fact, we have a good economy right now, but we are faced with a shortage of people in the key sectors that cover the health and wellbeing of our economy: construction, nursing, social care, engineering and a whole range of other sectors. Full-time employment and part-time and temporary employment are all incredibly vital to our labour market.

We have record levels of employment, but we should look beyond that to the next generation and ensure that, while they are at school, they are engaged and nurtured to think about the world of work. The Government have the Careers & Enterprise Company and other models of engagement, but that is simply not good enough in terms of overall coverage—engagement with schools and the requirement on our education establishments to open their doors to businesses, so that they may talk to young people about careers, and to bring into schools sectors that reflect the local economy.

I feel strongly about the role and significance of devolution. In my short apprenticeship as the Employment Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions, I oversaw some of the devolution deals around the Work programme. I worked with the combined authority in Manchester and on other devolution deals. Employment programmes and employability were a major factor in giving a devolution to local authorities up and down the country. At the heart of that success is working with the private sector, not just the public sector, to ensure that the private sector and the needs of the local economy are fully reflected in devolution deals. Importantly, the combined authority and local authority models require an absolute understanding of what is going on in the local economy, where the skills shortages are and where future demand might come from. There is also a need to look at succession planning and how businesses can work with their workforce.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland we have recognised it is important to address the issue of skills shortages and to go into secondary schools. Some people have suggested we should even go into primary schools, although I am not sure that is entirely appropriate. We have also addressed the skills shortage in engineering. We should encourage ladies and girls to look to engineering as a possible job for the future, because they can do it as well as we men.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short and not made into speeches.

Priti Patel: The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is absolutely right. Young girls should be encouraged and should have the opportunity to look at the careers that they might not even consider to be suitable for them. In STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—engineering is a classic example.

If I may, I will share with the House a little bit about Essex and how we are approaching the skills issue locally. Essex is famously the county of entrepreneurs. Firms based in my constituency have a proud and strong record of creating jobs and local employment. Businesses in my constituency are almost entirely small and medium-sized businesses and they have now created 25% more jobs leading to more than 30,000 people in employment. They are doing well, but they could do even better. They want to see the barriers to recruitment, employability and access to the labour market brought down. They want people with the right kinds of skills. They want change because we have seen that a deficit in skills standards is one of the biggest barriers to growth locally, and to productivity in our wider economy.

On Friday I attended a skills forum organised by the excellent Essex Chambers of Commerce and Industry, which was also attended by my equally brilliant colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). In that business-led forum the spotlight was on skills and on the barriers that prevent businesses recruiting people. It particularly looked at the barriers around the skills and training programmes in Essex and the demands and challenges for the future workforce who are being trained. We need highly trained people, but the lack of flexibility within the training and provider landscape was clearly on display in the discussions that we had.

What stood out in the skills forum, and in my previous meetings and engagement with local businesses, was that they want to be at the heart of the decisions that are made on skills policies, and they want to be involved in designing and shaping courses. They want to play their part in offering job training opportunities. However, there are many barriers and restrictions on their doing that. They are best placed to understand the needs of their businesses and the local economy in a way that no Government with a centralised approach and no local authority can fully understand until those businesses are a full part of the discussion. The devolution of skills
to local authorities can be successful only if businesses play a leading role in developing that skills agenda, including working with the education establishments and the courses in those areas.

Over the years, I have received endless complaints from businesses about the time it takes for new courses to be approved. They also complain, as I have mentioned, about barriers put up by the public sector to engagement with businesses. It can take years, with hundreds of hours of input from business and trade organisations, for new courses to be signed off. That equally applies to relevant courses. On Friday, I met representatives from a business who said that finding a course that was specific to their business was near-impossible. They just wanted a course, for a young person who wanted to be on an apprenticeship scheme, that covered the basic employability skills.

There is so much more that can be done, and I welcome the many creative suggestions in the all-party parliamentary group report. We need to ensure that there is flexibility, and that businesses are at the heart of the devolution agenda. I strongly support the idea of devolution in skills coming to the county of Essex. I think that we would benefit from that, in some of the wards that I represent, which have been suggested today. Devolving skills and focusing on skills in the workforce, is important not just to businesses, but to individual workers. The skills deficit has a drag not only on our economy, but on the life chances of people who want to work. We have so much untapped potential across our workforce, and there is a great opportunity for the Government to lift the lid on the talents of those people who are struggling to access the labour market.

One way that we can do that, as the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green mentioned, is through the apprenticeship levy. We need to look at how we can unlock the potential of the levy and use the funds it raises to support the upskilling of a whole generation who are simply not accessing the levy. I also suggest using the funds to upskill agency and temporary workers. More than 1 million people go to work every day to do agency and temporary work. That model offers a great deal of flexibility, but those workers make an enormous contribution to our economy; their net contribution stands at something like £35 billion. There is a growing concern that the funds that agencies put into the apprenticeship levy cannot be used to train and upskill workers on their books. Somewhere in the region of 2,000 to 2,500 businesses are paying the levy, and the rules on the spending of funds raised by the apprenticeship levy are so rigid that it is almost impossible to use that money to invest in agency or temporary workers.

We have a very good record in Government when it comes to revitalising apprenticeship schemes, and we should be proud of that. The levy has a critical role to play in providing a great pathway. We know that the current pathways are not suitable for everyone, and we need more flexibility when it comes to the levy and apprenticeship schemes. Many workers need to go on shorter, practical courses to take the next step to move on in their career. Examples include courses in food hygiene and fork-lift truck driving, which are not covered by the apprenticeship levy. The flexibility of the levy could be increased to support some of those courses, so that we can support more people to get back into work and get better pay progression, and give them long-term employment opportunities.

If we are to deliver a fair society that invests in people and provides opportunity for those who want a hand up so that they can reach their full potential, why on earth would we not do this? We have a fantastic opportunity to provide greater training support; existing employment programmes are far too rigid and inflexible to do so. A very good way in which we could do that. I suggest, is that the Minister, working across the Department for Work and Pensions footprint, could give people who are on universal credit, and who are limited in their hours of work, the freedom and flexibility to access the levy, to get on some of these courses, and to get skilled up so that they can progress.

We are on the cusp now. The levy is new, but it represents a fantastic opportunity. Devolution of skills is surely a success for our region, and it deserves to receive more encouragement.

Stephen Timms

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Welcome to the Chair, Mr Paisley. The Government have said that they want skills devolution, and the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) has supported that aim. Indeed, I think George Osborne announced that skills would be devolved to a number of mayoral combined authorities, but progress has been woefully slow, so I very much welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) has secured today’s debate.

There are still lots of operational details about how that devolution will be achieved. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to give us some detail about when devolution will happen in London and the other mayoral combined authorities, because the need is now pressing. I welcome the report from the all-party parliamentary group for London, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on bringing it forward. I welcome the sense of urgency that the report conveys about what it describes, absolutely rightly, as “an enormous skills challenge” in London.

There is a striking degree of agreement in London about what needs to be done. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green set out a number of priorities. The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in its most recent quarterly survey, for the third quarter of 2017, found that 60% of businesses in London that tried to recruit encountered difficulty finding people with the right skills. That is the highest—that is to say, the worst—proportion since it started collecting those figures four years ago. The right hon. Member for Witham mentioned the Essex Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry explicitly endorses the recommendation in the all-party parliamentary group’s report to devolve all 16-to-18 provision to London, and to give the capital greater control over policy and commissioning.

Life is difficult for many in London today. Employment is high, which is a very good thing, but jobs are often insecure and uncertain. Housing costs are high and rising, quite fast, and wages are not keeping pace. More and more people are in the position characterised by the Prime Minister as “just about managing.” Some forecasters currently estimate that 3 million jobs could be lost to
automation in the next generation. Automation is a huge driver of the need for reskilling. Furthermore, in the background to all of that is the perennial UK challenge on productivity. UK productivity fell from 9% below the OECD average in 2007 to 18% below it in 2015. We have to overcome that long-term challenge. The report is also absolutely right to highlight, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green did in her opening speech, that a drop in European Union migration will have a disproportionate impact on London, because so many workers in London are from other parts of the European Union. Lots of London’s key sectors have big EU-born workforces, and Brexit is bound to make the problems of skills shortages worse and increase the importance of achieving solutions.

Those challenges are particularly acute in east London—the part of London that I represent. In October, the Mayor of London published research showing that east London is the fastest-growing area of the capital. Some 110,000 additional jobs have been created in the six Olympic boroughs since 2012—three times the number predicted in 2013. I very much agree with what the Mayor said in October:

“Businesses, universities and cultural institutions are flocking here and the centre of gravity in London is moving east.”

That trend in our part of London further highlights the importance of the skills challenge.

The report published by the all-party parliamentary group for London highlights a number of issues specific to the capital, such as,

“a much higher demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green mentioned that as one of the concerns, and I very much agree with her on that. It is widely recognised that the ability to speak English is key to integration and community cohesion, and yet funding for it in London has been dramatically cut. The joint briefing for this debate from London Councils and the Greater London Authority makes the point:

“London’s population has grown from 7.4 million in 2005 to 8.9 million in 2017, but funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages has reduced in real terms by 60% since 2009.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), who will be winding up for the Opposition in this debate, pointed out last October, in a parliamentary briefing on delivering skills for London organised by the Learning Revolution Trust—a charity linked with Newham College in my constituency—that annual ESOL funding had been cut from £203 million in 2010 to £90 million. Refugee Action says that about half of ESOL providers report waiting lists of six months or more.

I hope that we can recognise the importance of ESOL and do something to address the current lack of funding. I pay tribute to the work in my borough, Newham, of ESOL Exchange, which will mark its 10th anniversary next month. It is a network of people and organisations working together to improve ESOL in Newham, managed by the Aston-Mansfield Community Involvement Unit. It provides a web-based directory of formal and informal ESOL provision of all kinds across our borough, in order to make it as accessible as possible. Helping people in east London speak English proficiently is a very important part of the skills challenge.

I pay tribute to the Learning Revolution Trust, a charity that aims to reduce the financial barriers to education faced by many people today in east London. It typically provides modest financial support to people, perhaps midway through a course, for example to help with childcare costs, and has helped more than 300 young people since it was established in 2012. It has made an important contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green and the right hon. Member for Witham both mentioned apprenticeships, which are key. It seems to me, however, that the programme has been botched in the past year or two. The Association of Colleges has reported, based on data from 91 further education colleges last November, that the number of apprentices had fallen 39% compared with the previous year. It suggests that, even though £2.6 billion is being collected through the apprenticeship levy, the Government might actually end up spending less on apprenticeships this year than last year, because the cuts in funding for the apprenticeship programme from taxation have been greater than the extra amount going in through the apprenticeship levy.

The right hon. Member for Witham rightly drew attention, in a very courteous way, to some of the flaws in the design of the levy. Those flaws are serious. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green suggested, it would be great if the Minister would tell us that there will be some sort of review of how the levy is going. I have not heard any suggestion of that yet, but I do think a review is urgently needed. It is now absolutely clear that the target of 3 million apprenticeships starts by 2020 will be missed. FE Week published an informative graph in November, showing that achievements towards that target were behind target up to a year ago, and then, almost a year ago when the levy was introduced, they went massively off-target. There is really no prospect now of the ground being made up. It would be very good to hear from the Minister what plans there are to try to get the apprenticeships programme back on track.

The call for devolution, which is across the board now, of powers on skills should be not just heeded—the Government have recognised that—but delivered. I hope we shall hear from the Minister what steps will be taken to do that.

10.14 am

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I commend the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing what is a welcome and increasingly urgent debate.

As we leave the European Union, we will need our domestic workforce to be ever more dynamic, innovative and flexible, not just to maximise the new opportunities to our economy from trade and technology, but to reduce our reliance on a vast overseas workforce. Access to a pool of half a billion EU workers has for too long allowed businesses to obtain cheap, skilled and hard-working employees without having to properly invest in the domestic skills base. It has similarly allowed the Government to duck some of the shortcomings of our own education and skills systems by effectively piggy-backing on the investments of other nations in their people.
Economic migration to the UK will not and should not stop once we have left the EU. London, where I am an MP, is an economic powerhouse that needs to have access to the global talent pool, but if we are to fulfil our own industrial strategy and maximise opportunities for home-grown workers, we need to turbo-charge our approach to skills and get businesses, schools, colleges and Government to work together in a far more interconnected way. The current framework for improving skills is far too centralised and inflexible, unable to deliver workers to fill London’s vacancies as quickly as those vacancies are created, and failing to provide lifelong learning to keep existing workers sufficiently up to date.

Two weeks ago, I visited my local jobcentre, where the team is doing a quite remarkable job in getting people into work. However, one of the groups they find hardest to place is the over-50s, who need to be given time and confidence to adapt to the changing workplace. Meanwhile, one in five London families are stuck in in-work poverty, so attention also needs to be paid to providing clear progression pathways into higher paid work. We require a new spirit of collaboration that leads to increased interaction between our schools, businesses and public services.

I am very excited by what I see in my own constituency. Hon. Members have referred to the critical importance of investment in STEM subjects. On Friday, I visited the Coopers’ Company and Coborn School, which has a dedicated STEM coordinator, Nick, who is doing some amazing work in increasing uptake in science, maths and tech subjects by connecting the school to the academic community and to businesses. Too often such work is reliant on dynamic individuals and organisations, without whom the workstream would not be able to progress.

I am also particularly excited by a five-week, focused course being run by Havering College in my constituency, working with Transport for London. Committed students in the boot-camp style course at this railway academy are guaranteed a job interview with the prospect of employment as railway engineers. Half a million pounds-worth of rail equipment donated by TfL has been installed at the college and students are getting hands-on experience to learn about the rail industry. That is the kind of joined-up skills approach we shall need to see much more of, not least as it helps to provide workers for critical infrastructure projects such as Crossrail. The programme has also helped long-term unemployed and ex-offenders with few or no qualifications to access full-time employment.

It is probably now time to give London the powers that will enable it to prioritise those kinds of skills investments: getting people into work and delivering critical infrastructure in the capital. Devolution of skills provision would also support the capital to develop Londoners’ employability and skillset, targeting and scaling up skills efforts to ensure that everyone who grows up in London can access employment in a changing and increasingly competitive labour market. Compared with international peers and other parts of the UK, London has much lower fiscal and political autonomy, and it is highly dependent on national policies and funding—74% of Greater London Authority and borough expenditure is based on intergovernmental transfers. That makes it very difficult to plan for the long term.

There are two areas where the Government could now look at devolving additional power, since City Hall will soon take control of London’s adult education budget: unspent apprenticeship levy funds and the 16-to-18 further education skills budget. Those issues will be key to meeting the demands of London’s changing labour market. With a wider range of powers, London would be in a strong position to create a system that meets employer need, not just learner demand, and capitalise on local labour market intelligence. It would enable stronger employment engagement to identify skill needs and sector priorities, which can only be done effectively at local level. The provision of higher level professional and technical education could be driven up and clear progression pathways created for learners. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s perspective on those and the other technical and skills issues raised today.

10.19 am

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):
I say with even greater feeling than normal what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this debate. Her contribution was thought provoking and adds to an ongoing debate on this serious issue. I describe it as serious because successive Governments have wrestled with the problem of the national provision and accountability of skills funding and the effectiveness of local delivery. Certainly the Government’s own initiative of the apprenticeship levy will not, as far as we can tell at this moment, solve or resolve those historical tensions and problems. We need to look at the issue from a fresh perspective. Now is a good time to do that.

In the Government’s regionalisation agenda—we talk about the northern powerhouse, the Midlands Engine and so on and so forth—skills is an essential driver of economic growth in a region. To devolve economic power to the regions without devolving the provision of skills in effect leaves a vital part of economic infrastructure out of regional control. I am here to advocate increased devolution of skills, in particular in an area such as mine, which now has a new metro Mayor, Andy Street, who has pledged to enhance economic growth in the area and to see what can be done with local provision of skills funding in order to enhance the initiatives already in place.

Nothing could be more appropriate at this time. Only last week the local chamber of commerce in my constituency warned of acute skills shortages. My area is the historic Black country, which in years gone by was the workhouse of the world, when Britain was an international manufacturing powerhouse. Despite all the reduction in manufacturing as a proportion of our economy, the Black country still enjoys that role—it is a vital part of the engineering and motor manufacturing supply chain, which drives one of the most successful parts of our economic profile, the motor industry, vital to both productivity and our balance of payments.

There are more foundries not only in the Black country but in my constituency that there are in any other constituency, any part of the country, that have survived from an acute skills shortage. Those foundries have survived the globalisation drive because they had unique skills and a quality not deliverable in any other part of
the world. However, they now have an acute skills shortage. First, they have a problem with the age profile—the average age group in most of those foundries is of people in their 50s—and, secondly, they have survived largely by recruiting from eastern Europe, and if that supply is in any way diminished, the existing skills problem would be enhanced.

In the last quarter of 2017, 82% of businesses in the Black country were reporting recruitment problems. It is estimated that we will need to reduce the number of the workforce with no qualifications by 50,000 over the next 15 years just to bring us in line with the national average, and that the Black country will need a 70% increase in the number of apprentices to meet basic demand. That is a monumental task, but our local area is seeking to address it.

In my constituency, in Tipton, the Elite Centre for Manufacturing Skills is being built. It is a joint venture between Dudley College of further education, the University of Wolverhampton and the historic metal casting company Thomas Dudley. The centre is designed to recruit and attract young people from the area to obtain not only apprenticeship but degree-level qualifications in the range of skills necessary to the local foundry industry. That is an example of a local initiative in which local businesses engage with the academic sector and Government, knowing what is needed locally and delivering the sort of courses and expertise to get the right balance of skills needs in the area.

Unfortunately, if we look at the national picture, central Government policy engages with the regions only on its terms, seeking insights of the problem but not giving direction, and seeking advice but not giving local agencies the funding to be able to deliver on their unique insight and expertise. A particularly bad example of that came to my notice in December.

The BCTG—Black Country Training Group—executive director Chris Luty got in touch with me and other Members of Parliament in the area because the group had lost its apprenticeship funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency. BCTG is the largest provider of apprenticeships in the Black country. It had tendered for its Government funding to be renewed and, to the astonishment of Chris Luty, was unsuccessful. That meant that all the contracts with SMEs in the Black country would have to be closed, leaving a huge gap in local skills provision for small companies in the area that are vital to the supply chain for Britain’s motor industry.

In all, BCTG has recruited 4,000 apprentices, 750 since last May alone. That is the sort of scale it operates on and demonstrates the gap that would have been left had it not been able to secure the funding. I wrote to the Minister and so did other Black country MPs. To the Government’s credit, they realised that that was an error and changed their decision.

The reason given for the original decision, however, is illustrative:

“The review was conducted by a member of the Agency’s staff who possesses the appropriate technical expertise in the provision of apprenticeship training but who had not previously evaluated your tender.”

If that is not a classic case of Sir Humphrey-speak, I cannot think of a better one. It is outrageous for an organisation so key to the delivery of a vital driver of economic growth in the regions to make such a mistake. That sentence highlights the need for a change in approach to the devolution of skills to the regions.

I realise that other people wish to speak so I will bring my remarks to a close. Enhanced devolution of skills to the new bodies that are being set up affords the possibility and potential of enabling regional and even sub-regional needs to be correctly identified, backed up by initiatives from local businesses working with whatever partners are available to analyse the needs and to address them with the appropriate training and level of funding.

At the end of the day, if we are to be successful, we have to find another way of doing that. The brutal fact is that at the moment we invest billions of pounds into education and skills training but in so many of our vital industries we still have key shortages. I am sure what is happening in my area is very similar to what is happening in many other areas. Finding mechanisms to devolve skills funding to local agencies is the key to unleashing the skills potential of so many young people and meeting the needs of local industries in a way that has not been done for many years.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the next person to speak, I remind hon. Members that Front Bench speeches will begin at 10.40 am. I call Rachael Maskell.

10.30 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak in this really important debate, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on the excellent, comprehensive way that she set out the challenges ahead. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) about the importance of seeing the issue in the wider context of the local economy, and I will touch on that in my speech.

Although in York we do not have a devolution deal yet—I trust that the Minister will progress that with expediency—there is a real skills gap in our local economy. We are conscious that we are falling behind as other economies accelerate, such as those of London and the south-east. There is the north-south divide, but there is now an east-west divide, too, because of the progress being made in Manchester with the devolved settlement. That is why it is so important that we move forward on all devolution issues, not least skills.

York’s economy has changed massively over the years. We had a strong industrial base in the confectionary industry and in rail manufacturing, but that has really reduced. The low-wage, low-skilled economy has taken over. We have a very high cost of living but very low wages—some of the lowest in Yorkshire. There is real disparity, which causes pressure and mismatches in our city, where the tourism, hospitality and retail sectors dominate.

I have talked to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the urgent need to address the skills deficit in the city. I have been out talking to businesses across the city; they consistently raise that mismatch—particularly the fact that business and IT skills do not come into the economy, and that schools do not prepare children for the modern world.
of work. Last Friday, I visited York St John University, which wants to help to address the skills gap. I have also visited York College, an outstanding college in my constituency that understands the challenges of the local economy.

I want to raise the issue of co-ordination, which other hon. Members have raised. Businesses, schools, colleges and local enterprise partnerships need to come to one place to discuss the real needs of the economy and how to address skills gaps. I will give a couple of quick examples of that. Engineering is a really important part of York, which is a rail city, but the university offers courses in electrical engineering only. Although the city council has identified rail engineering as part of the footprint, we are not providing the skills in the city for that. The National Railway Museum is about to embark on a new project for a gallery about the future of engineering, to engage girls and boys across the city and the country, but if we cannot follow through on ensuring the learning, that future cannot be delivered.

The digital creative sector is another part of our footprint where there is not that connectivity. There are fantastic facilities and there is a university course, and there are business start-ups, but after that, people have to move out of the local area. We need to be able to grow those skills right through to development and address the real gaps in the economy. The same goes for the bio and agri-tech sectors, where the gap needs to be bridged between academia and applied research. There are real gaps.

We need to be careful about how we balance skills acquisition. Clearly, we see a national education service as important in allowing people to enter the economy at different points in their learning and drive those skills forward, whether from the workplace or from school. We need to make sure that we strike the fine balance between addressing national and local needs in the economy.

There are real challenges in schools. We are not preparing our kids for the world of work young enough. They learn how to pass exams, but not about the life skills that are needed. Business talks about children being “screen deep” in IT skills, but not having the skills needed for the digital economy. T-level assessments have real problems, particularly for agriculture, because the assessments have to take place at a particular time of year, but the agriculture sector revolves around the seasons. Tree surgery, for instance, needs to be done at the appropriate time, not at a time that kills trees. I put that on the Minister’s desk to address. We have real opportunities to engage schools in acquiring the skills that the economy needs for the future. We desperately need a review of the curriculum to ensure that we are addressing those needs, starting at primary school.

I am conscious that other colleagues want to make contributions. Finally, my local college has made a plea to me, as have other further education institutes. If the adult skills budget is devolved, the procurement activities could seriously disadvantage colleges and prospective students. Lessons must be learned from the recent procurement of the non-levy apprenticeship budget, which other hon. Members have spoken about. I trust that the Minister will take that on board.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for bringing this debate forward. There has been a great deal of agreement on this important issue.

I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee in the last Session. Colleagues will be aware that the Committee has done a lot of work on the interplay between devolution in cities, skills growth and the further education sector, and the need for more accountability regarding those decisions. It had a discussion about LEPs yesterday. That whole agenda needs to be much more cohesive, and people need to understand about local accountability for the way that taxpayers’ money is spent.

Further education colleges, such as City of Bristol College, which I visited again on Friday, remain part school, part training provider, part higher education college and part community college. That last function is really important to us in south Bristol. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green said, there is competition between schools. In south Bristol alone, there are more than 500 surplus school places, plus the college. The schools are all in competition with private schools, a university technical college and a sixth-form college. That dilutes not only the pool of youngsters going into those establishments, but the money and the opportunity to link up skills. Ultimately, it must dilute the quality. We need a strategic delivery function that does that much better.

The system is complex for youngsters, and for parents. I have spoken to the Minister about that and her Department is working on it. Parents are crucial—as partners, in supporting young people through a complicated system, in giving them opportunities, and in ensuring quality of provision, so that when we support our youngsters into their very different pathways, we are sure about the quality and the reliability of the courses.

I want to mention the collapse of Carillion last week. City of Bristol College stepped in, via the training board, to provide last-minute places. That highlights the importance of sustainability in further education, so that institutions can pick up that work. I will write to the Minister to make sure that the college gets the money to follow those young people, whom the college has done great work in supporting. We cannot allow that quality to be diluted any further.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing the debate. It has been excellent, thoughtful, positive and full of ideas, and she has led the field.

I am afraid that I do not have time to do full justice to the multifaceted points that my hon. Friend made. She mentioned the co-design of courses and the role of local authorities and their contractors and suppliers. She put forward ambitious and interesting ideas about how we might devolve all 16-to-18 provision, and she mentioned careers funding. I am conscious from my links and discussions with various groups in London—my
right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) referred to this, too—that there is huge appetite in London for devolution, for all the reasons that she explained.

I also praise the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who drew on local experience to inform her thoughtful comments. I was particularly interested in what she said about careers. I think she used the words “not good enough in their spread”. I do not want to criticise what the Careers & Enterprise Company is trying to do, but one of the central issues in this debate is resources—resources in the centre, and how those resources are distributed. I think that there is some common ground in the Chamber on that issue. Interestingly, she also drew on her DWP experience. In my experience, having spent a long time holding this portfolio and others, if we do not get the mix right between the Department for Education and the DWP, we will not make the progress in this area that we all want to make. That is particularly true in areas such as traineeships.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham mentioned the need for urgency from the Government. He rightly drew attention to productivity issues and to ESOL, which is key. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), in an interesting intervention, made the point that this debate is about not just an economic issue but a moral responsibility. On ESOL, we have a moral responsibility to refugees, people who have settled here and given their work to this country, and many other disadvantaged groups in this area.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) made some thoughtful comments about initiatives in her constituency and devolution for London. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), the extremely experienced former Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, mentioned skills shortages; the incident that he raised with respect to a lack of proper supervision points to what we have been saying for the past two years about the capacity of the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the Department to handle such things. The fallout from the machinery of government changes is still causing problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly drew attention to the skills gaps in her local economy and the importance of issues in the service sector, which I will touch on. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) used her experience on the Public Accounts Committee to make some telling points, including one that she has made to me on several occasions about parents being crucial.

We are entering a period of extreme uncertainty regarding our skills base because of the challenges of Brexit, automation, cuts to the adult skills budget, and so on. If we do not have a progressive integrated policy, those things will soon make it impossible for us to build highly skilled local economies or address our productivity crisis. Research commissioned by the Local Government Association reveals that the skills gap is worsening. The LGA says that by 2024 we will lack 4 million high-skilled people to take up available jobs, and will have 2 million too many people with intermediate skills and more than 6 million too many low-skilled people. The Open University has said similar things, and the recent British Chambers of Commerce quarterly economic survey also touched on this issue.

As I said when I hosted the launch of the Learning Revolution Trust’s “Delivering skills for London” report in November, we have to accept and embrace the fact that, for many adults, working models and expectations will continue to change radically. That means that there will be more self-employment, more juggling of multiple part-time jobs, more engagement with small businesses, and more demands on individuals with more complex family structures and needs. I pay tribute to the Learning Revolution Trust for that report, which brought together colleges, council leaders and local players in just the way that they need to be brought together.

We must not forget the people who are often missed out. That report referred to the issue of employing people with disabilities—particularly learners with learning difficulties or disabilities, and people with special educational needs and disabilities. The Maynard review made really important proposals in that area. Will the Minister say specifically what collaboration and co-operation is happening in that respect, particularly with DWP and BEIS? Without their involvement, it will be difficult to take this forward. Add to that the public policy challenges for generations and our exit from the European Union—a lot has been said today about Brexit—and it is clear that the skills system needs to be one of our highest priorities if we are going to escape a shortage of labour when we leave the EU, and when people from the EU who are currently here leave. In that context, we must look at devolving skills budgets.

The Minister will know that in November, England’s seven metro mayors—four Conservative and three Labour mayors—called on the Government to devolve that power much faster. The Minister’s colleague, the West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street—I quote from the Local Government Chronicle—said:

“I believe now is the time for government to go a step further and provide us with the tools to tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities we each face.”

Such requests are piling up across the board.

The all-party parliamentary group for London’s report has been dealt with in great detail. I was privileged to speak at its launch last July. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on the way that they chair the APPG. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green talked about its recommendations, so I will not repeat those, but I will say that, although the report focuses on one city, this discussion can be applied to regions across the country.

While we look at how apprenticeships are funded and how they might be part of the mix, we should explore traineeship funding at local level, too. Later today, I will meet the Association of Employment and Learning Providers and around 40 training providers to discuss a way forward for a programme that they believe the Government have neglected. We need to find ways to use traineeships as a contact point for getting on to apprenticeships and meeting local needs and demands. Another area that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham touched on is ESOL.
We must remember when we look at local funding that European structural funds have traditionally supported the expansion of apprenticeships and small businesses in areas of the country with strong local enterprise partnerships. The Government have guaranteed funding in this area for the moment, but they have given no guarantee about what will happen when we come out of the EU. Can the Minister tell us what she and her officials are doing to make that clear to No. 10 and her colleagues in the Brexit team? The sum that is potentially available, £725 million, simply cannot be lost from the process.

This call for devolution is not new, and neither are the benefits that would come from it. Back in 2013, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and I wrote a Smith Institute pamphlet about how the Government and Whitehall had been far too slow to grasp the nexus between skills and sectoral delivery, as well as place delivery. I wrote:

“Put bluntly the age of relying on Government micromanagement and mandarins to deliver what we need in this area has reached a bit of a dead-end.”

I added that

“to encompass new low carbon and hi-tech industries...Such initiatives cannot any longer simply come out of Whitehall”.

The Minister will of course remember what Lord Heseltine said about that issue in his famous 2013 report, “No stone unturned: in pursuit of growth”.

I am hugely conscious of what we need to do for councils, such as mine in Blackpool and that of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central, that were able to create their own apprenticeships in the early 2010s but now, because of funding cuts, are not able to do so. The LGA has put forward an important vision in Work Local, which the Minister should look at as well as IPPR North’s recommendations.

Our national education service talks about how important accountability is:

“the appropriate democratic authority will set, monitor and allocate resources”.

Skills devolution is not just the smart thing to do in the community but the way forward. If local authorities, mayors and combined authorities have the capacity, competence and aptitude to take it forward, the Government need to take a far stronger and more thoughtful look at that.

10.50 am

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing the debate. We do not have enough time to cover everything. It has been a fantastic debate, and it is useful for me to hear from individual Members. As the shadow Minister said, there is a lot of cross-party agreement on the subject. It is not terribly party political.

The hon. Lady talked about the significant skills gap. I was recently at the WorldSkills competition and conference, and of particular note was that Ministers from about 55 countries all around the world were saying the same thing. This is not a uniquely British problem. There is a skills gap around the world. If we look ahead 10 or 20 years, we cannot think of the jobs that will be available. This is a fast-changing climate.

To give some background on how serious the situation is, the skills for life survey in 2011 reported that 43% of people were found to have literacy skills below level 2 and a good pass at GCSE—and 78% had numeracy skills below that level. Of the respondents, 15% were found to have literacy skills of an 11-year-old or lower—an estimated 5 million people—and 49% were at that level for numeracy. Therefore, it is estimated that 17 million people have the numeracy skills of an 11-year-old or lower.

According to a 2017 Lloyds bank report, 11.5 million people in the UK are classified as not having basic digital skills. However, increasing numbers of young people are now leaving compulsory education with good standards of English and maths. In 2016, just over 71% of 19-year-olds held a level 2 qualification in both English and maths—the highest figure on record. However, we have a cohort of adults who lack those basic skills.

The hon. Lady was quite right that historically employers’ investment in skills has been poor. Employers and businesses have been bad at investing in the skills of their workforce, and the levy is one way of making sure that that is no longer the case. They pay into an account that must be used for training and assessment.

The hon. Lady also mentioned careers. I hope she has time to read the careers strategy I launched late last year—I spent a lot of time on it. Careers advice has been delivered poorly—I say that not least from my own experiences at school—and the strategy specifically mentions some of the issues she raised. She talked about patchy careers advice. What is the point of education if not to give young people the right start in life? Education is not an end in itself but a launch pad for life. We therefore need careers to become integral to what happens in schools. The largest word on the cover of the careers strategy is skills, because that is what it is about. I am not terribly fond of the word “careers”, because it invokes images that no longer apply. It is about jobs and skills.

It was a pleasure to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) contribute to the debate. I know how passionately she feels about this subject. As an aside, my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) mentioned the moral case, as did the shadow Minister. I could not feel more strongly that we have a moral imperative to get this right. It is not just about business and the skills needed; it is about making sure that people have a job path and manage to reach their potential in life. It should not matter where they come from, who they are or who they know. Everybody should have the same opportunity.

I urge Members to go into schools and talk about their careers advice, and to look at the careers strategy. There are a lot of requirements—there needs to be a lead on the governing body—and the spine that runs through the strategy is the Gatsby benchmarks.

My right hon. Friend mentioned two examples in Essex. I met a fantastic company in Essex, with 1,000 employees and 54 apprentices at any one time. That company is doing what we need employers to do. If it has a skills shortage, it recruits locally and takes apprentices from level 2 up to level 7, catering in some areas specifically for people with special needs and people on the autism spectrum. It is brilliant.
All the changes brought in have put the Institute for Apprenticeships and employers centre stage. Someone mentioned how the work is led by employers, and in a way it has been devolved to them. They, along with the IFA, can set up the new standards and fill those gaps. My right hon. Friend mentioned the training programmes needed, and that is one way of dealing with that.

Flexibility on the levy came up in the debate. Yes, I am open to extending the levy’s use, but it has been in place for less than a year. We will allow transfers. For me, the levy is something I will review constantly and see how it is spent—it will not be about having a review. What matters is not that we just get apprentices. I want high-quality apprenticeships and the money from the levy to go to where it is needed. There is a lot of money sloshing around in the system, and what matters is that it is not gamed or misspent but spent on the purpose for which it is intended.

On small and medium-sized enterprises, the Government will pay 90% of their training costs, and I believe for SMEs with fewer than 50 employees we pay 100%, so there is nothing to stop them taking on apprentices. The opportunity is there.

Gordon Marsden: I have personal experience of this. The Minister says that the Government pay 90% of SMEs’ costs, but that is only for 16 to 18-year-olds. It would be useful if they were to look at the market for 19 to 24-year-olds as well.

Anne Milton: The shadow Minister raises an important point. There are so many issues I would like to raise—I have all these lovely notes about all the things we are doing. The best response I can give to hon. Members is that it might be useful to set up, along with officials from the Department, a session to let them know what is going on and to get their feedback. That would be a useful way of moving forward, particularly on where we support SMEs, because they are an important part of every local economy.

Although I have lots of things to talk about, I have to conclude. The national retraining scheme, which we have launched, is one of them. We have put £64 million of new funding into early initiatives. I could talk about the skills advisory panels, which will be important in looking at the regional skills issues mentioned by the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey). I commend what is going on at Dudley College and the local initiatives there. That is exactly the sort of scheme we want to see, and which I am seeing.

T-levels are not in place yet. I wish they were, but they are coming down the road soon. They are part of a consultation. We are also changing completely the approach to careers, and—I am skimming through my notes now—there is the devolution of 25% of the adult education budget. The areas where it is being devolved to have asked for more time, but it will be devolved in 2019-20.1

None of the skills improvements we want to see will happen through Government action alone. Schools need to see students’ future, not just a set of exam results, as mainstream to their work. Employers need to play their part in building a skilled workforce, and we need a really strong FE sector and those important, independent training providers. That is critical. Parents also need to see that what their children need is a set of skills, not only—and not always—a university degree.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House has considered skills devolution in England.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered rail services in Bedfordshire.

I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Rail services in Bedfordshire is a wide-ranging subject. Six Members of Parliament represent Bedfordshire, and I am pleased that two of them have been able to attend this short debate. With your permission, Mr Paisley, and that of the Minister, I hope to allow time for them to say a few words about services in their areas.

Rail services in Bedfordshire, and their context, have changed markedly in my time as a Member of Parliament. I grew up in Luton, and throughout that time there was the looming spectre—in a positive way—of Thameslink 2000, now the Thameslink programme. That major upgrade programme was given the go-ahead to totally transform the midland main line as it comes in and goes through the Snow Hill tunnel down to Brighton and the south. The programme has developed significantly since I have been an MP, and it will reach its culmination in the next couple of years when all services are switched on. That major investment programme was developed by the Labour and coalition Governments, and it is now under the Conservative Government. I fully welcome it because it provides much-needed capacity on that vital commuter route.

There have been recent developments in rail services in Bedfordshire in a number of different areas, but there are also long-standing issues that the Department must engage with to bring about service improvements for passengers, and those cannot be overlooked as we reach the end of the programme. In particular, we need vital ministerial action and instruction now as the franchise process on East Midlands Trains goes forward.

If I may, I will speak about two or three local issues that affect Luton residents, and then I will address the vital issue of stopping services on East Midlands Trains. In March 2016 I had the opportunity to raise in an Adjournment debate the long-standing issue of the rebuild of Luton railway station. At the time, I noted that it had been 2,179 days since the issue had last been raised in the House, and I regret to inform Members that in the past two years, the situation has not moved on much.

Luton railway station is in the top 10% of all stations in terms of passenger numbers, but it is old, tired, and inaccessible. In 2009, it was recognised as one of the 10 worst railway stations in the country. The response from the then Labour Government was to award it funding through the Better Stations programme, but that money was pulled after the May 2010 general election. That money was a crucial pot—alongside other pots—that leveraged in cash to get the rebuild. As a result, there is a total lack of disabled facilities to allow people to get to the platforms, and the geography of Luton means that, north and south, the primary access point into the town centre is through the train station, which effectively acts as a wall and barrier for many residents who wish to get to the centre of town with pushchairs or heavy baggage. The centre around the railway station has changed and redeveloped massively, but the same tired station still exists, and as we know, first appearances matter.

If the Minister had been unfortunate enough to start her journey at Luton railway station today, as I did, she would have seen boarded up windows, and the amusingly entitled “water feature” that means that water continues to pour on to platforms. If the single lift was out of action, she would probably have struggled to get access to the platform with her ministerial boxes. Those problems need tackling. A number of abortive schemes have been brought forward, but despite the £6 billion or £7 billion investment from the Thameslink programme, accessibility has diminished as a direct result of that programme. As we go to 12-car running, those with mobility issues must now take a taxi to Luton Airport Parkway, or go on a circuitous route that adds about 15 or 20 minutes to their journey.

The Minister is new to her position, and I hope she will bring a fresh wave of enthusiasm to this issue. Within control period 6, will she specify a rebuild of Luton railway station that befits a town that serves a quarter of a million residents and a wider conurbation? As she knows, the East Midlands franchise is coming up for renewal, and there have been significant moves by the owner of Luton airport, the shareholder, the residents of Luton, and the airport’s operator and board to get the Government to include four fast trains an hour to Luton airport within that franchise.

London Luton airport is a rapidly growing airport in the south-east and the fifth-largest airport by passenger numbers in the UK. It is growing by about 15% a year, and it has great ambitions to take up much of the slack in terms of much-needed airport capacity in the south-east. It is the only London airport without an express train service, and of all London airports it has the lowest percentage of passengers who access it by rail. Some 160 fast East Midlands trains will be more under the new franchise—pass daily through Luton Airport Parkway, yet only 10% of them stop. That is a major issue, not least because the new service that connects the terminal to the train station—a major £200 million investment by the people of Luton—will be connected in the next few years. Journey times from St Pancras to the airport gate to check in could be as short as 30 minutes, which is a game changer for connectivity, but that will work only if four fast trains an hour connect the service. London Luton airport is integral to the emerging east-west corridor between Oxford and Cambridge, and to connecting services to the east midlands and the north, and I would like to see progress on that.

Despite the culmination of the Thameslink upgrade programmes over the next year—including physical infrastructure—just before Christmas we learned that there will be a phased introduction of new services of up to 24 trains per hour. Although I understand the desire of the operators to phase in that process, we have had a long time to plan for this. The communication strategy for this has been deeply disappointing, and it is not sufficient just to dump that news on Members of Parliament and commuters shortly before the introduction of a new timetable. This change is so significant that it could have been viewed from space, yet for some reason we learn at the final, gasping moments of the programme, that the full implementation of the timetable will be delayed by two to three years.
Finally, the change from May 2018 to the East Midlands franchise will mean that,

"from 20 May 2018 until the completion of the midland main line upgrade in 2020, East Midlands Trains peak-time services will no longer call at Bedford or Luton. As a result, no EMT services arriving into St Pancras between 07.00 and 10.00, or leaving St Pancras between 16.00 and 19.00, will stop at Luton or Bedford."

That is a major change and major disruption for many of my constituents who rely on taking a direct train to London, and even more so for those north of Bedford, coming, for example, from Corby or Kettering to work further down the line in Bedford or Luton—and the disruption is happening over a long time. I think that I speak on behalf of all six Bedfordshire Members of Parliament—a group including Conservative, Labour and independent Members—when I say we are deeply disappointed by the way in which things have been communicated, and the shortness of the time window off the back of what even the Rail Minister has acknowledged was a less than perfect consultation exercise on the introduction of the new franchise from 2020. To be told that we shall lose services on East Midlands Trains at exactly the moment when we require them was deeply disappointing.

In the hastily organised meeting chaired by the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), where we talked to the operators GTR and East Midlands Trains, and officials from the Department, I asked one simple question: who made the decision? It may not come as a surprise to the Minister, even at this stage of her time in the Department, that a long conversation ensued, with not much clarity at the end of it.

Accountability is vital with such major timetable changes. We all acknowledge, pragmatically, that timetable changes cannot now be reversed for May this year, but my simple ask is that the period of disruption be kept to a minimum. I understand that there are mitigation measures in place, under which GTR will operate additional services that stop at Bedford, Luton and then St Albans—which gets the lion’s share of everything—before going on to St Pancras, but we are used to, and many people’s working patterns are built around, long-distance services and slower commuting services. That is a mix that has served those towns well, and I should like a commitment that East Midlands Trains will again stop during peak hours at Luton and Bedford in the new franchise, and that all efforts will be made to move the changeover date so that it is much earlier. I understand that as the sixth path on East Midlands Trains is introduced, that should not be too difficult. I understand that there may be an issue as to rolling stock, but it is not beyond the wit of the Department to ensure that we do not wait three years. It would be deeply disappointing, and would undermine the trust of all parties that have supported the £7 billion Thameslink upgrade programme, if the net result were to be more services and seats but a worse user experience for a number of commuters coming from different parts of the network, including Luton, Bedford and Bedfordshire. I make a plea to the Minister to engage fully in the issues affecting rail services in Bedfordshire, to make sure that we deliver for passengers.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I shall call the other Members who want to speak, but I ask them to take literally one minute, as I want the Minister to have as much time as possible to respond, and we must conclude at 11.30.

11.13 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am grateful to my neighbour, the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker), for letting me speak and I look forward to hearing what the Minister—whom I warmly congratulate on her new post—has to say.

I have three quick points to make—mindful of your admonition about time, Mr Paisley. West Midlands Trains serves Leighton Buzzard in my constituency. I learned recently that it is about to invest another £70 million in train maintenance and will provide an extra 10,000 seats to London each day, which will be available during the daily peak times. That will happen over the next few years but, more importantly, there will be two extra class 319 carriages to help commuters from Leighton Buzzard in the next few weeks. That is vital, with the extra housing growth that we have in Bedfordshire.

Secondly, I completely back the points that the hon. Member for Luton South made about the withdrawal of commuter services on East Midlands Trains from Bedford and Luton. That will cause major disruption to my constituents and there are worries that it is a bit of a stitch-up by some long-distance commuters who have been plotting it for a while; there are even worries about the locations of the consultants’ offices. I note that they are in Nottingham, Derby and London; perhaps they would be advantaged by the changes. I call on the Minister to ensure fair play.

Last, I also completely back the point about the need for four fast direct trains an hour from London St Pancras to Luton Airport Parkway. Luton is the country’s fifth-biggest airport and if we get things right it will be the one that is quickest to get to from central London. Let us get the cars off the roads and give people a good experience.

11.14 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) on securing this important debate. I shall not be as brief as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), but I will try my best.

Rail users who use train services from Bedford have been betrayed. We were promised that electrification of the midland main line would mean faster, greener, more reliable train journeys, and associated economic benefits. Instead, electrification has been cancelled and we are now losing our fast peak-time East Midlands Trains service. The announcement just before Christmas was a big shock. In October, the previous Rail Minister wrote to me that London to Corby passengers would have 50% more seats in the peak than they do now. The letter, which I have with me, also said:

“Passengers will also continue to be served by around the same number of East Midlands Fast trains during peak hours as they are now”.

That turned out not to be true. Throughout the time that we were focusing on the East Midlands rail franchise
consultation, the timetable changes were being pulled together. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us today when the Department first became aware of the timetable changes and why the changes to Bedford rail services were communicated so late in the day. Why will there be no consultation? People are really shocked that there is no consultation.

These changes are huge. Passengers have only a matter of months to rearrange their lives around the loss of these well-used services. Many people moved to the area specifically because they thought it would be easy to commute to work in London or to the north. However, that will no longer be so; it has really upset their timetables and their lives.

Members of the local commuters association stood at Bedford station last week and counted passengers alighting from and joining peak evening trains at Bedford between 4.30 pm and 7.30 pm: 1,711 passengers left the train at Bedford and 130 joined it to travel north. No doubt a count in the morning would offer very similar figures. That means that about 4,000 people travel during peak hours from Bedford station. People are anxious about how they will balance work and family commitments. They tell me they will not be able to get back from London on time to relieve babysitters. Those travelling in from the north tell me they will drive from now on.

Dr Sheena Whyte wrote to me:

“My husband and I chose to live in Bedford because this enables us to work in Leicester and London respectively. Without a direct commuter service between Bedford and Leicester at peak times, the ability of my husband to attend his lecturing role at De Montfort University becomes almost impossible”.

That is typical of many of the letters I receive. People have chosen Bedford because of rail connectivity. We keep hearing about all the extra capacity, but rail use in Bedford is up 20% since 2010, so extra seats were needed anyway. It is said that under the proposals 1,200 seats will be gained, but we are losing 2,000 seats from East Midlands Trains. It is unbelievable: Bedford rail users’ fares rose again in January, and I hope the Minister will urge the train companies to offer some form of compensation to them.

The Thameslink trains that people will be forced to use are not fit for a long commute. Many people use the journey to do work, and they cannot do that on the current Thameslink trains. I hope that the Minister will tell us when all Thameslink services will be retrofitted to include tables, power points and wi-fi.

I intend to host an event in Parliament for rail users as soon as possible, and my office has been in touch with the Rail Minister’s team to try to arrange a date. I hope that the new Minister will confirm today that she is willing to attend that meeting and speak to my constituents.

Mr Shuker: I will start by thanking all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) on securing the debate and thank him for allowing other hon. Members to voice their concerns. As a proud Lutonian, I have many family members in Luton who have given me an update on their travel journeys since I have been in the Department for Transport.

I have listened carefully to all the representations about the immediate plans for rail services through Bedfordshire and it is clear that hon. Members and their constituents have lost patience. It is also clear that public trust, or at least confidence, has suffered. That is in part because of the lack of consultation about plans to introduce new but important changes to services across Bedfordshire. I will say more about that shortly.

I apologise to passengers and to local businesses who will be inconvenienced by the planned service alterations in May. I recognise the short-term pain that those changes will cause to commuters and businesses. I can assure hon. Members that the Government, Network Rail and the train companies are doing everything possible to mitigate the impact of these changes on rush hour passengers. For example, we are currently exploring the potential for running an additional “peak-busting” East Midlands Trains service direct between Bedford and St Pancras.

I want to be clear about two things. The enhancements that we are delivering on Thameslink and the midland main line are essential to sustaining the long-term prosperity of Bedfordshire and the east midlands. I know that the hon. Member for Luton South is chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Thameslink, so he knows much more than I do about that, but I gathered from his speech that he is convinced that the investments are being made for the right reason. The passengers, businesses and communities who will have to cope with some service reductions are the very people who will benefit in the future from newer, faster trains, more services, more seats and more destinations.

I also highlight that we are dealing with challenges associated with success and not failure. More people are travelling on trains than by any other form of transport.

Ms Ghani: May I correct the Minister? It will not be extra seats but fewer seats for commuters travelling from Bedford. We are losing 2,000 seats when we lose the EMT train service and gaining 1,200. There will be fewer seats available, not more.

Ms Ghani: The paper I have in front of me tells me that there will be 2,000 seats available. I am aware of the note that the hon. Gentleman sent through to the Department; unfortunately, there was a change of Minister, so that note has been passed on to the new Rail Minister. I know the hon. Gentleman has requested a meeting with his passengers and constituents, and I believe the new Rail Minister will honour that and have the meeting to explain further the impact of the changes on the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in the short term and the benefits for them in the long term. That note has been passed on, and no doubt the Minister will be present at the meeting that the hon. Gentleman wishes to convene.

I recognise that these statements will be of little comfort to hard-pressed commuters who face the prospect of travelling on fewer trains, even if they will be more certain of a seat for their journey during that time.

Mohammad Yasin: I want to be clear that we are delivering on Thameslink and the midland main line are essential to sustaining the long-term prosperity of Bedfordshire and the east midlands. I know that the hon. Gentleman has requested a meeting with his passengers and constituents, and I believe the new Rail Minister will honour that and have the meeting to explain further the impact of the changes on the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in the short term and the benefits for them in the long term. That note has been passed on, and no doubt the Minister will be present at the meeting that the hon. Gentleman wishes to convene.

I recognise that these statements will be of little comfort to hard-pressed commuters who face the prospect of travelling on fewer trains, even if they will be more certain of a seat for their journey during that time.

I want to be clear about two things. The enhancements that we are delivering on Thameslink and the midland main line are essential to sustaining the long-term prosperity of Bedfordshire and the east midlands. I know that the hon. Member for Luton South is chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Thameslink, so he knows much more than I do about that, but I gathered from his speech that he is convinced that the investments are being made for the right reason. The passengers, businesses and communities who will have to cope with some service reductions are the very people who will benefit in the future from newer, faster trains, more services, more seats and more destinations.

I also highlight that we are dealing with challenges associated with success and not failure. More people are travelling on trains than by any other form of transport.

Ms Ghani: May I correct the Minister? It will not be extra seats but fewer seats for commuters travelling from Bedford. We are losing 2,000 seats when we lose the EMT train service and gaining 1,200. There will be fewer seats available, not more.

Ms Ghani: The paper I have in front of me tells me that there will be 2,000 seats available. I am aware of the note that the hon. Gentleman sent through to the Department; unfortunately, there was a change of Minister, so that note has been passed on to the new Rail Minister. I know the hon. Gentleman has requested a meeting with his passengers and constituents, and I believe the new Rail Minister will honour that and have the meeting to explain further the impact of the changes on the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in the short term and the benefits for them in the long term. That note has been passed on, and no doubt the Minister will be present at the meeting that the hon. Gentleman wishes to convene.

I recognise that these statements will be of little comfort to hard-pressed commuters who face the prospect of travelling on fewer trains, even if they will be more certain of a seat for their journey during that time.

I want to be clear about two things. The enhancements that we are delivering on Thameslink and the midland main line are essential to sustaining the long-term prosperity of Bedfordshire and the east midlands. I know that the hon. Member for Luton South is chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Thameslink, so he knows much more than I do about that, but I gathered from his speech that he is convinced that the investments are being made for the right reason. The passengers, businesses and communities who will have to cope with some service reductions are the very people who will benefit in the future from newer, faster trains, more services, more seats and more destinations.

I also highlight that we are dealing with challenges associated with success and not failure. More people are travelling on trains than by any other form of transport.
However, the reality is that demand for rail travel is exceeding supply. The Thameslink programme and the upgrade of the midland main line represent only two examples of the major investments that this Government are making across the country to give passengers the rail services they demand.

Last year we announced our intention to commit some £48 billion to improving the reliability of the rail network between 2019 and 2024—all this in addition to the £55 billion already planned for HS2. However, the clear and unavoidable cost to passengers of delivering all those improvements is that there is often an impact on current services in the interim.

I will go back to the question of consultation, which was raised by the hon. Member for Luton South. May 2018 represents one of the largest timetable changes in recent rail history, affecting services across the south-east of England and beyond. The hon. Gentleman also quoted the Rail Minister’s comment that solutions are not always perfect, but that we need to make the changes to increase capacity and reliability on the line. I am rushing through, because we have a short time, but I hope to get to everyone’s points.

In the meantime, let us not forget that the £7 billion Thameslink programme was designed to transform the rail services that are so important to constituents and to the long-term prosperity of Bedfordshire. The upgrade of the midland main line is planned from May 2018 to 2020, and unfortunately Bedford and Luton town will lose East Midlands services in the peak while the upgrade is delivered. However, the Department has agreed to fund East Midlands Trains to lease three additional high-speed trains. In addition, as part of the timetabled development work, East Midlands Trains has found a way to maintain its existing calls at Luton Airport Parkway in the peak, enabling airport passengers from north of Bedford to continue to enjoy a direct service.

However, during that time they will benefit from more frequent Thameslink services. Those services will provide over 2,000 extra peak-time seats from Bedford and over 3,000 from Luton each morning. At Luton, that is far in excess of the number of seats on EMT trains that will no longer be able to call there—most, if not all of which are already occupied. That will be welcomed news to some passengers, I am sure. Thameslink will also provide an alternative fast service with fewer stops, delivering journeys of around 45 minutes between Bedford and London, and of around 30 minutes between Luton and London. For some passengers, the convenience of a regular direct Thameslink service to the heart of London will make for an easier commute.

The hon. Member for Luton South mentioned accessibility to platforms and trains. That is within my portfolio, and having done some research I have been assured that Thameslink has better facilities on its trains, better access to toilets, better wi-fi and wider doors, and step-free access to platforms at Bedford but not at Luton. I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to work out what more we can do to apply pressure to ensure accessibility is available to all.

As I said, I recognise that that will be of little comfort to some passengers during the midland main line upgrade. The situation for them will be resolved from 2020, which coincides with our exciting plans for the new East Midlands franchise, on which, I am delighted to say, we conducted a full and thorough public consultation. That consultation is now closed; I thank all those who contributed to the discussion on our proposals. The contributions are being evaluated and we will release our response soon, alongside the invitation to tender for bidders.

Our plans for the East Midlands franchise invite proposals for a brand-new fleet of longer, quieter, more comfortable and more efficient trains, which will provide additional seating with improved on-board facilities on long-distance services. Together with the investment in the midland main line upgrade, a fleet of high-quality electric trains will provide up to 50% more seats in the peak on the fast, direct service between Corby, Kettering, Wellingborough, Bedford, Luton and Luton Airport Parkway, and London St Pancras by December 2020. The next operator of the franchise will also have to bring forward exciting and innovative plans to improve customer service and the provision of information to passengers, and offer tickets that serve flexible travel patterns and improve value for money.

As part of a strategic vision for the railways that puts passengers first, we will also require new ways of working under the next franchise. Therefore, in keeping with our strategy for the railways published last November, the new East Midlands franchise will bring to an end the historic separation of track and train. That separation is no longer suitable for meeting the challenges of today’s intensively used rail network. In its place we will introduce a “one team” approach that will embed shared incentives between Network Rail and the new operator to ensure that passenger interests come first in all decision making. I hope all hon. Members will agree that that vision for the new franchise will ensure that East Midlands services play a full role in securing the long-term economic prosperity of the region.

I thank all hon. Members for contributing to the debate, which has been stimulating. I hope I have answered most questions; if there are any that I have not answered, I am sure that the Rail Minister will most certainly follow up in writing, if not in the meeting that the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) wishes to convene. I also hope that I have left hon. Members in no doubt that we recognise the importance of Bedfordshire’s prosperity to our national success. For that reason, we have invested and continue to invest at historic levels in enhancements to rail network, trains and services. A railway fit for the 21st century is our vision, and we are rolling out the plans to get us there. Unfortunately, sometimes that comes with unavoidable short-term consequences, for which I have apologised. I assure hon. Members that the Department will continue to work hard with Network Rail and the train operators to mitigate those as far as possible.

I will close with one of the lines used by the hon. Member for Luton South: the £75 billion that we want to deliver must deliver improved quality of service for our passengers and value for money.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Shipbuilding Strategy

[SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the National Shipbuilding Strategy.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, and good to see many experienced hands from defence debates assembling for yet another one. It is also a pleasure to welcome the Minister to his place and to the wonderful world of defence procurement.

I declare two interests. First, I introduce this debate not only as the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport—Plymouth is a proud military city in uncertain times because of the possibility of defence cuts—but as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair. It is good to see so many members of that small but illustrious group—a band of brothers and our sister parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, and good to see many experienced hands from defence debates assembling for yet another one. It is also a pleasure to welcome the Minister to his place and to the wonderful world of defence procurement.

I declare two interests. First, I introduce this debate not only as the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport—Plymouth is a proud military city in uncertain times because of the possibility of defence cuts—but as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair. It is good to see so many members of that small but illustrious group—a band of brothers and our sister from Berwick-upon-Tweed—in their places today. Secondly, as a proud GMB and Unite member, I have had the input of those unions into the debate, for which I am grateful. The combined skills and experience of shipbuilders, engineers and master craftsmen and women contribute hugely to the debate, and it is in defence of those jobs and skills and that industry that many of us are here today.

I am sure that the Minister’s new officials have brought him up to speed, but it might be useful if I recapped briefly why shipbuilding and this debate are so important at the moment. First, though, every hon. Member, on both sides of the Chamber, wishes him and the new Secretary of State for Defence well in their battle with the Treasury to secure more funding.

The UK spends too little on defence, and that has consequences for what the Ministry of Defence can spend on shipbuilding, ship repair and ship procurement, capabilities and weapons systems. The excellent report by the Select Committee on Defence, “Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge”, shows that the last Labour Government spent on average 2.5% of GDP on defence, and the figure did not fall below 2.3%. Many hon. Members, on both sides of the House, would like a return to that level of spending.

With defence inflation running at a greater level than consumer prices index inflation, the extra bit that the Treasury affords defence is being eaten away as the real-terms value of defence procurement is put under more pressure. I think I speak for most hon. Members when I say that we strongly oppose, on a cross-party basis, cuts to our amphibious ships based in Devonport, in the constituency that I represent, and plans to merge the Royal Marines, but that should be taken as a given in this debate.

That is the backdrop, but the military context is important as well. We live in very uncertain times. Russia is expanding her horizons, has invaded European countries and has largely got away with it. China has ambitions across the Pacific. And the Royal Navy’s ability to command the waves is severely constrained by a shortage of manpower, a privatised recruitment system that is not delivering, and ships tied up because of faults, personnel shortages and a lack of resources. There is a focus on the carriers and continuous at sea deterrence, but the rest of the Royal Navy is suffering, and my argument is that this House will not stand for it.

The national shipbuilding strategy was much delayed, but was at least a good start. It is accepted in full Sir John Parker’s recommendations, so I am not sure why it took so long to be produced. Defence aerospace is not as fortunate as shipbuilding, because at least we have a strategy. Britain is good at shipbuilding, and the many warships on sea trials, in dock being built and being planned are testament to our naval heritage and the up-to-date skills of a superb workforce right across the UK. I hope that today’s debate will illustrate to the new Minister and his officials not that that plan is wrong per se, but that with scrutiny we can make it more robust and more valuable to industry and our armed forces.

I want to highlight two principal areas in asking for revisions to the document. One is the procurement of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary’s vessels, especially the new fleet solid support ships, and the other is the configuration, capabilities, roles and realities of the proposed Type 31e frigate. As I said, the first issue is the new RFA solid support ships. The proposed three ship orders, with the vessels coming in at 40,000 tonnes apace, would match the 120,000-tonne construction contract for the new carriers so ably delivered by British workers across the UK and assembled in Scotland.

I personally favour a restricted tender for the ships, so that only UK shipyards could build them, as they will be carrying arms, munitions and supplies, but I concede that international competition is the most likely option that the Minister will choose for them. In such circumstances, not only must the UK industry be encouraged to submit a bid and not actively discouraged by the MOD, but we must ensure that the procurement does what the procurement for the MARS—military afloat reach and sustainability—tankers did not: it must truly value the social, employment and economic impact of the work for shipbuilding and supply chain communities right across the country.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that shipbuilding industries throughout the world are very heavily subsidised, in one way or another, by their Government. That does not happen in this country. Does my hon. Friend think that we could get a better, more level playing field if the Government addressed their mind to that?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I agree with him. In fact, our hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) has raised the concern that state aid from the South Korean Government was potentially part of the consideration of the value of the MARS tankers contract, which went to South Korea. That £452 million contract was potentially subsidised by the South Korean Government, who are building skills and employment in Daewoo shipyards in that country. Excluding a little bit of final outfitting in the UK, those jobs have been outsourced and offshored.

Contracts to build ships for the Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary should be onshored. The ships should be home grown, British designed and British made, using British steel and British technologies, and preserving Britain’s sovereign defence capabilities to

Contracts to build ships for the Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary should be onshored. The ships should be home grown, British designed and British made, using British steel and British technologies, and preserving Britain’s sovereign defence capabilities to
design, build and equip complex and important ships for our own use and for export. The MOD could give its friends in the Treasury the good news that between 34% and 36% of the contract value would be flowing back into its coffers in tax and national insurance—bad news potentially for Kim Dong-yeon, the South Korean Finance Minister, but good news for our Chancellor of the Exchequer, who I am sure is following this debate closely and with avid interest. He is, after all, a big fan of the armed forces.

If UK shipyards build elements of the ships, it could help to fill gaps in the order books of yards right across the UK and contribute to what I believe should sit alongside the shipbuilding strategy: a clear running order of contracts over the next 30 years for the Royal Navy and RFA; a pipeline of work; a reason to invest in world-class design and production facilities, not just on the Clyde, but in reanimated yards such as Appledore in north Devon and those of Harland and Wolff and Cammell Laird. Ipos MORI research commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy found that 100 shipyard jobs lead to an additional 32 jobs in the manufacturing sector within a 60-km area, so there is a multiplier effect from investment in UK shipbuilding.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that at the other end of the scale, the commercial end, there are also very profitable yards? There are two in Stroud, funny as that may seem, at Sharpness and Saul. It is important that we understand that the whole shipbuilding industry needs support, but also recognise that it is a very integrated industry. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I do agree. The great strength of this debate on the national shipbuilding strategy is that we can praise the contribution not only of those yards that might be seen on the 10 o’clock news—the ones with the very large cranes and very large warships—but also all the supply chains to the smallest yards, and all those businesses that supply the kit that goes on the ships. That makes the UK a formidable power when it comes to shipbuilding. I am glad that the shipbuilding strategy hints at that, but perhaps it could go a little further in celebrating it.

That brings me to the second point, and recognising that many hon. Members want to speak, I will be brief. In my maiden speech in the House of Commons in June 2017, I called for more, and more capable, frigates. The Type 31e is not exactly what I had in mind. I am concerned that the shipbuilding strategy embeds the reduction of truly world-class frigates from 13 to eight. The Type 26 is a fine global combat ship, although one of the City class should be named after Plymouth—a campaign started by my Conservative predecessor and continued proudly by me. It is a good ship and a good programme that will serve UK interests well, but there are too few of the ships—to be precise, five too few.

The top-up light frigates have an ill defined military role, a confused capability and a price tag that gives this the potential to be the Snatch Land Rover of the Royal Navy—a comment by the Royal United Services Institute’s director of military sciences. I have a different name for that class: corvettes. I am genuinely concerned that over the next few years this class of ship will be the focus of much critiquing, as it fails to hit established frigate standards and looks less capable than the Type 23 frigates that the ships replace.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On the point about an undefined task, we had it from the Minister—I have had it in a written answer—that the ship will not be able to do any NATO tasks, and it will not be able to do any carrier protection work, so can my hon. Friend suggest what the role of this vessel will actually be, apart from being a glorified fishing protection vessel?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is spot on. The confusion about the role of this warship is at the heart of the problem with the shipbuilding strategy. It looks like we put the cart before the horse in defining a price tag but not a role. It is essential that in the next couple of months the Ministry of Defence comes forward with that, to provide all defence-leaning Members of Parliament, on both sides of the House, with a reason to celebrate this warship, not criticise it, because I worry that the critique will not support it and help its attractiveness as an export product. We should turn those weaknesses of the Type 31 into its strengths and promote a corvette class, not a poorer frigate. That would give the Royal Navy two carriers, two amphibious assault ships retained and not cut, six destroyers, eight proper frigates, five corvettes and the new offshore patrol vessels. That is still too few ships, but a line we should not go below, or accept further cuts or reductions against.

The shipbuilding strategy suggests that UK yards will build five Type 31s as replacement for the Duke class, and pitch for competition for 40 to export. As Darth Vader warned Director Krennic in “Rogue One”—a film I am sure we have all watched:

“Be careful not to choke on your aspirations”.

I truly want to believe the MOD when it says that there is a market abroad for 40 Type 31s, built in Britain, but I cannot see where that might be.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that we do not know the capability, and given the comments made by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), is there not a question as to who we would export these Type 31 frigates to? Does the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) agree that the view of many in the shipbuilding industry is—to quote his hero Darth Vader again—that we want these ships, not excuses?

Luke Pollard: As a Luke, I am not sure Darth Vader is quite my hero, but the point the hon. Gentleman makes is a good one. There are 14 other ship manufacturers globally providing a light frigate option of between 2,000 and 4,000 tonnes. That is an awful lot of competition when the customers are ill defined. Let us look at some of those competitors for the Type 31 frigate: there is the French and Italian FREMM class; the Spanish Navantia F-105; the Danish StanFlex; Germany’s F-125 Baden-Württemberg class; and South Korea’s Incheon class, let alone the myriad cheaper platforms built by China and other far-eastern nations.
Mr Kevan Jones: It is a fact that Britain last exported a frigate over 40 years ago. When I raised that with the new procurement Minister at Defence questions, all I got was an accusation of talking down the British shipbuilding industry. Does my hon. Friend agree that as a matter of urgency the MOD needs to clarify exactly where it sees the market for these 40 frigates?

Luke Pollard: I agree with my hon. Friend. Clarity around the role, capabilities and market for the Type 31 is absolutely critical in building a strong case—a marketing dossier—that says, “British Members of Parliament support this ship and will actively go out and sell it,” because I am concerned that we cannot even advocate for the Type 31 for UK military use, let alone military use for those abroad.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that an increasing pattern in the months, but they are more in the market for a Type 26 all-rounder anti-submarine warfare frigate, rather than Type 31s. I appreciate that the Minister has inherited OPVs, rather than frigates in their own right. Type 31 Arrowhead or Leander-class options—extended OPVs, rather than frigates in their own right. Britain is building ships. Britain is building OPVs: the Batch 2 river-class ships and the Khareef class for Oman. They have similar armaments, but with the ability to add Exocets and a medium helicopter. Those ships could well form the basis for the Type 31 Arrowhead or Leander-class options—extended OPVs, rather than frigates in their own right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East mentioned customers and where they will be. Australia and Canada are looking to procure new frigates in the coming months, but they are more in the market for a Type 26 all-rounder anti-submarine warfare frigate, rather than Type 31s. I appreciate that the Minister has inherited someone else’s homework and ambitions, but where will the 40 export orders come from and can the Type 31 really win 40 orders? I am naturally cautious about the export version will be built here or abroad. Britain is building ships. Britain is building corvettes and offshore patrol vessels. Babcock is building the Irish navy OPVs at Appledore: the Samuel Beckett-class OPV is lightly equipped, but capable. BAE Systems is building OPVs: the Batch 2 river-class ships and the Khareef class for Oman. They have similar armaments, but with the ability to add Exocets and a medium helicopter. Those ships could well form the basis for the Type 31 Arrowhead or Leander-class options—extended OPVs, rather than frigates in their own right.

As with the national security review, I fear that the national shipbuilding strategy puts the cart before the horse. We know the price tag, but not the capabilities. We know the final bill, but not what ships will be faced, what waters will be patrolled or what role it will have. Clarity is our ally if we are to make a strategy that is truly joined up and deliverable. In very uncertain times for our armed forces, this strategy should offer us hope of long-term thinking. I say to the Minister that the paralysis and the pitched battles of the national security review are understandable, but they do not have to lead to the paralysis announcements from the MOD.

I encourage the Minister to announce the base porting arrangements for the Type 26s and the Type 31s, providing clarity for future investment in base ports. Devonport offers a genuine world-class base, as he would expect me to say. I also encourage him to announce that the fleet support ship contract will be open to UK bids, and that no UK shipbuilder will be discouraged from entering by the MOD in order to curry favour for other contracts, especially the Type 31. I also encourage the Minister to announce that the social, economic and employment impact of the contracts will be assessed as part of the contract decision-making process. Bring forward greater detail about the Type 31—its capabilities, roles and operations—and be clear about how it will be built in the UK.

There is a huge opportunity to be ambitious here, an opportunity to build and sustain a revitalised shipbuilding industry providing good, well paid and high-skilled employment across the country, backing British supply chains, creating apprenticeships and, importantly, providing the Royal Navy and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service with the ships they need for Britain’s sea power to rule the waves once again. A strong defence is worth fighting for, and we know that a strong defence cannot be done on the cheap.

2.47 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who has done a service—not for the first time—to the House of Commons, by bringing key defence issues for our consideration.

Having said that, I am going gently to disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I did not know what line he was going to take until I heard his speech this afternoon and I shall be a little heretical myself, because there is a track record on this question of what we ought to do in terms of designing replacement frigates, particularly lighter replacement frigates.

The context in which one wishes to set this is the relentless decline in the size of the frigate and destroyer fleet. The House will probably not need reminding that we had more than 60 frigates and destroyers at the time of the Falklands campaign. By the time that my cohort came into the House of Commons in 1997, that number had come down to 35 frigates and destroyers.

The incoming Blair Government conducted the strategic defence review of 1997-98. That was for the twin concepts of the carrier strike force and the amphibious force making up the sea base, which would be able to exert land and air power from the sea in any particular theatre of warfare across the globe, was born. As a price
for bringing forward the idea of the two super carriers, a modest cut in the number of frigates and destroyers was put forward, from 35 to 32 vessels. We all know what happened next: the 32 came down to 31; the 31 came down to 25; and the 25 then came down to the present woefully inadequate total of 19. That is the issue that the hon. Gentleman quite rightly wishes to address. If there had not been any changes in the method of warship design, I would have signed up entirely to his argument from beginning to end.

But the one factor that I wish people to take away from my contribution to this debate is the concept of a template warship. The phrase “modular build” is the one that we need to keep in mind.

I talked about the way in which the numbers of frigates and destroyers were reduced. Part of that process was the way we went about replacing the destroyer fleet. At the time we started introducing the Type 45 we were down to 12 destroyers, and the original idea was that those 12 destroyers would be replaced with 12 Type 45 destroyers. We know what happened then: the same process—the 12 went down to eight, and eventually we ended up with six. Why did that happen? It happened because of our insistence, and the Royal Navy’s understandable concern, that the new warships should be top of the range, ab initio, in every respect that can be thought of. When we do that and we keep adding, in the long course of a period of design and build, more and more requirements to a new warship, inevitably the price goes up and the number of units we can afford to build comes down.

I was fortunate enough to see the Type 45 destroyers close up at a very early stage. Being taken on a tour of the ship, I was struck by the fact that a very large area in the forward part of the ship was devoted to the ship’s gymnasium. Why did the Type 45 destroyer have such a large gymnasium? The answer I was told was that the space that was going to serve as a very large gymnasium was earmarked for the future, so that when we could afford to add a suite of tactical Tomahawk cruise missiles—surface-to-surface, long-range missiles, which we could not afford to equip the Type 45 destroyers with at the time—we would be able to remove the paraphernalia of the gymnasium and insert a module into that area, thus installing this massive upgrade in the weapons system at some future stage in the ship’s life. Warships are rightly designed to have a long lifespan; we are told that the new carriers, for example, are meant to last us for the next 50 years. So how much better is it—the answer is hugely better—to design them from the outset so that instead of having to rip the ship apart halfway through its life to upgrade it, we can easily add to its capacity?

In 2009, I published an article that got me into a lot of trouble. In the RUSI Defence Systems journal in February 2009, I said what was perhaps the unsayable: that if we were ever going to get the future frigate fleet back up to the sort of numbers we needed, we would have to design it in such a way that it was “cheap as chips”. The First Sea Lord of the day, Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, who is a great man, was not at all happy with that phrase. But I did not use the phrase lightly; I used it because now we have this technique of plug-and-play, of modular build. If we could design a template warship that had all sorts of empty compartments in it from the outset, and if we could get a large number of hulls into the water from the outset, by a process of incremental acquisition, we could arm them up so that, over a period of years, they would become more and more capable.

I see the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport nodding as a sign, I hope, of some approval of the line that I am taking. We are not disagreeing about ends; we are slightly disagreeing about means. I do not wish to see the Type 31e become more and more expensive before even the first one has been completed. I wish to see a hull design—I look to the Minister to tell us how that is progressing—that will enable us to maximise the number of hulls and to spread the cost of a really high-capability warship, which the hon. Gentleman rightly wants to see and I want to see at the end of the process, over a longer period of years. That is so that, when the defence budget gets the uplift that it needs—and we all hope it will if the Secretary of State for Defence is successful in his so far heroic but incomplete campaign to take on the Treasury—we can hope to start to reverse the terrible downward spiral in the number of frigates and destroyers that had rendered our fleet incapable of doing its duty. The Royal Navy, as we know, is very strong on doing its duty, and we need to give it the tools and the warships to finish that job, whatever job it is confronted with in the uncertain future.

2.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in debates, Ms McDonagh.

May I first congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on setting the scene so well, and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, on his special contribution? I am very pleased to make a contribution, and in debates such as this I always refer to the fact that as an ex-serviceperson—on the land, of course—I have an interest in the support of service personnel and wish to see that we do our best, whether it be for the RAS; the Royal Navy or the Army. This debate gives us a chance to focus on the Royal Navy. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) is doing the armed forces parliamentary scheme with the Royal Navy and is also on the Defence Committee. We are very privileged to have his contribution in that Committee, and hopefully in this debate as well.

I am proud to be from a party—the Democratic Unionist party—that pushed the last Government hard into increasing the spend on defence by 1%. As we try to do, we used our influence in a very constructive fashion to make sure that defence issues are the top priority for Government. We have also got some feedback on that, as my hon. Friend will know. We have some commitment to defence spend in Northern Ireland in relation to reserves—this debate is not about that, of course—and capital spend. Those are some of the good things that we are doing positively in relation to Northern Ireland with the Ministry of Defence.

The reason for that defence spend is clear. While it is great to have money spent locally, the fact is that no matter where in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland someone lives, they will benefit from armed forces duty, and we need trained, well fed and well equipped. That is the reason we are here. The summary in the national shipbuilding strategy, which I am not going to read because I am sure that Members
have it in front of them, is clear that the Royal Navy needs to have the eight Type 26 frigates and the strategy for the Type 31e frigates as well. Again, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport referred to that.

I believe that we benefit by having been able to send aid over after the recent Hurricane Irma and during the crisis period. Our Royal Navy was already there and able to respond. We benefit by being able to meet our responsibilities throughout the world with a fleet that is capable, and we further know that we can defend these islands and our British colonies when needed. Better than our knowing that we can do that, the rest of the world also knows—it is important that it does—that we can and will do so if and when the need arises.

I will tell this story, not flippantly but to have an illustration on the record. I once had a teacher who advocated picking out a pupil at the start of the year to the class at the first opportunity—I was a recipient of it on many occasions in the '60s—and we knew from then on that we did not want ever to meet Cain and Abel again. That is perhaps rather simplistic, but it illustrates why it is important that the Royal Navy has the ability to be our Cain and Abel wherever it may be in the world. I am not advocating the use of blunt force to make a statement; I am saying that we have proven in the past that our abilities are numerous, and that we have the premier armed forces in the world. We also need to underline the fact that that is not simply a historical fact; it is a present-day reality. For that, we need facilities that are capable and that make the grade. Every one of us in this debate, whatever angle we come from, will want to impress that on the Minister, whom I am pleased to see in his place; I am also pleased to see the shadow Minister in his. Hopefully, we will all make constructive contributions to this debate, so that we can move forward in a positive way.

I read an interesting article on the topic on the website Save the Royal Navy that gave a concise view of where we are and where we are headed in terms of our shipbuilding strategy and defence capability:

“When the Tide class oil tankers were ordered in 2012 (a remnant of the Military Afloat Reach and Sustainability (MARS) project), no British company had bid for the construction work. There were two main reasons: most UK yards were occupied working on the QEC aircraft carriers blocks, but they also knew they would not be able to compete on price with foreign state-subsidised shipyards. The controversial decision to look abroad made sense at the time, the MoD got four ships at a bargain £452 million and no British shipbuilder could claim they would go under without the work. (£150 million was spent in the UK with BMT who designed the ships together with A&P Falmouth, who are fitting them with additional military equipment). Five years later, the landscape has changed significantly”.

which is why this debate is important.

“The QEC construction project is in its final phase, but one of its legacies has been to help stimulate a modest revival in commercial shipbuilding, and there are now yards hungry for further naval work.”

In a past life as a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment back in the '70s, I guarded the Samson and Goliath cranes in the old Harland and Wolff shipyard, which made a significant contribution to shipbuilding in Northern Ireland. On the border of my constituency, within that of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East, the shipbuilding giant was at one stage the biggest employer of men in both our constituencies, with some 35,000 workers at its peak in the 1920s.

Harland and Wolff has not produced a ship in about 14 years, although it continuously built and provided ships over a period of time. The last to leave Queen's Island was the £40 million Anvil Point, at the start of 2003. The 22,000-tonne ferry was the second of two vessels built for the Ministry of Defence. Harland and Wolff is teaming up with other companies such as Thales, also in my hon. Friend's constituency, to bid for a £1.25 billion contract. I believe that they have not only the ability but the drive and desire to deliver the best that can be given. They are invested in securing every bolt and screw, not simply for the sake of their reputations but for the sake of their own children and grandchildren, who may well serve their country on the ship.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the lettered references to me in glowing terms. Harland and Wolff in my constituency is one of many shipbuilders seized with the aspiration associated with the national shipbuilding strategy. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful for the Minister to clarify the distinction between UK content and UK benefit? What is intended, and what surety can UK shipbuilders take from that distinction?

Jim Shannon: Everything that I said about my hon. Friend was absolutely true, so he can take my comments as such, but his intervention was specific to the Minister, to whom we look for a helpful response. My hon. Friend outlined some of the issues in the briefing document that we had beforehand about building only in the UK and skills. We need skills not only in the Royal Navy but in the shipbuilding programme. Costs can never be ignored; it comes down to how we do it best. I understand that we are considering exports for the ships and frigates that we are building, but it seems that that may not have been realised yet. Quantity or quality is a difficult debate. What is best? We certainly want quality, but perhaps we need quantity to go along with that.

To return to the Royal Navy’s ability to fulfil all its missions, let us consider some of the things that we are aware that the Royal Navy does today. Fisheries protection will become more apparent when we leave the European Union on 31 March 2019. All our seas will be back in our control, and when they are, we will need to police them to ensure that other countries do not take advantage of places where they once fished, but where they will only be able to fish if they have an agreement with us. We must put that on record. The Navy has a role in the Falkland Islands and in anti-piracy in eastern Africa, as well as in dealing with refugees in the Mediterranean. The demands on the Royal Navy are immense; we should keep that in mind.

I am suddenly conscious of time, so I will finish with this. It is vital for the local economy that shipbuilding is done in-house and not outsourced, and the collaboration of local and UK mainland companies seeks to do that. I believe that that trumps the freedom of trade thought process, with which I agree to an extent, although I do not believe that it precludes the fact that charity begins at home. It is not charity, of course; it is having business, workers, jobs and contracts at home. If we have the capability to produce, which we clearly do, then that work can and must be carried out right here at home.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate, Ms McDonagh. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his comprehensive contribution, in which he outlined the key concerns about the national shipbuilding strategy, and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for outlining his longer term perspective on the attrition of the capability of the Royal Navy’s frigate and destroyer fleet, which the national shipbuilding strategy ought to aspire to address as an outcome.

I first encountered the man who wrote the report that spurred the creation of the national shipbuilding strategy, John Parker, about three years ago when he attended Glasgow University to deliver a speech on his history of working in the shipbuilding industry. He had a great reputation as a managing director at Harland and Wolff shipbuilders in the 1980s, where he started as an apprentice and grew up through the ranks. There was an international discussion about the long-term decline of British capability, from the global world leader in the shipbuilding industry that it once was to a marginal player now even in Europe, never mind the rest of the world.

I asked him three years ago when I was working at BAE Systems what his greatest regret was in his career. He stood up and said, “My greatest regret is that Europe is building 90% of the world’s cruise ships, and Britain, with such a great heritage of building world-beating ocean liners and passenger ships, is building none. There are high-wage, highly equipped shipyards in Europe building these vessels, and Britain isn’t building one of them.”

As managing director of Harland and Wolff when it was under the ownership of the British Shipbuilders Corporation—the industry was nationalised until the late 1980s—he recognised the emerging market for cruise ships, which were once again becoming a popular recreational pursuit. Harland and Wolff developed proposed designs for cutting-edge new cruise ships and went to the Government for funding to build them for Carnival, now the biggest cruise company in the world, but the Government said that they were not interested in the design. They wanted to hold a fire sale, get rid of the assets and remove shipbuilding from public ownership. They were not interested in any further investment in what they saw as a dying industry.

In the very same year—1987, the year before Harland and Wolff and Govan shipyard were sold off—Meyer Werft in Germany, a family-owned business, got funding from the German state investment bank to build a completely new, undercover shipyard and then the world’s first modern cruise ship. Today, that shipyard dominates the global market for cruise ship and complex shipbuilding in Europe, building about two 100,000-plus-tonne ships every year. That contrasting approach is symptomatic of a broader malaise that we face when it comes to industrial policy and planning in Britain.

Chris Stephens: Will the hon. Gentleman outline what the devastating economic consequences were of that decision on cities such as ours, Glasgow, as well as Belfast and elsewhere in the UK?

Mr Sweeney: The impact was absolutely devastating, and we saw the wider impact in Govan as well, which was a commercial shipyard up until 1999 when Kvaerner pulled out. That Norwegian oil company rebuilt the yard in the early 1990s for commercial oil tankers and gas carriers. The result of that collapse was disastrous. Sir John Parker said that just as we had got British shipbuilders match-fit, ready to compete, the rug was pulled from under them. Just as the industry was ready to re-enter the market and be a globally competitive player, it was wrecked. That is the sad legacy of the collapse of British merchant shipbuilding to the point where we are entirely reliant today upon the Ministry of Defence to sustain what is left of British shipbuilding capability. That is partly why I am concerned about the national shipbuilding strategy, if it is restricted in its entirety to naval shipbuilding and not the wider issue of how we re-establish a market foothold in commercial shipbuilding. The two are intrinsically linked.

If we are to achieve a competitive advantage we ought to broaden our horizons and re-establish how we deliver a resurgence in British commercial shipbuilding capability. That was Sir John Parker’s biggest regret. That is what drove his frustration at that time, and a lot of that is what underpins the recommendations in his report. He talks about a vicious cycle of changing requirements, which the right hon. Member for New Forest East mentioned, and a year-zero approach every time we have a new MOD shipbuilding programme which duplicates effort and introduces unnecessary costs. It is so bespoke in its approach to designing ships that it introduces unnecessary costs, which render British shipyards uncompetitive, even in the naval sphere, never mind the commercial sphere.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) has just hit the nail on the head. Does he agree that the lack of a steady drumbeat of orders to ensure our industrial base has caused this problem, and that the wonderful words of the shipbuilding strategy are not being delivered by the Government?

Mr Sweeney: I absolutely agree. We see a cognitive dissonance between the vision of the outcome desired and the prescription to deliver that vision and commitment, which are not in alignment. They are not going to deliver it. That is the tragedy of it. We all want to see the national shipbuilding strategy succeed. We are trying to deliver our own collective understanding of what is best for the British industrial capability into this document, so that we achieve the outcome of a globally competitive and effective shipbuilding industry in the UK again.

My hon. Friend mentioned a feast and famine approach to British shipbuilding, which has long been an issue, particularly as the commercial capability has fallen away. I look in stark contrast at the American approach to shipbuilding. The Arleigh Burke destroyer programme plans to build 77 ships. Those ships have been consistently under construction with the same hull since 1988. They have been built since the year before I was born, and it still plans to build more. That is a consistency of approach that we ought to think about adopting in the UK. It would essentially be a continuation of the Type 23 frigate programme, but adapting its technology and capability and maintaining the learning curves achieved over a 30-year build programme. That would be a huge opportunity for British shipbuilding. Why do we insist
on stopping every time we build six Type 45s and starting from scratch on a Type 26 when a Type 45 platform could have been adapted to deliver the same capability as a Type 26? The approach is wrong-headed.

The Type 45 project has 13 different types of watertight doors. Why do we have such a huge level of variance in the programmes? We have no standardisation, no grip on the design, no standard approach to delivery, and no innovation in adopting new products and defence standards. We have no resilience or innovation in defence when it comes to an entrepreneurial way of delivering ships. If we were to benchmark it against how Meyer Werft build a complex cruise ship, the lead time between specification to delivery of the ship is minuscule compared with what we do with the equivalent ship of, say, our Type 26 platform. It is years and it is unacceptable. We need to seriously grip that if we want to drive down costs, deliver value in the naval shipbuilding industry and achieve the outcomes in terms of numbers for the Royal Navy that we desire.

The prescription is chaotic. It talks about a vision for having more “certainty about the Royal Navy’s procurement plans”, yet it wants to introduce a competitive programme for a Type 31. That goes right back to the early 1990s with the Type 23 programme, when Swan Hunter was competing with Yarrow shipbuilders on the Clyde, and what happened? None of those shipyards could invest in modern facilities and modern practices that would deliver the benefits in terms of timescale and minor efficiencies that would allow the ships to be built for value for money. It ended with the collapse of Swan Hunter and a drip-feeding of orders. There were huge redundancies in the shipping industry and huge uncertainty. This is a recipe to return to that model that was deeply flawed in the 1990s and led ultimately to the loss of British shipbuilding capability. That is why we are appealing today for a commitment to uphold what was originally planned in the terms of business agreement, which was extinguished.

A letter of 19 October from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said that the terms of agreement was extinguished. It committed to a single world-class site for complex warship building on the Clyde and investing in that shipyard facility to make it world class, upper quartile. That would deliver the benefits industrially to allow us to deliver a national shipbuilding programme for frigates and destroyers, which would ensure that they had a consistency of build that would deliver the long-term benefits, learning curves and efficiencies. It would drive down the cost of the ships and allow them to be built at volume, which, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East mentioned, is necessary to sustain a larger Royal Navy fleet. That is how we should do this. It is not about spreading it around, which will not work.

The Royal Fleet Auxiliary programme has better potential because it has a lower gross compensated tonnage and is a less complex ship, although it is still complex. If the tonnage of 40,000 tonnes each was spread around the remaining UK shipyards, that would provide the bedrock of capacity to sustain all the shipyards around the UK, while having the designated complex war shipyard on the Clyde. That is what happens with the Canadian and Australian shipyards and it is what happens in the United States. That is the approach we ought to have. Why has the national shipbuilding strategy not taken account of international benchmarks? Why has it not got a commercial shipbuilding focus as well to develop a longer term model based on European norms? Why are we not committed to building British ships, including the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships, in the UK? It could go on for much longer because I am closely associated with the topic.

In summary, I have outlined what we want to see changed in order to make the national shipbuilding strategy worthy of the name it deserves. We need world-class UK shipbuilding back, and the way to do it is to adopt those suggested improvements.

3.16 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing this debate. During the defence debate less than two weeks ago in the Chamber, every single Member of the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair complained that we had applied for debates since the publication of the national shipbuilding strategy. All of a sudden, at the very next ballot, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport secured one, so I thank him for that. I hope he will accept my apology to him in relation to Darth Vader. I actually misspoke. I did not mean to say “his hero”. What I meant to say was “their hero”, because Darth Vader is a Conservative icon and not of any other political party. I can see nods coming from the Conservative Benches.

The history of how we have got to this point is important, particularly for those of us who represent the best shipbuilders in the world: the shipyard workers. Sir John Parker’s report was an honest attempt to deal with the feast and famine that we have heard about from the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), but it contained several historical inaccuracies that concern me because the national shipbuilding strategy seems to be based on those historical inaccuracies, which is that two different types of ships have never been built in the same shipyard. That is not the case. Anybody who had worked at Yarrow’s would tell us that that was not the case, because, while they were building ships for the Royal Navy, they were building a different type of ship for the Malaysian navy. If the Government are basing their decision on such a historical inaccuracy, it is up to us Members of Parliament to tell them that it is an historical inaccuracy, and perhaps they might want to comment on that and put that right.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, particularly about the frigate factory. Does he agree that the major issue was the fact that financing
could not be achieved, because of fragmentation of the programme? If that had been gripped in the same way as programmes such as HS2 or the London Olympics, and the budget had been assured through its whole life, there would have been a business case to finance, through commercial means, the investment necessary to build a world-class shipyard on the Clyde.

Chris Stephens: I agree entirely. My Glasgow comrade is absolutely correct. That was one of the significant reasons for the frigate factory being cancelled.

My concern about the national shipbuilding strategy has been expressed by others: it is that we are going back to 1980s thinking and introducing competition. One of two things can happen when we start to introduce competition on that basis. Shipyards will try to undercut. As we heard earlier from my Glasgow comrade, that meant the collapse of Swan Hunter. It would be inevitable if we went back to the days of competition. Alternatively, companies would get together and the prices of ships would increase.

I think I am being fair and moderate in my remarks when I say that we are now at a place where the announcement of the national shipbuilding strategy was a presentational dog’s breakfast. The then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), claimed six times in the Chamber that there was a frigate factory on the Clyde. While he was on his feet in the Chamber making that claim, GMB officials were taking Scottish journalists around the proposed site, which was rubble and ash. There is no frigate factory on the Clyde. It was a presentational disaster for the Government.

I add my support to that expressed already for the argument that there is no need for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service ships to go to international competition. The reason no British yard has yet asked to be considered is that they believe the work will be sent out internationally; that is inevitable. As has been said, there would be clear economic benefits from building those ships not just for the local economies of the places where they could be built, in a modular format, but from the tax and national insurance take.

I also want to add to concerns expressed about the Type 31 frigate. It seems to me that the price is setting the capability of that ship, vessel or whatever we call it. The suggestion that it could be built for £250 million has already been described as a conspiracy of optimism. We need to know its capability and its role and purpose within the Royal Navy. To put it more simply: is it a complex naval warship? If it is, it should be built on the Clyde, which has been designated by the Government as a specialist shipyard to build complex naval warships.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman says that the Clyde has that designation, but in reality, under the terms of business agreement, it was extinguished in 2014, although that has not been explained. Why did the rationale change? It makes sense to build all the complex warships on one integrated site where all the learning curves, benefits and efficiencies are concentrated. Why has that changed?

Chris Stephens: I think that is a question for the Minister. We need to know the reason, and I shall explain why. I understand that the only country with more than one specialist shipyard is the United States of America. That is probably no surprise given the size of the US Navy. We need to know such things, because recently there was an accident at sea involving a US Navy ship. If it had been built to commercial standards rather than by a specialist yard the collision with another ship would have been a real disaster. The model elsewhere, especially in Europe, is that one specialist shipyard builds complex naval warships.

There is a contract for three Type 26 frigates on the Clyde and I ask the Minister to confirm that the other five will be built there. There is a feeling in the yards and the trade unions that represent the workers that there has been a roll-back on delivering on promises.

I echo the points that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East made about shipyard construction. If the Ministry of Defence is concerned about economies and efficiencies and similar issues, it has a role to play in investing in shipyards and speaking to companies. The Clyde should have a frigate factory, and there is a role for the MOD to play in that.

The national shipbuilding strategy needs a bit more work. This is the first opportunity that hon. Members have had since the statement to raise concerns, and I hope that the Minister has listened carefully and will be able to respond to many of the points we have made.

3.25 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his significant move in bringing the debate to the Chamber today.

Shipbuilding, as hon. Members know, is a key part of our industrial base. Although the industry has undergone much change in recent years, including to the number of people involved in it, it is still a key element of our industrial heritage. The national shipbuilding strategy that was introduced last September gave some rays of hope to the industry more generally. Sir John Parker recognised that a steady drumbeat of orders was crucial if investment in technology and skills were to make new-build projects more competitive, and that the sharing of risks between yards would give flexibility and speed to help in meeting our aspirations to renew our, albeit diminished, naval fleet. On that last point, there has been a debate about the sense of sharing work between yards, and perhaps that is a debate for another day. The proof of the pudding, for the national shipbuilding strategy, will be in the eating. Already the signs are not good.

There is no clear sign that a drumbeat of orders will be forthcoming at a sufficient pace to give some surety to the industry. As workers on the Clyde are all too aware, we have already witnessed the number of Type 26 frigates being reduced from 13 to eight, and then the placing of an order for just three. My good friend the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), cited the example of the Type 45s, which started at 12, were reduced to eight and ended up as six. The direction of travel in MOD thinking is a matter of some concern. The only drumbeat that is evident to me is the one to which Type 23s will come out of service, starting in 2023 with HMS Argyll and ending 13 years later, in 2035, with HMS St Albans. That is a steady drumbeat for the withdrawal of ships from service;
we need one for a process going in the opposite direction. Indeed, the previous First Sea Lord said that that time scale for the Type 23s was not extendable. If we are to maintain 19 surface frigates and destroyers at sea or in a state of readiness, something needs to give from the Minister’s office.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman mentioned sustaining the drumbeat. Does he agree that there is an unnecessary constraint on that because of the arbitrary in-year spend profile that the MOD is lumbered with? The key to unlocking that is the Treasury, which can adapt its method of financing huge generational programmes for things such as complex warships. Those are unique in relation to the way the Government buy kit. The undertaking is huge and unique and should be financed in a way appropriate to the project.

Douglas Chapman: I know that the hon. Gentleman is very experienced in such matters and I am sure that he has considered it long and hard for a number of years, both as an industry professional and as an MP. It is obvious, given the amount of investment being put in, that it must be done in the long term, and looking at the project overall rather than as its component parts. I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

The Government’s watchword has been that we must live within our means. The Tory manifesto in 2017 spoke of meeting the NATO target of at least 2% of GDP going on defence spending, and increasing defence spending by at least 0.5% over inflation each year. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it has been cut in real terms since 2010-11 by some 13%. That has resulted in a massive black hole of around £20 billion. Big-ticket items such as F-35s are purchased in US dollars, and only one carrier can be used at a time. Last night, Max Hastings said on “Newsnight” that the Dreadnought has an outdated capability.

All that has contributed to the black hole with which the Ministry of Defence currently has to cope. Such things have pride of place in the Government’s strategy, but in the current financial climate it is a case of pride coming before the fall because the Treasury has no budget for these things—and for many other things, such as the P-8s, which are also purchased in US dollars—is simply unsustainable. Decisions that would offer hope and a future to the likes of the Clyde, Rosyth, Appledore and Tyneside are delayed, and we miss the chance to synchronise the drumbeat. Does he agree with the hon. Gentleman?

If we are to “live within our means” as the Government mantra suggests, the MOD either needs to find more money, or something else has to give. The SNP would choose to get rid of nuclear weapons. Think of the money, or something else has to give. The SNP would think that that would become the national shipbuilding strategy in November 2016, the national shipbuilding strategy in the UK, I urge the Minister to make surface shipbuilding his priority. In my constituency, workers at Rosyth have delivered carriers and a wide range of refit projects on time and to budget. We now have an opportunity to deliver the Type 26s, Type 31s and the fleet solid support ships. The message is simple: let us make the national shipbuilding strategy a working document that encourages the engineering talent of our nation to get on with the job, at pace, and with that vital steady drumbeat.

3.33 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms McDonagh, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this important debate and delivering such a fine opening address.

We have had a good debate—I genuinely mean that. We heard an excellent and thought-provoking contribution from the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and good contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and a particularly ambitious speech from the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman).

Last year the Government published the national shipbuilding strategy, and the importance of naval shipbuilding should not be underestimated. Approximately 15,000 people are directly employed in UK shipbuilding because of spending by the Ministry of Defence, and at least 10,000 additional jobs are in the wider British supply chain. Some months before the publication of the national shipbuilding strategy in November 2016, Sir John Parker published his independent report on the UK’s national strategy for shipbuilding. Many people thought that that would become the national shipbuilding strategy, but—for reasons that are unclear even to this day—the NSS was a response to Sir John Parker’s report.

Those two important publications gave a degree of coherence and a sense of direction to the industry. We were, however, disappointed by the lack of emphasis on decision making and not making savings in the budget to allow contracts to be signed, sealed and delivered.

SNP Members long for the day when Scotland becomes an independent country that is responsible for its own defences. Small nation Norway has a shipbuilding industry. It has also bought into F-35 and P-8 capability. That can be done even with a small nation budget. Last week, small nation Denmark agreed to increase its defence budget by some 20% to meet the threats that the Danish people might face now and in the future. Small, well-equipped, effective, flexible, good partner nations can play their part in the defence of Europe both individually and through NATO.

Finally, while Scotland is still a constituent part of the UK, I urge the Minister to make surface shipbuilding his priority. In my constituency, workers at Rosyth have delivered carriers and a wide range of refit projects on time and to budget. We now have an opportunity to deliver the Type 26s, Type 31s and the fleet solid support ships. The message is simple: let us make the national shipbuilding strategy a working document that encourages the engineering talent of our nation to get on with the job, at pace, and with that vital steady drumbeat.
economies, and for that to have been put at the heart of the national shipbuilding strategy. That important point in Sir John's report is not really reflected in the Government's national strategy.

Today we have heard about the multiplier effect and investment in shipbuilding—that point was coherently expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East pointed out that our shipbuilding strategy must be part of a broader strategy that goes beyond the defence sector, and that can happen if we have the right perspective to develop it in such a way.

As we have heard, the new Type 31e and Type 26 frigates—albeit eight rather than 13, as we were initially led to believe—will be replacing the Type 23 frigates as they leave service. I have a number of questions about that ongoing programme. Some of them have already been touched on by other Members, but other questions are new. First, the MOD has said that there should be a cap of £250 million per Type 31e frigate. Why has that cap been fixed, and why at that figure? We need to know, because we have been reassured by people in the Navy that that amount may well be sufficient, but there are also plenty of experts who say that this insufficient and arbitrary figure has been plucked from thin air. Nick Childs, a naval specialist for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, has raised specific concerns about the level of capability and stated that, "the naval staff seems to think it can get a vessel of about 3,500 tonnes, with an adequate military capability, for the £250m target price. That will be a challenge".

That is an understatement. It certainly will be a challenge, and many industry experts say that it is frankly impossible. If it is impossible, what contingency measures will the Government take?

Chris Stephens: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concerns, and those of others who have spoken in this debate, that the price is dictating the capability of this frigate, instead of the capability being sorted out first, followed by the price?

Wayne David: That is precisely the concern with including the arbitrary figure of £250 million. I hope that the Minister will be able to dispel those concerns and clarify the situation.

Secondly, the national shipbuilding strategy correctly states that there is a potential export market for light frigates—the Type 31e. Much of that is for the purchase of a light frigate designed for construction in the market, not by means of traditional production. How is the Government’s exporting enthusiasm for that going? How many orders have they received? How many do they now think are likely? That key question was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport.

My third point is that, sadly, less than half the steel in the new Type 26s will be British. That is a crying shame, and I hope the Government will ensure that as the shipbuilding strategy develops, it is increasingly seen as an integral part of industrial strategy in this country, and that there will be complementarity with other parts of British industry.

My fourth question is about delays to the Type 26 programme. There is a great deal of concern among the workforce. Apprentices have been laid off and have had to find training elsewhere. Can the Minister say anything about that?

We are all proud to have seen the launch of the Queen Elizabeth carrier, which was formally commissioned into the fleet in December. We now look forward to the launch of the Prince of Wales carrier. The construction and fitting of both vessels has taken a great deal of commitment and dedication from a well-skilled workforce.

It is important to ensure that those skills are not lost but continually put to good use, which is why we should focus on fleet solid support ships. The contract for three new FSS ships will be subject to international competition. The decision is due in early 2020. I am concerned that that stipulation may put off domestic competitors, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West suggested. That follows the awarding of a contract for four tankers under the military afloat reach and sustainability—MARS—project to Daewoo, a South Korean company that is widely believed to have been given a tremendous amount of state aid that made its bidding far more attractive than it should have been.

We hope that those ships will be built in Britain because that would secure the maintenance of the skills that have been built up in the industry, and support local economies. It would also help to enhance the national shipbuilding strategy’s domestic capability and to make real the renaissance in shipbuilding that Sir John Parker refers to in his report.

On sovereign capability, I ask the Minister to comment on the report that appeared in yesterday’s Western Mail. It suggested that the Ministry of Defence will award a contract for mechanised infantry vehicles to the Germans without any competition. I give the Minister the opportunity to deny that story.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wayne David: I will give the Minister plenty of time to respond.

Finally, I hope that the Government will demonstrate a real commitment to the Royal Navy and naval shipbuilding. This country has a proud maritime history—it had the largest and strongest Navy in the world at one time. That time is a long way behind us, but the challenge now is to ensure that our Navy can successfully meet the new threats and dangers that our country faces.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that we hope the sponsor of the debate will have a few minutes at the end to sum up.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank hon. Members in all parts of the Chamber for their warm welcome. It is an honour to have been appointed to this position, but I suspect that I face a difficult task. In the debates on defence that I have attended thus far, I have found a wealth of experience and knowledge from hon. Members about these issues. There is also a significant amount of cross-party agreement, although not always. In my jousts
with the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on Welsh issues, we did not experience more constructive debates of this nature.

On the hon. Gentleman’s question about the Western Mail story, that was speculation. It was nothing to do with the national shipbuilding strategy. There was a clear statement from the Ministry of Defence that no decision has been taken. I can say no more than that, but I hope that that keeps the issue at bay for the time being.

This has been an interesting and constructive debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing it, and on his constructive speech. Of course, he highlighted his concerns about the national shipbuilding strategy, but it is only right to acknowledge that, as the Minister, I view the reasons why he raised the issues, and the way in which he did that, as a constructive contribution to the debate.

I hope that I will be able to answer many of the hon. Gentleman’s questions. He mentioned the importance of the national shipbuilding strategy in giving opportunities to young people in his constituency and, as we have heard from other hon. Members, across the United Kingdom. I cannot fail to be anything other than impressed when I meet apprentices, whether they are working on building new ships or on maintaining our Hawk aircrafts. The Ministry of Defence and I are very proud that young people have the opportunity to work in the defence sector. We are the largest creator of apprenticeship opportunities in the United Kingdom. I am sure we all agree on that.

The hon. Gentleman also said that he considers the Type 26 destroyer to be a good ship. I hope to be able to say that it is being built in a very good yard by experienced workmen on the Clyde. Again, there is agreement on that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, made a thought-provoking speech. In my eight years in the House, he has always spoken with passion, commitment and an independence of mind when it comes to defence. I am sure that that independence of mind and that willingness to challenge will haunt me, as it has haunted other Defence Ministers over the eight years in which I have seen him perform. No one can doubt his commitment to the defence of this country and the wellbeing of our armed forces, or to his independent, cross-party chairing of the Defence Committee, which represents what is best about the Select Committee system.

I also acknowledge my right hon. Friend’s history lesson and his firm defence of the concept behind the Type 31 frigates programme. His description of the programme’s rationale was clear, and he was listened to with understanding by other hon. Members. His speech included the basis of the points that I will make in due course about Type 31s.

I enjoyed the contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As a Welshman, I am pleased that there has been a significant Celtic contribution to the debate. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have contributed fully, because we understand the importance of defence to all parts of the United Kingdom.

Even the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) acknowledged that, while Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom—long
the opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.

The opportunity to train and support businesses and individuals who can contribute to a further expansion of our shipbuilding capacity.

In my new role as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, I would very much like to meet the all-party group on shipbuilding and ship repair, because, from an MOD perspective, the shipbuilding strategy must clearly consider the issue of producing warships and defence capability, as well as the wider implications for the economy, which I am very interested in. I have seen the direct benefits of defence spending to the economy in Wales. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport about issues that I could potentially learn about in relation to his work with the all-party group. In my time in this place, I have learned that all-party groups make a huge difference; I have no doubt about that. They are a constructive forum in which colleagues work on a cross-party basis, and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with him.

The recommendations in Sir John’s report were accepted in full by the Government, as they applied to our responsibilities, and that created the national shipbuilding in full by the Government, as they applied to our issues in more detail with him.
hinges on the strength of the partnership between the Government and the sector. It is about our collective ability not simply to improve productivity and develop the product that the international market wants to buy, but to continue to develop the skills and the talent to keep the industry firing on all cylinders. That is exactly what Members have been asking for, it is absolutely what I want to contribute in my role in the Ministry of Defence, and it is the purpose of the shipbuilding strategy. Where we need to refine or take on board the advice and guidance given to us by colleagues, we will do that, because the aim of the strategy is to ensure that we leave the shipbuilding sector in a better place than we found it. I am confident we can do that, but we need support from all parts of the House.

I hope we are building on firm foundations. We are looking to move to the future with a strategy that is not starting from scratch, but builds on our strengths and reputation, while identifying that we have to rectify the fact that we have not sold a warship in 40 years. We have to be confident that what we have to offer is cutting edge. It is about working with the industry, which has a reputation to live up to and has contributed so much in so many parts of the United Kingdom. We need to ensure that the industry is capable of producing ships of value to the UK and the Navy while competing internationally and making a cutting-edge contribution at the world level.

Members have touched on the economic contribution that the strategy can make. I am very aware of that. Ipsos MORI has conducted research that highlights what we need to do. It is available on the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy website. I am aware that I need to allow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport time to sum up the debate, so I will finish. I genuinely believe that we are moving forward constructively. As a Minister, I want to work with Members to ensure that the strategy delivers for the United Kingdom and our Navy.

4.13 pm

Luke Pollard: It is good to have a second Plymouth MP here in a Defence debate. I am grateful for the contributions we have heard from all parts of Westminster Hall. I hope it is the start of a productive conversation between the Minister and the all-party group on shipbuilding in particular, but also with Members.

The importance of a drumbeat of orders has been reinforced time and again, and the Minister has heard that. Clarity on the capability of the Type 31s is key, and I would be grateful if the Minister removed the ban on Royal Navy personnel speaking at the all-party group. I would also be grateful if, one year on from the Sir John Parker review, the Minister looked at how the review could be reinforced with feedback from Members of Parliament representing shipbuilding and ship repair communities across the country. There is a collective will in the House to make it work, and the honest conversation we can have here will be an important part of that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered National Shipbuilding Strategy.
What is the purpose of this debate? In many respects, it is about just one element of the property debate. First, I want to look at the reforms to our present system of stamp duty. As an aside, I have a proposal to close a potential tax evasion issue and raise additional tax. I will be interested in the Minister’s response on both those things.

Today, as in the past, the buyer of a property has responsibility for paying stamp duty. They have to pay that tax. Stamp duty is effectively a buyer’s tax. My proposal is simple: change the tax to a sales transaction tax, so that the responsibility for paying stamp duty transfers from the buyer to the seller. I appreciate that that proposal also touches on tax rates, but I want to leave that aside. Each Chancellor has to decide tax rates on an annual basis. My purpose concerns the fundamental principle of who pays the tax.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the debate; he has a lot of experience in these matters. Most people understand that the problems with the housing market are on the supply side, not the demand side. We need to build and deliver more homes. Would it not be a disincentive for people to put their houses on the market if we effectively charge them to sell those houses?

John Stevenson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention, and accept that we probably have a slightly different view on this subject. I fully accept that the supply of housing is a fundamental problem in our housing market. As I said earlier, that could be seen as a separate debate. For the purpose of today’s debate, I believe that shifting the responsibility for the tax from the buyer to the seller would be beneficial, and hopefully I will explain why.

From the Treasury’s perspective, other than that it would be a change of regime, it is tax-neutral; effectively it would make no difference to the amount of tax that the Treasury raises. I therefore think that the Treasury must look at the issue from a different perspective: is this beneficial to the housing market and to the people who are buying or selling the property? I believe that it will help first-time buyers and give support to those moving up the property ladder. Potentially, it will improve the housing market overall. I emphasise that this is not just the proposal of a random MP; it has a lot of support from the industry, and in particular the Yorkshire Building Society, with which I have had many discussions on this issue.

First, let us take first-time buyers. The changes in the Budget were undoubtedly extremely welcome. The Budget helped a large number of first-time buyers, taking many of them out of the tax regime. That is of course welcome, but there was a cost to it, which I think is reckoned to be in the region of £600 million. There are also some practical issues, such as how we identify who is a first-time buyer and make sure that the correct person is claiming the relief.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Office for Budget Responsibility says that the changes that came through will cost £3.2 billion, with an estimate that around £150,000 will be spent on every additional first-time buyer under the programme. Those are the OBR’s figures, and that change by the Tory Government will be particularly useless without the supply side. Does the hon. Gentleman’s proposal for the tax to be on the seller’s side have any benefit, beyond the loss of income that the Government are now facing, with no real benefit to first-time buyers?

John Stevenson: I am saying that moving the liability from buyer to seller should be neutral to the Treasury. It is up to the Treasury what level of rates it applies, and that changes over time. I did not want to go down that route; I was looking more at the principle of who pays the tax.

If we do move it, it will mean that all first-time buyers will not have to pay any tax at all. It will be very simple to understand who is a first-time buyer. At present, first-time buyers have to find a deposit, the costs and the stamp duty, even though the mortgage only covers the purchase price. The change would therefore help first-time buyers, because they would not have to look for money to pay the stamp duty land tax. If there were a small increase in the price, that would be covered by the mortgage. Interestingly enough, according to a Yorkshire Building Society survey, 44% of first-time buyers say that saving up for the required deposit and stamp duty is very challenging.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing today’s debate. He is making a very considered speech and suggesting a practical solution to a very real problem. In that context, does he agree that with so many people in the private rented sector—20% of the housing market—saving for a deposit is a major issue for many working families, who are currently paying rent, or indeed a mortgage, and want to upsize their property? That is why this scheme has some merit.

John Stevenson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is saving up for the deposit that is so challenging for many young people nowadays. Added to that are the solicitors’ costs and the stamp duty costs, which can sometimes make it too difficult for first-time buyers to raise the adequate amount. Incorporating that into the mortgage would be much better, from the purchaser’s perspective. One of the important points that the Yorkshire Building Society makes is that the mortgage would cover the costs if there were a small increase in the price of the property.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I just seek some clarity about what level of cost of home the stamp duty relief, transferring to the seller from the buyer, would operate on, in the light of the Government’s stamp duty relief for first-time buyers. At what price range will that start to support the first-time buyers he is talking about at the moment?

John Stevenson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: the changes that the Government introduced undoubtedly helped many first-time buyers. I fully acknowledge that, and they have gone a long way to taking most first-time buyers out of potential stamp duty. There are some practical issues about identifying who is a first-time buyer. What I am suggesting simplifies the process. It takes every first-time buyer out of the tax regime, and I will come on to some of the other benefits that I foresee.
If somebody wants to move up the chain by selling their smaller house and moving on to a bigger house, because they have a growing family or for other reasons, they would benefit quite significantly from the change. They would still have to pay stamp duty, but it would be on only the lower-valued property. The higher-valued property would not be paid for by them. There would be a clear saving for somebody who was moving up the housing ladder. That would help growing families who wanted to move to a larger property.

We now come to the specific question of who pays. As I have suggested, it should be the seller. People often say, “There will be an immediate increase in prices.” I am not convinced about that. I think that the market will adjust naturally. Indeed, when stamp duty was increased by 3% for the purchase of second homes, I do not think that we saw a rigid decline of 3% in house prices. I suspect that the market will adjust and take care of the potential— I believe small— increase.

Overall, I think it will help the market. We have to realise that those who will pay—that is, sellers—are often in a better position to pay the tax. Many of the people who will be selling will have benefitted from many years of increasing house prices, so will have sizeable equity in their property and be more capable of dealing with an increase in the price.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: This is a genuine question: is there a danger that the hon. Gentleman’s proposal could disincentivise people who wish to downsize? One of our big problems is people who are currently under-occupying houses, while others are unable to get houses with enough bedrooms. Is there a danger of disincentivising people, or has he thought about a way out?

John Stevenson: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. My view is that if somebody wants to downsize they will probably go ahead, but more importantly the people who are upsizing will get the advantage, and will therefore be interested in the market. I will come to an issue about the housing market, particularly in London at the top end, where I think that the tax regime is causing problems as we speak.

I believe that those who own their property are in a better position to pay the tax when they sell. We also have to look at people who have second homes. They are probably in a much better position to pay the tax because they have an asset that, again, will probably have increased in value. Touching on the hon. Gentleman’s point about individuals and families who are downsizing, quite often properties are sold as part of an estate, when somebody in the family has died. The property probably does not have a mortgage on it, so it will be a windfall for the family. They are therefore in a much stronger position to deal with the payment of that tax.

There are one or two practical issues as well. At present, it is the buyer’s solicitors’ responsibility to pay the tax. I believe that that should continue. Obviously, within the legal profession there would be a mechanism whereby, when the property was sold, they would ensure that they had sufficient money to cover that tax when the property was registered. I also accept that there would have to be a transitional period, because people who have paid tax on a property that they have bought in the last few years would find it a bit hard to subsequently have to pay the stamp duty when they sold the property. I believe that would be manageable. There would be no great change to procedure, it would be effective and I do not think it would affect the market significantly.

What it would do is to improve the market of first-time buyers for those moving up the chain. If we look at the very top end of the market, there seems to be a problem now in London, where very expensive properties are struggling to be sold. Quite often, that is because buyers are unwilling to pay the very high stamp duty required. Changing the rules means there is a possibility of freeing up the top end of the market to some extent, because the seller who wants to get rid of the property would be able to pay the tax, which might encourage the buyer into the market to pay the very high prices.

Another small additional benefit that I would like to raise with the Minister is about the stamp duty land tax form. This might be slightly legalistic and anorakish, but it might nevertheless have a benefit for Government.

At present, when someone submits an SDLT form, the national insurance number of the buyer goes on the form. I suggest that we change that slightly, so that the seller’s NI number also goes on the form. Why? It would give Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs an opportunity to check two things: capital gains tax and payment of income tax. That is particularly relevant to people who have second, third or fourth properties and is not related to the principal private residence.

I believe that there may be some uncollected tax, because it is possible for people to avoid paying income tax on a rental property, or capital gains tax. Ensuring that the seller’s national insurance number is also on the form would be a great way for HMRC to cross-check to make sure that, over the period of ownership, the seller has paid income tax, as well as to confirm whether capital gains tax is due when the property is sold.

The proposal has strong support from the industry. It is an idea that I have supported throughout my time as a Member of Parliament. Many members of my profession support the idea. Building societies, particularly the Yorkshire Building Society, have been very vocal in support. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) may be an exception, but many estate agents agree. It is a policy whose time is coming. In the Budget, the Chancellor took first-time buyers out of the tax altogether. It is one more step to reform the tax in the way I suggest.

I welcome the changes that the Chancellor brought in in the Budget. The increase in thresholds was welcome. Previous changes, such as sliding scales, were very sensible. There is an opportunity for the Chancellor to innovate further and change this aspect of our tax system. I do not expect the Minister to announce changes to policy today, but I hope he will consider my idea. Will he look at the issue? Will he meet representatives of the industry to discuss it? Will he carry out a consultation on it? Out of interest, does he agree with my idea?

On the national insurance suggestion, will the Minister look at that and give feedback? I am sure Treasury officials would be able to analyse whether the suggestion would be beneficial. Will he look at whether there has been a loss, or a potential loss, in income tax or capital gains tax from people who have owned second properties?

Property really does matter in this country. I completely understand the importance of getting the supply right. Types of ownership and the mix are so important,
but so are changes to our tax regime. As I said at the outset, property taxes raise a huge amount of tax in this country—it is probably one of the biggest areas of tax for our Exchequer. This is an opportunity to make a small but significant change to that regime. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

4.33 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter—I almost said Mr Speaker there; perhaps that is a Freudian slip. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) for organising this debate and for bringing to it his customary thoughtful style and experience as a solicitor. I was also a solicitor before coming to this House, although not a property one. I am aware of some of the experiences that he has had and in my prior life, before being appointed as a Minister, I was very interested in the property market and some of the questions that he has raised today. I will try to respond to as many of those as possible, but let me first raise some of the background to stamp duty and the Government’s recent reforms, because it is fair to say that there has been a great deal of activity in the area over the last few years.

Stamp duty as we know it was introduced in 2003. It replaced the former stamp duty regime, which my hon. Friend will remember from his time as a solicitor and required the physical stamping of documents. It raises over £11 billion a year, which makes an important contribution to our public services, as he said—we should remember that in the context of this debate—including £8.6 billion a year from residential property transactions. Although we continue to seek ways to reform stamp duty, we have to bear in mind its importance to the Treasury and our public services.

Over the last few years, stamp duty has played a significant part in a number of different budgets, and the Government’s objectives when considering it and its impact on residential property purchases have been above all to support first-time buyers, and to sustain the tax base. We are trying to keep the tax as simple as possible and to reduce it where possible. We are aware of the distortions that the tax can inevitably lead to, which deters people from moving home, from downsizing and from upscaling, and the effect that has on quality of life. Buying a home and changing where a person lives is obviously one of the most important decisions that they make, and we want to make sure that, where possible, the tax system does not interfere in that. We see it as an important lever in the housing market, but not the only lever. The housing market requires supply-side reforms as well as tax changes, and any reform of stamp duty can only be one potentially small element in our housing policies.

With those priorities in mind, the Government have taken a succession of significant actions to reform how stamp duty works. In 2010, the stepped structure of stamp duty through the most widely applicable price bracket created distortions in the housing market, which everyone was familiar with, particularly people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) who have worked as estate agents. We wanted to iron out some of those problems for both sellers and buyers. The stepped increases in rates meant, for example, that those moving up the housing ladder were met with large increases in tax when properties fell into higher brackets.

In 2014, we took action to reform stamp duty on residential properties at the autumn statement, which many hon. Members will remember. We changed the stepped increases to a variable rate that increased with the price of the property purchased. That was an important and successful reform and led to about 98% of people liable for stamp duty finding their bills reduced. There were new, higher rates for properties of the highest value, which increased the tax paid by so-called prime and super-prime properties particularly focused on areas of central London, but the vast majority of homebuyers in our constituencies across the country were better off as a result of the changes.

Since becoming a Minister, I have asked to see the figures on transactions in the higher price brackets. There has been quite a significant amount of press coverage of that. At present, the Treasury does not believe that there has been a material change in the number of transactions at the highest price brackets, but we will continue to keep that under review, bearing in mind the public interest.

In April 2016, we introduced higher rates of stamp duty on additional properties, which was designed to tip the scales in favour of first-time buyers and away from those who want to purchase second homes or invest in buy-to-let. Of course, it is perfectly acceptable for people to want to do that. We understand that and do not want to make it impossible for people to enjoy a second home or to invest in buy-to-let property for their pension and their future or for their children and grandchildren, but we did believe that it was important to make changes to help others to get on the property ladder.

Since those changes were introduced, more than 400,000 people have bought their first home and first-time buyers make up an increasing proportion of those in the mortgaged property market. However, it remains very challenging for young people to get on the property ladder—we all acknowledge that—and therefore in 2017 we made the largest change so far, which was to remove stamp duty for first-time buyers.

At the autumn Budget, we permanently abolished stamp duty for first-time buyers who were purchasing a property for £300,000 or less. First-time buyers purchasing a house for between £300,000 and £500,000 will save £5,000 and, to ensure that the relief is targeted at those who need it the most, purchases above £500,000 will not benefit. We appreciate that in parts of the country properties are of such a high value that the benefit is more limited, but even in London the average amount of stamp duty paid by first-time buyers has been halved, so the change is still significant and an improvement for anyone trying to get into the property market for the first time.

To turn specifically to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle, his suggestion about transferring stamp duty from the buyer to the seller was thoughtful and one that, he will not be surprised to hear, the Treasury has given thought to. We have done considerable research into it. It would be a significant step and therefore one that we should take only if the benefits are clear. The legal liability for stamp duty rests with the purchaser, but evidence suggests that the cost
of stamp duty is reflected in the value of the property. That is of particular concern with respect to my hon. Friend’s suggestion, because it means that switching the formal liability to the seller would be likely to have a limited effect on the overall cost of purchasing a house. My hon. Friend’s argument would have been stronger before we changed stamp duty for first-time buyers. Now the vast majority—80%—of first-time buyers have no stamp duty and 95% benefit from our changes. Before those changes, of course his proposal would have made a significant difference.

Another point, made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), with respect to those downsizing, would be of concern to us, because there might be a reason for people not to downsize when we want those who are a bit older with larger homes to consider moving into smaller homes—if they wish to, of course—freeing up properties for the next generation. We will give the suggestion thought, and I am happy to meet anyone about it, but it is not something that we are considering at present.

The other suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle, on the stamp duty land tax form, was interesting. I would like to take it up with him and hear more. I am happy to meet him with my officials to take it forward. I think Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs would be interested in considering the idea.

I have only a minute or so remaining, so I will conclude. The Treasury is extremely committed to improving the housing market. Members on all sides of the House appreciate the fact that our housing market is broken and needs fundamental reform. We see tax as an element of that, and I hope that over the past several years right hon. and hon. Members have seen a number of significant interventions to make that better. One argument is that we now need to move into a period of stability with respect to stamp duty, so that those selling and buying homes and those operating in the market have the confidence to make choices in the future. We will, however, consider future options, and we will do everything we can with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that we continue to increase the supply of homes throughout the country, particularly focused on first-time buyers.

Question put and agreed to.
I pause for a moment from the main body of my speech to put on record the fact that, while four of the five abducted booksellers were released over the following months, two years on the fate of one, Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen, remains unclear. He has been denied access to legal counsel and has not been officially charged, tried or allowed to return home. I pause to mention that because this week, dramatically, The New York Times reported that he was snatched on Saturday from a train bound for Beijing, where he was heading for a medical examination, apparently by plain-clothed Chinese police. What steps has the United Kingdom taken to raise his case, and to urge the Chinese authorities to allow him to leave China, reuniting him with his family, including daughter Angela, who studies in Cambridge and whom I have met? She campaigns valiantly for her father’s release.

The January 2017 abduction from a Hong Kong hotel of Chinese billionaire Xiao Jianhua has caused similar concern. A further cause of grave, indeed international consternation was the disqualification not long ago of six democratically elected Hong Kong legislators, including the youngest ever member of the Legislative Council, Nathan Law, whom I had the privilege of meeting here in November 2016. Those legislators were removed from their seats because they were accused of failing to take their oaths properly. Some of the individuals, it is true, were disrespectful and inappropriate in how they took their oaths, but Nathan Law took his oath perfectly properly, merely adding to the end some words of Mahatma Gandhi. To be disqualified for quoting Gandhi is extraordinary. For a court to disqualify these young men instead of the legislature giving them a chance to retake their oaths properly is alarming. They now face demands to repay salaries and expenses that they legitimately earned while fulfilling their duties as legislators.

Last August, a further injustice occurred when Joshua Wong, Alex Chow and Nathan Law, who were student leaders of the peaceful umbrella movement in 2014, were sentenced to prison terms of six, seven and eight months respectively. Twenty four hours after their sentencing, a letter signed by 25 international figures, including me, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who is here today, and many leading politicians, diplomats and academics, was published, which expressed concern at this as a miscarriage of justice, a threat to Hong Kong’s rule of law and basic human rights and a blow to the one country, two systems principle. It was followed by a letter by 12 senior international lawyers, many of them Queen’s counsel, who argued that the imprisonment of these young men was not only a threat to the rule of law, but a breach of the principle of double jeopardy in Hong Kong and a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which applies to Hong Kong. They noted

“serious concerns over the independence of the judiciary”.

I am pleased that a few weeks later, Joshua, Nathan and Alex were granted bail, released from prison and permitted to appeal, but whatever happens with their cases on appeal, the serious issues raised by the decision to jail them in the first place should not be ignored. I would like to think that the international consternation expressed at their treatment, and undoubtedly noted by the Chinese authorities, contributed to their release. That is why I share the view of the last Governor of Hong Kong, Lord Patten, when he said our Government’s Ministers should speak out publicly, not only privately, and that those who believe that raising difficult issues with China, such as human rights, would affect trade are “mistaken”.

Joshua, Nathan and Alex are far from alone. According to expert Kong Tsung-gan in a recent article in Hong Kong Free Press,

“at the heart of the government strategy to keep pro-democracy groups on the defensive and to intimidate ordinary people into not participating in the movement are the 39 legal cases (criminal and civil) it has brought against 26 pro-democracy leaders, as well as prosecutions of dozens of grassroots activists.”

I understand that, at present, more than 50 democracy activists face court proceedings and potentially prison under public order offences, in cases that past precedent indicates would normally have been punished with non-custodial penalties—community service or a fine. Some 16 peaceful demonstrators have been jailed for between six and 13 months already.

“As never before,” writes Kong Tsung-gan,

“the government is using the courts to criminalise and delegitimise the pro-democracy movement.”

He argues that although some cases—such as those I have quoted—have received international attention, more focus should be given to the “overall pattern”.

In a further example of the erosion of democratic procedures, in December last year, the Legislative Council introduced procedural changes regarding elected legislators’ authority. The powers of the Legislative Council chairman to close down debates were increased. Inevitably, that will reduce the ability of pro-democracy groups, which represent the majority of Hong Kong’s people, to properly scrutinise legislation and hold the Executive to account.

A new law imposed on Hong Kong by China now criminalises disrespect of the national anthem. Some Hong Kong football fans have booed China’s national anthem during football matches. One can argue whether it is appropriate to disrespect a national anthem, but is it right to criminalise such action with a penalty of up to three years in prison? Disturbingly, I understand that these new laws can be applied retrospectively.

Journalists now face physical threats. Hong Kong has fallen to 73rd place in Reporters Without Borders’ 2017 World Press Freedom Index—down from 18th in 2002. Academic freedom is being curtailed, too, with recent reports of controversial academic figures being removed from posts or having promotions blocked, of state-appointed figures governing universities, and of a growing push to limit freedom of speech there.

Another illustration of the erosion of Hong Kong’s autonomy, and one that directly affects the freedoms of the United Kingdom, was the decision to deny British human rights activist Benedict Rogers entry to Hong Kong in October last year. I take the opportunity to thank Foreign Office Ministers for expressing concerns to the Chinese authorities about the denial to Mr Rogers, after I raised questions in the House at the time. Does the Minister have any update regarding this? In late 2017, several Taiwanese scholars were also refused entry to Hong Kong.
The year ended with yet another example of the increasing erosion of Hong Kong’s authority: the Chinese Government’s decision to enforce mainland Chinese law at the new West Kowloon high-speed rail terminus in Hong Kong. Under the arrangement, Hong Kong will effectively surrender its jurisdiction across a quarter of the new express rail terminus, where immigration procedures will be performed by mainland law enforcement agents with powers of search and arrest. I understand that Chinese national law will apply at the rail terminus. Thousands demonstrated in Hong Kong against these plans on new year’s eve. In the view of many experts, that effectively introduces one country, one system.

I understand that the National People’s Congress standing committee decided that the co-location arrangement is constitutional, thereby usurping the function of the courts, which under the Basic Law of Hong Kong should have exclusive rights to adjudicate cases. The Hong Kong Bar Association has said it is “appalled” by this decision, and stated:

“Such an unprecedented move is the most retrograde step to date in the implementation of the Basic Law, and severely undermines public confidence in ‘one country, two systems’ and the rule of law” in Hong Kong. Does the Minister share the concerns of the Hong Kong Bar Association?

In December, Mr Speaker hosted the launch in Speaker’s House of a new organisation set up in this country to monitor, report and advocate for Hong Kong’s freedoms and autonomy—Hong Kong Watch. I had the privilege of attending the launch of that organisation, which was founded by Benedict Rogers and others. I commend its work to the House and encourage Members on all sides to engage with Hong Kong Watch. It has a highly distinguished cross-party group of patrons, including Sir Malcolm Rifkind, Lord Ashdown, Lord Alton of Liverpool and Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC. The seniority of those individuals in their respective spheres of public life underlines that the concerns I am expressing are shared by respected public figures across political parties in this country and beyond, and that they cannot be ignored.

Indeed, Lord Ashdown recently visited Hong Kong as a patron of Hong Kong Watch. He published a report, which he presented at a meeting in the House of Lords last week, which I attended. The report is entitled, “Hong Kong 20 Years on: Freedom, Human Rights and Autonomy Under Fire”. I urge the Minister to read it if he has not already done so, and to respond to the concerns and recommendations in it. Lord Ashdown states:

“Over the past five years the freedoms guaranteed to the people of Hong Kong in its mini-constitution, the Basic Law, have been increasingly eroded. In Hong Kong, the rule of law is under pressure, human rights are undermined, and the city appears to have been increasingly eroded. In Hong Kong, the rule of law is under pressure, human rights are undermined, and the city appears to have been increasingly eroded.

The Hong Kong Bar Association has said it is “appalled” by this decision, and stated:

“Such an unprecedented move is the most retrograde step to date in the implementation of the Basic Law, and severely undermines public confidence in ‘one country, two systems’ and the rule of law” in Hong Kong. Does the Minister share the concerns of the Hong Kong Bar Association?

In December, Mr Speaker hosted the launch in Speaker’s House of a new organisation set up in this country to monitor, report and advocate for Hong Kong’s freedoms and autonomy—Hong Kong Watch. I had the privilege of attending the launch of that organisation, which was founded by Benedict Rogers and others. I commend its work to the House and encourage Members on all sides to engage with Hong Kong Watch. It has a highly distinguished cross-party group of patrons, including Sir Malcolm Rifkind, Lord Ashdown, Lord Alton of Liverpool and Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC. The seniority of those individuals in their respective spheres of public life underlines that the concerns I am expressing are shared by respected public figures across political parties in this country and beyond, and that they cannot be ignored.

Indeed, Lord Ashdown recently visited Hong Kong as a patron of Hong Kong Watch. He published a report, which he presented at a meeting in the House of Lords last week, which I attended. The report is entitled, “Hong Kong 20 Years on: Freedom, Human Rights and Autonomy Under Fire”. I urge the Minister to read it if he has not already done so, and to respond to the concerns and recommendations in it. Lord Ashdown states:

“Over the past five years the freedoms guaranteed to the people of Hong Kong in its mini-constitution, the Basic Law, have been increasingly eroded. In Hong Kong, the rule of law is under pressure, human rights are undermined, and the city appears to have been increasingly eroded. In Hong Kong, the rule of law is under pressure, human rights are undermined, and the city appears to have been increasingly eroded.

What concerned me particularly, as I listened to Lord Ashdown presenting his report last week, was what he said of his recent visit, compared with previous visits to Hong Kong over the years.

4.59 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.14 pm

Fiona Bruce: I will shortly draw my remarks to a conclusion. I was about to quote Lord Ashdown. Following his recent visit to Hong Kong, he said that “something has happened to cause the almost irrepressible spirit of Hong Kong to be dampened down”.

It is profoundly concerning to hear claims from China that the joint declaration is viewed by some as a historical document of no relevance. Does the Minister agree that it is still relevant now and right up to 2047, that it is a joint declaration by both Britain and China in which both signatories have responsibilities and obligations, and that, as an international treaty lodged at the United Nations, China’s adherence to those obligations under the treaty ought to be taken as an indication of its reliability in adhering to all its international treaty obligations?

Does the Minister agree that, as Lord Ashdown said, “it is in the interests of Britain, China and Hong Kong to continue to uphold the rights enshrined at the handover”?

Does he also agree that Britain has, as Lord Patten said, “a right and a moral obligation to continue to check on whether China is keeping its side of the bargain” publicly as well as privately? If so, what are the Government doing to fulfil that obligation?

We must heed the plea of Anson Chan, Hong Kong’s former Chief Secretary, and Martin Lee, founder of Hong Kong’s Democratic party, who told the Conservative party human rights commission, which I have the privilege to chair:

“We need the UK to speak up forcefully in defence of the rights and freedoms that distinguish Hong Kong so sharply from the rest of China. If it does not lead, then the future of one country, two systems is at best troubled and at worst doomed.”

I hope we will step up to our responsibilities, speak up for Hong Kong and live up to the promise made by Sir John Major 22 years ago that Hong Kong should never have to walk alone.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, five Back Benchers are seeking to catch my eye. The wind-up speeches will begin at 5.40 pm, so you have about five minutes each.

5.16 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on her excellent introduction and her commitment over the long term to the people of Hong Kong. As a former shadow Minister for Asia and as a patron of Hong Kong and deputy chair of the all-party parliamentary China group, I congratulate others for joining in the debate and for expressing our concern about human rights, democracy and individual freedoms.

As we reflect on the past 20 years, it is important to pay tribute to the Hong Kong Government for the significant steps forward they have taken since handover, from minimum wage legislation to anti-corruption drives, clean water initiatives and huge investments in public infrastructure projects. As we look forward to the next 20 years, we should pause to remember the past 20,
and how important the principles of the joint declaration are for the flourishing of Hong Kong’s economy and society. The dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit of the Hong Kong people has allowed Hong Kong to flourish under the joint declaration. There is no reason why that should not continue.

The UK-Hong Kong relationship has deepened. More than 600 UK businesses with registered offices in Hong Kong, an export market worth £8.6 billion and a UK investment stake of more than £33 billion are clear signs that trade is booming. In terms of academic and cultural exchange, more Hong Kong students are enrolling at UK universities than ever before, which is an achievement to celebrate. In part, the relationships we form with students, young people and young democrats redouble our efforts to commit ourselves to a more socially just society based on individual freedoms and human rights.

We are all aware of the high-profile cases raised in connection with the topic of the debate, including the arrests of the booksellers. It is interesting that today’s papers highlight the case of Gui Minhai, the Swedish national who does not understand why he has been arrested. It is unclear whether he has any legal support. Conversations are going on between Sweden and China, but that case emphasises how surprising such acts can be. At one moment, one can be debating a good trade relationship and things can feel so normal, but in another situation things can seem so strange. When we try to develop a good relationship with China along trade lines, we must be brave and talk about the issues that are important to us.

On 28 March 2017, I asked the Minister’s predecessor as Minister for Asia, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), how confident he was that the Hong Kong Government were committed to genuinely democratic elections. He stated that it was the Government’s view that the best way to secure the future of one country, two systems was through a transition to universal suffrage. I would be grateful if this Minister would give us an indication of the timescale or of what progress might have been made in tackling that fundamental issue of universal suffrage.

Secondly, the issue of functional constituencies continues to be an area of concern when it comes to creating a system of fair and genuine democratic representation. I recognise that the functional constituencies are somewhat a hangover from pre-handover days, but I should be grateful if the Minister would clarify the Government’s position on whether they should play a lasting role in the democracy of Hong Kong, and whether he has discussed the issue with his counterparts in Hong Kong or Beijing.

Thirdly, I wonder what action the Minister has taken to raise the jailing of Hong Kong journalists. The tension between democracy and governance, journalism and the free expression of speech is obviously something that means a great deal to many of us in the Chamber. Could the Minister please give us an update on what progress is being made to discuss genuine freedom of speech in Hong Kong? Of course, Hong Kong has always treasured that; it has always had a lively bookselling tradition and a lively journalistic environment. As we move into an increasingly globalised age, such questions are also crucial around social media. I should be grateful if the Minister would give me an idea of his views on that.

I have one minute to go. Marking the anniversary of the handover, the Foreign Secretary issued a very carefully worded statement, in which he made no specific reference to the persisting cases or concerns outlined by hon. Members today. As a guarantor of the joint declaration, a treaty lodged at the United Nations, it is our responsibility to ensure that its principles are upheld, working with our Chinese counterparts. Following the delegation of young LegCo Members last year, hosted by Lord Collins of Highbury from the other place, I pledged to those young representatives that I would continue to press our Government to ensure that the spirit of the joint declaration is upheld. I hope that, through debates like these, we can continue to be vigilant, to promote human rights, democracy and individual freedom on behalf of Hongkongers.

5.22 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on China, including Hong Kong, to join the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing it. In many ways, this debate is a continuation of others we have had. I last spoke on this subject in this Chamber in March 2016; we were then considering the 38th biannual report on Hong Kong. It is perhaps timely to review again progress on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration of 1984, just over 20 years since the handover of Hong Kong.

In the 38th biannual report, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office noted that the system of one country, two systems has in very many areas “continued to function well”, but it noted specific concerns about rights and freedoms, including academic freedom and the freedom of the press. In the 41st report, the most recent one that we have, the Foreign Secretary’s introduction confirmed his strong belief that the joint declaration “remains as valid today as it did when it was signed by both the Government of the UK and of China over thirty years ago”, that it was legally binding, that it continues to be enforced and that he had unequivocally raised the issue, both publicly and privately, with the Chinese Government.

In a sense, the updated report is largely a continuation of the earlier one. Anyone objectively looking at the progress of Hong Kong over the last 35, 20 or even five years would have to note considerable elements of progress in the way that Hong Kong continues to surprise—its environmental campaigns, its increased social welfare understanding, and its ability to continue to do dynamic things in its trade with the rest of the world, brilliantly exemplified by the presentation given at the annual dinner of the Hong Kong Trade and Development Corporation in London last autumn.

Our co-operation with Hong Kong, which stretches to cover much more than trade and investment, encompassing the 3.7 million British passport holders in Hong Kong, strong education links and—above all, perhaps—the rule of law, has continued strongly. It will be, I suspect, raised to a new level in March, when our Department for International Trade works with Hong Kong on the GREAT festival of innovation, which will
I think be the Department’s largest promotional activity in the far east this year. It will focus on technology in a whole number of different ways, and will be a strong example of how Britain and Hong Kong are still immensely relevant to each other.

None the less, the issue of the freedom and democracy of Hong Kong is incredibly important. Although those concerns remain strong, I note that Hong Kong Watch’s report says that academic freedom is “alive, and generally well,” with the caveat that there should be vigilance against changes to those freedoms. My belief is that in engaging with Hong Kong—many of whose residents are old friends of the UK in a number of ways—and with the People’s Republic of China, part of the issue is the tone we strike. Having something called “Hong Kong Watch” is valuable, in the sense that it will continue to look closely at the six freedoms articulated in the joint declaration, but it also has an element of moral superiority to it, which we must be careful about.

For example, in an email to me a few days ago, a Hongkonger resident in the UK accused China of breaking solemn commitments to respect Hong Kong’s freedoms and “British way of life”, before going on to talk about the Iranian-style fake election of the chief executive and “Governor-like powers to rule Hong Kong.”

We cannot have it both ways. The fact of the matter is that the British Governor there was not elected in any way whatsoever, and he did have significant powers to look closely at the six freedoms articulated in the joint declaration, but it also has an element of moral superiority to it, which we must be careful about.

Things have moved on. The key thing I would like to leave the Minister to ruminate on today is the importance of shared rule of law for all three parties. When Hong Kong is operating at its best, in a way that can raise huge amounts of capital and provide great services for Hong Kongers resident in the UK accused China of breaking superiority to it, which we must be careful about.

Hong Kong Watch” is valuable, in the sense that it will continue to look closely at the six freedoms articulated in the joint declaration, but it also has an element of moral superiority to it, which we must be careful about.

5.27 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I remember when the discussions were going on about the future of Hong Kong. There was particular interest in Northern Ireland. I was a member of the Chinese chamber of commerce in Northern Ireland; a lot of the members came from Hong Kong or had families there and were very concerned about the future. Of course, Chris Patten had been a member of the Administration in Northern Ireland when the Anglo-Irish agreement was signed and we were moving toward discussions about the future of Northern Ireland, which culminated in the Belfast agreement. Given that the Government had expressly stated that they had no economic, strategic or selfish interests in Northern Ireland, there was a certain affinity with people in Hong Kong who were facing an uncertain future.

Thankfully, despite all the fears about Britain’s exit, or Brexit, from Hong Kong—people thought capital would flee from Hong Kong, industry would be decimated, people would want to leave and the whole economic dynamics of the Hong Kong economy would be affected—that did not happen. Perhaps there are lessons for today from those kinds of warnings.

The commitment was made to the people of Hong Kong that although China would now have control, it would be one country but two systems. Nothing would change for 50 years. Freedoms they had experienced would be guaranteed. As has been shown this afternoon, if we look at the way in which deteriorations in human rights and freedoms have been manifest, whether we are talking about the abduction of booksellers and businessmen, interference with the judiciary, attacks on journalists or the way in which protestors have been treated, there has quite clearly been an erosion of the freedoms that people were promised. It is significant that the man who did the deal has said that perhaps we should have done more. Chris Patten has expressed concerns about what is going on in Hong Kong.

The one thing that the Chinese do not like—this is quite clear in all dealings with them—is public criticism. We saw that when we were asked to ensure that protestors were kept off the streets of London during the state visit of the Chinese Premier; it showed how, for the Chinese, public criticism rankles. It is important that where these deficiencies are identified, our Government speak out against them, not only privately but publicly.

There are some people who say that we look to China as one of our big export markets, and that there are trade implications to speaking out. I do not believe that. One need only look at how in the past Presidents of the United States, for example, have publicly criticised China, and it has not led to the kind of sanctions that one would expect. The one ask I have of the Government is this: let us not be mealy-mouthed in ensuring that the protections that we gave and promised to the people of Hong Kong are delivered.

5.32 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. Scotland has had strong links with Hong Kong historically and commercially, in politics, science and modern trade. There can be no doubt that over the last 20 years Hong Kong has thrived as a result of its proximity to China, while enjoying access to financial markets around the world.

Scottish universities, including Aberdeen and Edinburgh Universities, have very strong links to Hong Kong, and they share our concerns. Last year was a special year for the special administrative region, and much was made in Hong Kong and China of the significance of the 20th anniversary of the handover from the British. As the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said, at the time, Britain left in a clear agreement that Hong Kong’s special status under the one country, two systems understanding would be protected, along with a commitment to the rule of law and Hong Kong’s autonomy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) eloquently explained.

However, in recent years we have seen worrying signs that the commitment is wavering. It does not benefit China and the ruling Communist party to flex their muscles when it comes to Hong Kong. The economic importance of Hong Kong to China should very much temper their response. But all this shows a worrying disregard for the joint declaration. The United Kingdom has a clear right to monitor and comment on the declaration, given that that was one of the major preconditions for the handover of Hong Kong. The commitment to the rule of law and autonomy were agreed for a period of at least 50 years. It is worrying that, only halfway through, we are deeply concerned that those principles appear to be at risk.
I hope that the Government will recognise the concerns expressed in the Chamber today and speak out where necessary. China is a friend to the United Kingdom and a country with which we enjoy a prosperous and beneficial relationship, but friends must be able to be honest with one another and have difficult conversations on issues on which we disagree. Like the right hon. Member for East Antrim, I recognise the economic success of Hong Kong and want to see it flourish. The last 20 years have defined the Hong Kong of today. If it is to continue to flourish for the next 20 years, its democracy, autonomy and rule of law must not only be protected, but enhanced so that they are worthy of any great international city, which Hong Kong most certainly is.

5.34 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her contribution. She is clearly a lady with a big heart, and she presented the case very well. Well done to her. Last week in the Holocaust debate, I quoted a poem: “First they came... and I did not speak out.”

I recognise that we are not talking about the same thing today, but there is a similarity that we should speak out about. Looking at the situation in Hong Kong and the response to date, I am uncomfortable, as other hon. Members have said that they are.

I often say that I am proud to be a Member of Parliament in the greatest seat of democracy in the world. It is an honour that I do not take lightly. While I am standing here representing my constituents, I am mindful that with great power comes great responsibility. I am sorry to say—please do not interpret my words as an attack on anyone in this place—that we are not living up to our responsibility when it comes to Hong Kong. It is good to see the Minister in his place. I believe there is no better person to respond to this debate, and I mean that with all sincerity. I look forward to his response.

We all know the background: Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997 following the 1984 agreement between China and Britain. China agreed to govern Hong Kong on the principle of one country, two systems, and the city would be able to enjoy a high degree of autonomy, except on foreign and defence affairs, for 50 years, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) said very clearly. I am not a mathematician, but we have not reached the end of those 50 years. If a loan had been defaulted on, we would not write it off; where there is a prison sentence, we would not allow early release; yet here we appear to have backed off. As I often say, “so sad, too bad.” The abuse of human rights, the right to worship and the right to express oneself in a democratic process—we have a responsibility to these people, and we are not fulfilling it.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I take very seriously any form of persecution, and I am constantly asking the Government—as the Minister knows—to step in and speak out on behalf of these people. People who have arranged peaceful protests are being imprisoned. Three and a half years ago, I served on the armed forces parliamentary scheme run by the Royal College of Defence Studies. One of the representatives there was the chief of Hong Kong police. He told me about the number of protests, because I was interested to hear how things were going, and he illustrated to me that protests were able to go ahead. Today they are not. Today people are under the cosh. Today, they can face a jail sentence. We have to step out against that.

Avery Ng, the chairman of the League of Social Democrats, told The Guardian: “It is ridiculous for the Chinese government to claim that the joint declaration is a historical document. You don’t sign a contract and claim that it is historical the second day after the contract was signed.”

How true that is! He continued: “I believe the UK government has legal, moral and political responsibility to come out and say the right thing.”

I agree with those sentiments, and while I do not believe that we have humiliated ourselves—I do not say that for one second—we have not draped ourselves in honour, either.

Yes, we would appreciate a good relationship with China to enhance trade, especially in a post-Brexit Britain, but we cannot sell ourselves, our integrity or our obligations off to achieve this. Our products are top-quality. Our relationship has gradually built up. While I firmly believe that organising a boycott of Chinese products would be counterproductive and the wrong thing to do, I do not believe that we have lost the ability to speak out about our former colony, and to instigate a real and meaningful discussion regarding these cases and what they mean for the people of Hong Kong.

Last sentence, Mr Streeter. I am asking the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for more than a strongly worded email. Let us discuss this face-to-face and make the case for those who are not being allowed to speak out for themselves. I often say that we speak for those who have no voice.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that Opposition Front Benchers have five minutes each, and the Minister has 10 minutes. That should allow a few moments for Fiona Bruce to respond at the end.

5.38 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to start summing up the debate. In the interest of brevity I will not go through everyone who has contributed. It is quite clear that everyone who has spoken is concerned about the plight of the people of Hong Kong, and not just because of the United Kingdom’s history in the region. It is perfectly legitimate in any democratic society to have concern for human rights everywhere; human rights are there because people are human beings, not because of where they live or which political system they work under.

I have a concern, as I think we all do, that the Government of China, through the authorities in Hong Kong, as we see in so many other places, use the excuse of law and order or of protecting national security to clamp down on what would be seen in any reasonable society as possibly awkward or inconvenient, but perfectly legitimate, peaceful and lawful, disturbances by people doing no more than exercising their right to disagree with the Government of the day, to make public statements and to take part in public protests against, or in favour of, that Government’s policies. Let me make that clear,
as I have done in a number of other human rights debates that I have taken part in here. The Chinese Government and the authorities in Hong Kong have the right to maintain their own society. They do not have the right to use that as an excuse for completely arbitrary arrests and detentions.

I hope that the Minister will indicate what the Government's intentions are for after we leave the European Union. China will clearly be a big target for one of these wonderful new trade deals that we will get. How can we be sure that that will not be obtained at the cost of our watching brief on human rights in China? It has to be said that the United Kingdom's record on dictatorships in places such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain is not good. Far too often, trade interests triumph over human rights. More recently, we have even seen that in Spain: there have been arbitrary arrests for taking part in the wrong kind of political demonstration in Spain in the past few months, and the Government have been very slow and reluctant to criticise them. The United Kingdom's authority in speaking to the Chinese Government about human rights abuses in Hong Kong would be much greater if we were prepared to speak as firmly to our so-called friends in some other human rights abusing regimes across the world. We do not have to go to Hong Kong to see people being denounced as enemies of the people simply for expressing unpopular or contradictory views.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is no longer in his place, for reminding us that part of the reason why there is little democracy in Hong Kong now is because there was practically none for 150 of the 155 years that Britain was in charge. Out of a population of several million, practically none for 150 of the 155 years that Britain was in charge. How many citizens of Hong Kong were asked who they were in charge. Out of a population of several million, practically none for 150 of the 155 years that Britain was in charge. Sometimes we seriously have to look at ourselves in the mirror. We should ask why democracy in Hong Kong suddenly became important when Britain was about to hand over control; but did not seem that important when Britain was in control.

Some of the structural, institutional reasons why human rights are sometimes not properly observed are British legacies. The reason that universities can clamp down with complete impunity on academics or students who speak out of turn is because the Chief Executive of Hong Kong is the de facto principal—the boss—of every university in the city. The Chinese did not do that; Britain did that. That was what Britain set up. Half the legislature is elected not by the citizens but by the big business interests. The Chinese did not do that; Britain did that. Let us face it: in this place, half the legislature is elected not by the citizens but by the big business interests. The Chinese did not do that; Britain did that. I have to say that she is fearless in defending those whose human rights are abused, however inconvenient it is and wherever we see it. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on her considerable work on Hong Kong in recent years.

The situation is obviously getting more difficult, as the Government report acknowledges, and we have to ask what is to be done in this situation. We should remind China of a couple of things. One is that while we agree that calls for independence are not ones that we support, clamping down on protests and on free speech, and appearing not to wish to see civil society flourish, can only increase those pressures. That will not reduce those protests. As Lord Ashdown said, will the Chinese enhance their own soft power if they undermine Hong Kong's freedoms? That is a very powerful point.

I am interested to know what the Government are going to do and what they are going to say to the Chinese. I think that the Prime Minister will have a meeting with President Xi in the next few months. Is the intention to raise these issues? The Government have been objective and open in assessing the situation, but what further do they think that they can do? I would also like the Government to assure us that in the post-Brexit pressure for trade regimes, we will not abandon our commitments and responsibilities to human rights. Taking on board what the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said about humility, and notwithstanding what happened when we were running Hong Kong, what steps do the Government think it is possible to make to
move to universal suffrage, and what is their view on the legality of the immigration checkpoint on the new railway?

The title of the debate is "Democracy in Hong Kong". Most of the focus has been on individual human rights, and at this juncture I think that is the right focus.

5.49 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her work as chair of the Conservative party human rights commission. I value her deep interest in Hong Kong and a range of other matters. I am sure that if I reply to some specific issues in writing subsequent to this debate; I hope that all Members will understand, particularly the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). We are concerned about the checkpoint issue, not least because it has been raised by the Law Society of Hong Kong, but I will return to the detailed points made by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) after this debate.

I have rather more sympathy than I can probably say publicly for much of what the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland rightly said. It is a conversation that I had with my officials earlier, and I am glad he was not a fly on the wall for that. He will appreciate that although he makes some valid points about the past, we also need to look to the future. It is my responsibility now to make things work for the future and to ensure that the joint declaration is properly enforced, and I intend to do so.

I stress that the UK Government are acutely aware of our historic responsibilities to Hong Kong, and indeed to future generations of Hong Kongers, to uphold the joint declaration. We remain absolutely committed to monitoring and ensuring the faithful implementation of that document, and to the principle of one country, two systems. The joint declaration of 1984 is a legally binding treaty registered at the United Nations. It clearly applies to both signatories, remains in force, and is relevant to today’s Hong Kongers and those of future generations.

We have been unequivocal about our position on that issue both publicly, including in our six-monthly reports to Parliament, and in private with the Chinese Government.

We judge that one country, two systems has generally worked well. It provides Hong Kong with the essential foundations for success as a global financial centre and a prosperous world city. Those foundations are Hong Kong’s capitalist economic system, its high degree of autonomy, its system of common law and independent judiciary and the protection of rights and freedoms. To return to one thing that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said, I take seriously the three prongs of my responsibility as the Minister for Asia and the Pacific: prosperity; security, defence and intelligence; and human rights. Please be assured that there is and must be no trade-off between human rights, whether in Hong Kong or in any other part of the world, and any Brexit-related trade matters. I know that there will be ongoing debates in the House, but please be assured that that is my position as Minister and that of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Government’s most recent six-monthly report makes it clear that we cannot ignore the fact that important areas of the one country, two systems framework are coming under increasing pressure. However, I reassure the House that we consistently and unashamedly raise those concerns with the Chinese and the Hong Kong authorities. I appreciate that such engagement may not always be obvious or visible, although of course it is very obvious in the six-monthly reports, but be assured that those representations continue to be made.

Personally, I believe that more can often be achieved through quiet diplomatic engagement than through megaphone diplomacy, but we are willing to comment publicly and robustly where we feel that it is appropriate. For example, I raised our concerns about the pressure on one country, two systems during my visit to Beijing and Hong Kong last August, and I was encouraged to hear Chinese Ministers confirm their support for the doctrine. That support was echoed by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam in my discussions with her. She pledged to implement the principle of one country, two systems, to uphold the Basic Law and to safeguard the rule of law.

However, I also accept that confidence in that doctrine is being undermined by ever more frequent reports of mainland security officials operating in Hong Kong and continuing concerns raised about the exercise of some of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the joint declaration. Many people will have followed the media coverage last year when three high-profile pro-democracy activists, Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow, were sentenced to imprisonment. We were further concerned when we heard that the British national Ben Rogers had been denied entry to Hong Kong in October last year. He is a champion of democracy and human rights, well known to Members of all parties. The Prime Minister spoke about his case in the House, we summoned the Chinese ambassador to the Foreign Office to discuss it and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government raised the issue with the Hong Kong Secretary for Labour and Welfare during his visit to Hong Kong in November.

I wrote to the Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam setting out our position on all four of those cases. Her response was consistent with previous public comments made by the Hong Kong authorities on the issue. If the people of Hong Kong and the watching world are to have continued confidence in one country, two systems, it is vital that the high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Basic Law and guaranteed in international law by the joint declaration are respected. As I said earlier, we will not shy away from that. I know that the Prime Minister mentioned it when she met President Xi at the G20 summit in July, and as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland rightly pointed out, we will no doubt discuss it when the next visit takes place.1

Let me be clear: ongoing commitment to those doctrines is not interference by the west in Chinese affairs. Maintaining confidence in one country, two systems and the rule of law is crucial for both Hong Kong’s own interests and China’s, including the city’s role as a financing hub for the belt and road initiative. Our interest is also driven by our wish to see Hong Kong prosper well into the future. We firmly believe that Hong Kong’s economic system, which is uniquely trusted to bring huge new opportunities into China from all corners of the globe, will only flourish if its people enjoy the freedom and safeguards that will promote their talents and enterprise.

Turning to political reform, I welcome the Chief Executive’s commitment to addressing that challenge in Hong Kong, which was a focus of her policy address last October. As we have said and will continue to say in the six-monthly reports, we believe that political reform, including on universal suffrage and functional constituencies, will better equip Hong Kong to tackle the challenges that it faces, as well as giving the people of Hong Kong confidence for the future.

On independence, our position is also clear. We do not consider it to be a realistic option for Hong Kong. That is the other side of one country, two systems. Indeed, any move toward independence undermines the concept. Again, we will call that out, because we believe that the system as it stands is the best possible guarantor for Hong Kong’s long-term stability and prosperity.

As I have outlined, Hong Kong matters hugely to the UK, and not just because of our shared history. Hong Kong is also an important trade and investment partner, both bilaterally and due to its pivotal role as a gateway to the belt and road initiative. I am perhaps a little more optimistic than my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. Twenty years after the handover of Hong Kong to China, the UK’s commitment to the joint declaration and one country, two systems remains as robust as ever. I am very confident that the relationship between the UK and Hong Kong, a relationship that will also include China, will continue to deepen in the coming months and years to come.

Where we identify disagreements, such as in the case of Ben Rogers, we shall continue to raise our concerns. We shall continue to stress to the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities that for confidence in one country, two systems to be maintained, Hong Kong must enjoy the full measure of its high degree of autonomy and rule of law, as set out in the joint declaration and enshrined in the Basic Law.

5.57 pm

Fiona Bruce: I thank colleagues for contributing to this debate, and I thank those who have joined me in raising concerns about recent challenges to democracy and human rights in Hong Kong. I also thank the Minister for his considered response, and for the clear assurances that he has given of the UK Government’s ongoing commitment to ensuring that the principles, rights and freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration and the Basic Law are adhered to.

In speaking of such matters, I know that we all share a genuine concern for the wellbeing of the people of Hong Kong, for their flourishing future and for a positive relationship between our two countries. I hope that our deliberations will aid all those things.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered democracy in Hong Kong.

5.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Reassurance about the critical mass of the British Army in terms of incorporating reservists.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Many of us are calling for greater numbers of British troops and a greater frequency of rotational deployment of those troops to our key strategic NATO partners, especially Poland. I pay tribute to those British troops who have been sent to the Suwalki gap. Those things are not cheap, and that is why we need more spending on our defence budget.

Leo Docherty: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Some of what we have been discussing, such as the fundamental requirement for hard power that we can project around the world—the doctrine and force plan—was contained in the strategic defence and security review laid out in 2015. The concept of joint force 2025 was sound. It laid out that we need a war-fighting division of 50,000 soldiers, carrier-enabled power projection and a significant air group, including Typhoon and F-35. As a concept and a plan, it was sound. The problems with the SDSR 2015 were on two fronts. First, there were significant funding problems. The budget for SDSR 2015 was predicated to a degree on significant internal savings of £11 billion that had to be made by the Ministry of Defence. When that is done by cutting inefficiencies and waste, that is good, but when things such as training and the defence estate are cut, it is probably not so good.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On the issue of the defence estate, Imphal barracks is due to close in 2031, yet it is the jewel in the crown for those coming to York and in particular for their families. Is there not an impact on recruitment and retention from the closure of barracks such as Imphal?

Leo Docherty: I am sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s point, and I know the Minister is particularly well positioned to respond to it. The other difficulty with SDSR 2015 was the depreciation of sterling and the ongoing fluctuation of Trident within the MOD budget, which have caused considerable problems. Taken in the round, that means that the MOD budget has a black hole of £2 billion or thereabouts. That is why we are here today. That black hole has been driving the discussion about possible cuts. I would like to lay it clearly on record that I think all of us in the Chamber agree that any form of capability cuts is an entirely untenable prospect that we should resist.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate at this critical time. On resources, does he agree that given the recent stark warning from the Chief of the General Staff on a resurgent Russia, we in this House have a role in deterrence, and that includes deterring the pinstripe warriors of the Treasury from leaving us without sufficient resources to fund our defence adequately?

Leo Docherty: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is our duty to make it clear to the Treasury that there is a large cohort of Members of Parliament
who are absolutely determined to ensure that the Ministry of Defence has a sound financial settlement and is properly resourced.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in articulating his argument, it is important to stress that he has the support of all Members?

Leo Docherty: I absolutely acknowledge that. Defence is not really a party political issue; it is an issue of national security, and I am heartened by the fact that Members from all parts of the House are here engaging in this debate.

The second set of problems with the plan laid out in SDSR 2015 relates to timing. As the name implies, joint force 2025 is some years away. We have a capability gap, and delivering that capability is some years off. It is also important to remember that this is not the generation of a new capability. The force laid out in SDSR 2015 is essentially making up for ground lost in 2010, when the MOD suffered a 8% reduction in budget and our fighting power was reduced by about 25%. We have to put things in context: having a deployable war-fighting division as laid out in SDSR 2015 is nothing new. We deployed a division of 45,000 soldiers to Iraq in 2003 and a division of 53,000 men in Operation Granby at the Gulf war in 1991. We are essentially making up for ground that we lost in 2010, and it is important to bear that in mind. It is also important to bear in mind that with joint force 2025, there is not much fat in the system—it is quite a bare-bones approach.

We have to reconcile ourselves to the situation we find ourselves in today, and I would be interested in the Minister’s comments. My judgment is that we cannot credibly claim to be able to deploy a war-fighting division within six months. That is some years off. We also lack the air defence that is particularly important to protect our enhanced force presence in Estonia. The Minister will perhaps mention that.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on this timely debate. I am grateful to him for mentioning air defence. He will appreciate that the Typhoon force will not be able to operate effectively without the tanker force that was based at Brize Norton in my constituency. He mentioned the Russian threat, which almost weekly we now see, as we did in the 1980s, probing our air defences. Does he agree that it is essential to make a cool, dispassionate assessment of that threat and make sure that our capacity and capability match it, rather than to reduce the threat to match available resources?

Leo Docherty: I absolutely agree. The response has to be threat-based, and the review must not be a sticking plaster. We need a large-scale solution for what is a large-scale problem.

To conclude my remarks on the SDSR 2015, there is also a gap in the extent to which we have the capability to co-ordinate artillery fire with cutting-edge technology, which was mentioned by CGS on Monday. The Russians have done that very effectively by co-ordinating long-range artillery fire with unmanned aerial vehicles. Furthermore, one of our big current gaps is that we do not exercise on any scale whatever. In their Zapad exercises, the Russians exercise north of 70,000 troops, whereas we in this country and across the NATO alliance are nowhere near that. That is a critical capability gap that we need to resolve.

A lot of what I have mentioned is tied up in CGS’s stark warnings on Monday. I look forward to the Minister offering reassurance on some of the points, particularly with regard to our forward presence in Estonia.

So where do we stand now? It is good news that the review that is under way has been restructured. We expect an announcement today from the Secretary of State for Defence to indicate that the defence component of the review will be extracted and given a little longer to run. That is a good development. In my judgment, the review that was under way, led by the National Security Adviser, was essentially misconceived. It was supposed to be initiated because of an increase in threat, but at the same time it was supposed to be fiscally neutral, so it was inherently problematic from the very start, and I am glad that that restructuring has developed.

I am also pleased that the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), has indicated his support for an increased overall defence budget moving up to 2.5%. We have to see this slightly longer review, which I think will run into the summer, as an opportunity for a wholesale refunding of defence and the achievement of a proper long-term financial settlement for our military. I am confident that our Secretary of State gets that. I hope the Minister will reassure us that that is the case, and that Ministers see this as an opportunity for a long-term solution.

It is important that MPs, like all of us in this Chamber, make it clear to the Treasury that we insist on the proper resourcing of defence. That is important for a number of reasons, not least because I, like every Conservative Member, stood on a manifesto that committed us to maintaining the size of our military. Page 41 of the Conservative party manifesto commits us to maintaining the size of our armed forces. Apart from the politics, it is a national duty to achieve that.

We have to get the politics right. We cannot simply demand more money for the Ministry of Defence. We have to continue to insist on the MOD achieving efficiencies and best practice, including things such as competitive procurement. I am encouraged by the detail in the national shipbuilding strategy that sets upper limits on expenditure. Also, we need to consider seriously the removal of expenditure on Trident from the MOD budget.

In simple terms, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that a world-class military cannot be bought cheaply. I conclude by saying that we should see this as investment, not spending. This is not money that just gets spent to no consequence. Spending on our military is an investment in our national profile globally. A strong national military does not simply defend us militarily domestically and internationally. It secures our global reputation. It is a fundamental enabler of our foreign policy, our humanitarian effort around the world and our passing global trade, so we get a phenomenal return on that investment. Members who have travelled around the world in connection with the military know that the
British armed forces have, without doubt, a phenomenal global reputation for higher standards of excellence. We should recognise that as an asset, not just a cost.

I finish by repeating a quote from Trotsky that was mentioned by CGS. I am not given to quoting Trotsky in this place, but Trotsky rightly said:

“You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

A properly resourced military is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity. Given our heritage and our history, I am confident that we can rise to the challenge.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Seven people wish to speak and wind-ups need to begin at 10.30 am. I will leave you to work out the maths for yourselves. If anybody takes too long, I will have to impose a time limit on the remaining speakers.

9.46 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this debate, especially with such fortuitous timing. There have been many debates on defence in the past couple of weeks and Members of all parties who believe that our military is best served by having a strong and adequately funded force have made an extraordinary effort. I will be brief today because yesterday I spoke at length about the national shipbuilding strategy, frigates, the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries and the future of our sovereign defence capability. There is no appetite anywhere in the House for further defence cuts. I am pleased that that sentiment seems to have infected the Ministry of Defence in its funding battle with the Treasury.

The Defence Committee’s excellent “Shifting the goalposts?” report showed that the previous Labour Government spent on average 2.5% of GDP on defence, not falling below 2.3%. Lots of Labour Members, and indeed Conservative Members, would like to see a return to that level of spending relatively swiftly. It is important that we match the funding for defence to the threats that we face, rather than match the spreadsheets to the number of ships. That is an important distinction and the argument has been made many times.

The fiscally neutral element of the national security capability review is an anchor that has dragged this debate down, but it has enabled Members on both sides of the Chamber to share the valid concerns of the defence communities about the potential for cuts, be they speculation or actual potential. We must not fall into that trap of spreading fear because morale is already suffering in our armed forces. It is important that we support those people who are serving now and who want to serve, so they understand that a role and a future in our armed forces is a career to be proud of, and that their service is recognised and valued.

The potential postponement of the cuts is welcome news. I welcome the chance that the hon. Member for Aldershot mentioned for further consideration of the future shape, role and capabilities of our armed forces. This is a moment for us to regroup and refocus our efforts to provide a clear challenge and direction for Ministers to take forward in their discussions with the Treasury, and to be clear about the role we want the armed forces to play in future. How will we support them through adequate training and resources and, importantly, how will we support them after their time in uniform has come to an end?

Plymouth has been at the centre of much of the speculation. I am grateful to the Minister for taking the time to listen to the concerns from Plymouth about our amphibious ships, Albion and Bulwark, which are due to come out of service in 2033 and 2034—I hope those dates remain. He also knows about the importance of ensuring that we have an adequate number of capable frigates base-ported in Devonport, and of looking carefully at the capability of our helicopter carriers. HMS Ocean has now come out of service. Members from across the House will recognise that she served with distinction over her career, most recently in response to the hurricanes in the Caribbean. That was a fitting last deployment, showing the real value of that ship and her crew to the Royal Navy and to our friends and allies abroad.

It is also right to pay tribute to all those people who are not elected—members of the public, armed forces and veterans—who have used their voices loudly and proudly in the last couple of months to speak up for our armed forces. If more of our communities raised defence on the doorstep, as they have done over the last few weeks when I have been canvassing in Plymouth, the debate over the last couple of years would have been very different. The Plymouth Herald and the cross-party Plymouth City Council campaign to fly the flag for Devonport has been one such example. There are many other examples from around the country of local communities galvanising and coming together to say that the armed forces are important, not just for jobs, but for heritage, feel, community and identity. We should shout loudly and proudly, especially in my part of the world in Plymouth, about the contribution of the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines.

The Minister might give us good news towards the end of the debate, and the Secretary of State might do the same later, but I am encouraged that there has been such a strong outpouring of support for the armed forces. I hope that that will continue as we regroup and refocus to make sure that the tussle with the Treasury produces better funding for defence.

9.51 am

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). There can be no one with a more appropriate seat to discuss the size and strength of the British armed forces, and I congratulate him on his very knowledgeable and excellent speech.

I want to say a few words about recruiting, which is of course the lifeblood of our armed forces, and most especially about recruiting to the Army. It is not an idle boast that the British Army is, man for man, probably the best fighting force in the world. In the Falklands, the Gulf, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and, most recently, Iraq and Afghanistan, both our enemies and their allies have been deeply impressed by the fitness, determination, courage, professionalism and, most especially, humanity of our armed forces.
The answer is simple and not, I suspect, much understood outside the armed forces and those who have been lucky enough to serve in them. In no other army in the world can a soldier depend on the men around him in the way that he can in the British Army. From Waterloo to Alamein, from Goose Green to the Euphrates, from Bosnia to Basra and Helmand, British soldiers and commandos have proved time again that they can face tremendous odds and triumph. A soldier will likely say that the key to that confidence is their discipline and training. It is therefore a matter of the first importance that the system that produces young men and women of that calibre must not be altered in such a way that it will produce only pale imitations of what is required.

So far the Army has held the line, but only just. It is a constant battle for all three services to fight off politically correct notions that are, rightly, anathema to the ethos of the armed forces. They require a very high standard of personal conduct, respect for the law, teamwork, cohesion, trust, and a highly developed sense of duty. After training, these men and women are no ordinary people, and they may well be asked to do extraordinary things. For the soldiers of today and tomorrow, as for their forebears, warfare will continue to represent the ultimate physical and moral challenge. They may have to take part in a terrifying contest of wills that inevitably leads to death, terror, bloodshed and destruction. They will encounter extreme danger, in rapidly changing circumstances, amid conditions of chaos and uncertainty. Their skills and the quality of their leadership, weapons and equipment will be severely tested.

Such operations can be sustained only by highly trained men and women, motivated by a service ethos and absolute confidence in their training, by pride in their traditions and institutions, by comradeship and an exceptional level of team spirit, by the emotional, intellectual and moral qualities that lead people to put their lives on the line, and of course by loyalty, patriotism, and an enduring belief in essentially British values and an unshakeable determination to defend them.

I remind the Minister of what Lord Wavell said in his famous lecture on generalship. His words are very apposite. He said that:

"in the last resort, the end of all military training, the settling of all policy, the ordering of all weaponry and all that goes into the making of the armed forces is that the deciding factor in battle will always be this: That sooner or later, private so-and-so will, of his own free will and in the face of great danger, uncertainty and chaos have to advance to his front in the face of the enemy."

If all that goes wrong, after all the training, intensive preparation, provision of equipment and vast expenditure, the system has failed. So far it has not failed. The armed forces have never let us down, but the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the House must see to it that the state does not let them down by failing to resource them adequately for the hugely demanding tasks that are placed upon them. Although I am all for the Army adapting to some vaguely woolly notions if it really feels it has to, it is important that we continue to get the outstanding young men and women whom we are so lucky to have in our armed forces, and that the training does indeed prepare them for what might come.

The Ministry of Defence made a huge mistake when it let the contract for recruiting to Capita, which has made a real pig’s ear of it. It was done much better and much more efficiently when the Ministry of Defence retained recruiting offices all over the country. They had vast local knowledge and were staffed by officers and senior non-commissioned officers, who were highly experienced. They took the greatest possible trouble with the selection of recruits and were better able to guide those recruits towards well-thought-out careers. It is much more effective for the armed forces to leave recruiting to the military staff who actually know what is wanted.

I conclude by saying this: I do not mean to sound like a stick in the mud, but touchy-feely political correctness has absolutely no role whatever in the British Army. The services have so much to offer young men and women, many of whom join up to acquire very valuable skills, but all of whom, in their basic training and beyond, require courage, toughness, resilience and skill at arms. They are truly some of our very finest young men and women. I accept that the Army must do what it thinks it needs to do to get people to join, but I think it ought to be extremely cautious about the message that it sends outside.

9.57 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing the debate. It seems that we are getting used to seeing the same faces in debates on defence, calling on the Government to do the same thing time and again. This matter has to be taken seriously—we are at tipping point.

Any organisation that is struggling to recruit and retain staff must consider what is going on. We are seeing the effects of austerity across many areas, including health, education and defence. It has an impact on the equipment, the service that can be delivered, and ultimately the people. Despite the cuts, we want the same good outcomes. We want our population to have good health services, excellent education, and well-organised defence with critical capabilities.

We have not reduced the demands on the armed forces. We still want to deploy overseas. The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) talked about our well-trained personnel. Of course we want them to remain the best-trained personnel in the world, but operational stretch in the armed forces means that, although our expectations remain high, with fewer personnel, the demands on those still serving are increasing year after year.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot on securing this debate. It is not only the men and women of our armed services who suffer from operational stretch, but also their families. That might very well be a deterrent to many of the young men and women choosing a career in the armed forces.

Carol Monaghan: Mine was one of those families who experienced operational stretch and know first hand the impact it has. Many people serving in the armed forces have to make the decision to leave simply because remaining is no longer sustainable for their personal life. We know from the continuous attitude...
survey that the retention crisis is not simply about pay. Although that does contribute, the crisis is about the value we place on our armed forces personnel. Housing, family life, leave entitlement and so on all contribute to the retention problems.

Scotland faces eight base closures. What message is that giving to those who are stationed there? Are they feeling valued? Is their service being recognised? As the crisis deepens, more and more personnel will leave. These are highly trained individuals and have skills that are in such high demand in civilian life. There are many companies just waiting to snap them up when they walk out.

We have called on a number of occasions for an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing, which is the norm for many countries, such as Ireland, Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Germany. Recognised representation is a key way for the UK Government to better understand the needs and requirements of our armed forces, their families and the wider armed forces communities. A representative body like the Police Federation would be a voice for both personnel and veterans. It would tell them that their concerns are being taken seriously and that they are valued, and would give them a means of liaising with the Government.

The Tory party bills itself as the champion of the armed forces, but the chronic underinvestment simply does not match those claims. The Scottish National party is currently organising a commission, talking to members of the armed forces and finding out what it is they require and what terms and conditions would make a difference to them. I hope that, when we publish the findings, the UK Government will act on the recommendations.

Ultimately, glossy adverts cannot solve this problem. Serious investment is required. A complete overhaul of the terms and conditions of members of the armed forces has to be considered, including pay and housing, and the impact on the family and children’s education. It is commendable that so many Tory Members are in the Chamber—I know they champion the cause—but unless the defence budget becomes serious and the Chancellor opens up his purse, there will be no improvement. The Chamber—I know they champion the cause—but unless the defence budget becomes serious and the Chancellor opens up his purse, there will be no improvement. The

hon. Member for Aldershot suggested—we have heard the suggestion many times—that Trident should be removed. I would say it is better still to just remove Trident from any budget, and we can start looking at serious defence that continues to have critical capabilities.

10.4 am

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on a very well informed speech, although I am not faintly surprised, as he was a serving officer in the Scots Guards. As I always do, I remind all present, for the record, that my daughter is a serving officer in the armed forces.

I come from a family not unconnected with the military. My brother-in-law served in the Scots Guards, possibly with the hon. Member for Aldershot. My father served in the 14th Army, led by Field Marshal Slim, a man for whom he lost no admiration to his dying day. In recent years, I discovered to my utter astonishment that my mother worked not unadjacent to Alan Turing. That was a secret she kept until very late in her life.

I am a great believer that we learn from history, and I make no apologies for going into history again. It is something I do increasingly frequently in this place. I live in Easter Ross, up in the Highlands north of Inverness. In Easter Ross, there is a cluster of four aerodromes or air bases, call them what you will: Tain, Alness, Evanton and Fearn. One might say that it was the grandfather of the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) who led the charge to see off the threat that was rapidly developing from Nazi Germany—it is quite true. One might say that it was late in the day that those bases were built, but they were, and they were built in time to defend this country. Today, going there, it is clear just how big an undertaking it was to put the bases in place, and one can see the commitment and courage behind the decisions taken in the 1930s. If we had not done that there and in other parts of the UK, we know what would have happened: we would be speaking a very odd dialect of English today in this place.

**Bob Stewart**: Like Scots!

**Jamie Stone**: I shall ignore the comment from the hon. and gallant Gentleman.

With your forbearance, Ms Dorries, I would like to tell an anecdote. On 5 May 1945, Dönitz gave orders for the German U-boats and surface fleet to surrender. The U-boats were ordered to fly black flags to indicate their surrender. On 8 May, three days after that order, U-534 was on the surface off the coast of Denmark and was attacked by two Liberator bombers. U-534 shot down E for Edward from 547 Squadron, Leuchars, but G for George got that U-boat and sank her. G for George from 86 Squadron was from RAF Tain, near my home town of Tain. That is a fact that even local people at home do not know. It is worth putting on the record.

We have heard in previous weeks and today about the threat from Russia. It is absolutely obvious what is going on there. We know that China is building bases and developing its forces; Members have mentioned that. As I mentioned in the main Chamber two weeks ago, and as others have said—I am sure that the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) will touch on this—our Navy was mostly tied up over Christmas. What a tragic contrast to the great days of the Royal Navy! We know that we have to spend the money. Members in all parts of the Chamber plead for that money to be spent. As I have said before, it is a great honour to associate my party with that sentiment.

I close with a point I have made before in this place. The great British general public are not stupid. They know perfectly well what is going on. They take great pride in their armed forces. Everyone in my home town is extremely proud of everyone who has served in the colours, be it the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy or the Army. They know and recognise the necessity of spending the money. As and when the Chancellor reaches deep into his purse and comes out with the extra millions we so badly need—it is more than millions; it is verging on the billions—he will have the support of the British public, and he will have praise and his place in history.
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and to be called to speak in this debate. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this timely debate. He walks in the footsteps of many of his predecessors in being a stout defender of our armed forces. I have very happy memories of my own service, starting in his constituency in New Normandy barracks and Normandy barracks with 2 Para and 1 Para. He has done us a great service today in providing an opportunity for an important debate about the size and structure of our armed forces.

It is also, as always, a great pleasure to see the Minister in his place. I know that he takes these matters incredibly seriously. It is a reality of parliamentary procedure that questions and debates relating to defence are responded to by Ministers from the Ministry of Defence. Perhaps we could employ our collective nous to see whether at some point in the not-too-distant future we can find a way of gathering like-minded colleagues together to make some of these points and put some of these concerns to the Minister’s colleagues in other Departments, namely the Treasury and the Cabinet Office.

Like all hon. Members present, I am constantly inspired by the skill and commitment of our servicemen and women, who serve our country often in the most difficult circumstances. My concern, though—and this takes us to the nub of the debate—is that very soon there may not be enough of them to do what is required, and not only will they suffer from being over-exposed and overstretched but, as a result of having fewer personnel in our armed forces, the UK will be less secure.

With that in mind and with an eye to the forthcoming defence review, I want to draw attention to a few of the reasons why, in recent years, the importance of numbers has been downplayed. First, there is a misunderstanding about the threat environment. In recent years and months, the eyes of Westminster and Whitehall have been focused on cyber-threats and the broader concepts of soft power and security. It is important to look at such emerging threats, but we run the risk of that focus coming at the expense of a focus on the conventional threats that we still face. At a time when the UK is under greater threat than at any point since the cold war, that focus has resulted in the Government considering reducing the personnel in our armed forces, the UK will be less secure.

As hon. Members are aware, the risk associated with those low numbers is often hidden behind the term “capability”. Every time people voice a concern about size, what tends to follow is a response about technology, structures or training, and someone telling them that in the 21st century, less in fact means more. The truth, however, is that even in the 21st century, less still means less, and quantity still has a quality all of its own. I am certainly not denying that new equipment and structures can mitigate the loss of numbers, and it is of course true that technology is a force multiplier, and that well-trained troops are better than poorly trained ones, but it is equally true that there is an irreducible number of people that a credible Army cannot go below.

My greater concern, however, is focused on why those misunderstandings of both threat and capability occur, and why they are allowed to take root. In my view, the answer is threefold: poor processes, a lack of expertise and undue emphasis on money. For too long, we have allowed the loud whispers of Whitehall generalists, often in the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, to drown out the voices of subject matter experts, be they civilian or military. That must stop.

Due respect must be given to those who understand hard power, hard security and the application of conventional force. Similarly, any review process must be done correctly, beginning with analysis of the world in which we live, including the threats posed by it and the role we want in it—not with a list of the savings that must be made, and where the Cabinet Office and Treasury think they should come from. As such, I very much hope that the Minister and his Department use any forthcoming review to re-emphasise to those in Whitehall the importance of both strategy and of specialists. If they do not, I fear that we run the risk that any review may be no more than a fig leaf for yet another round of Treasury-inspired cuts.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), my colleague on the Select Committee, for securing this debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that the potential defence review is an appalling added pressure on our armed forces, because they simply do not know what will happen to them in the weeks and months ahead? That is simply unfair, and the Government need to get on with it and tell us what will happen.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. She and all hon. Members will be most welcome to join me later today when we play host to soldiers from the Yorkshire Regiment. That will be a good opportunity to listen to the concerns of soldiers. She is right, however, that there is significant uncertainty about the future of our armed forces.

I understand that the Defence Secretary will make a statement in the House today; from the recent debate in the main Chamber he will know the strength of feeling across the House. There is a challenge for all of us who believe that the size and structure of our armed forces are such that they should not be reduced further, and he should understand—I hope the Minister will take this away—the significant support from Members throughout the House for the position that we want the Secretary of State to take: hold firm to the line that we cannot reduce our manpower.

Ruth Smeeth: I am sorry for making another intervention, and I thank my hon. Friend for taking it. I believe that the Secretary of State has decided not to make a statement to the House this afternoon.

Dan Jarvis: I am sorry to hear that, if it is the case. We will hear about that from the Minister later.

To conclude, emerging cyber and information threats have not and will not result in the decline of conventional threats; the opening up of new fronts does not mean the closing down of old ones; and threat mitigation is not a zero-sum game. As such, I very much hope that the Government will ensure that we do not further reduce the number of men and women who serve in our armed forces with such distinction. I very much look forward
to working with Members across the House to ensure that the Government do not make any further cuts, specifically to the size and structure of our armed forces.

10.17 am

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries.

With yesterday’s shipbuilding strategy debate and the expected statement from the Secretary of State, which is now in doubt, this week is turning into a bit of a defence-fest. This is an important debate at a time when defence is very much in the headlines, and I thank the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for introducing it.

The situation is complex, but the bottom line is the significant drop in the size of the armed forces since this Administration came to power in 2010. There are many ways in which the figures and numbers can be played around with, but the broad, overall figures suggest that, on 1 April 2010, the full-time trained and untrained total strength of the UK armed forces was 197,820, and that by 1 April 2017, that total stood at 157,247, which is a drop of 21%. The number of full-time trained and untrained personnel serving in the Royal Navy was 39,310 in 2010 and 33,230 in 2017, which represents a drop of 16%. The figures for the Army and the Royal Air Force are equally depressing.

According to the most recent figures, which cover the past 12 months, the net outflow from all three services has been 2,740 personnel. If numbers across all three services are even to remain neutral, we need to attract some 15,000 new recruits every year just to stand still. That is a tall order and has to be achieved against a background of increasing cuts. Between 2010 and 2015, we had a real-terms cut of £8 billion, or 18% of the overall budget. Although this Administration are trying to reverse that trend, a lot of the damage has already been done and has been made worse by slow, delayed decision making, cloudy strategic thinking and poor value for our tax pound in some procurement projects. The very fact that we will hopefully get a statement today—according to The Times, another defence review will be pushed into the long grass for perhaps another six months—tells its own story about this Administration and the legacy they are grappling with. It is a legacy of their own making.

That does not have a positive impact on recruitment and retention at a time when skilled engineers and technicians can find that there is more money and a more stable family life in industry and commerce rather than in serving in the armed forces. A recent report from the pay review body highlighted that people were joining up not for a career, but to be trained to a high standard before moving on to industry. They may be “made in the Royal Navy”, but they are progressing their career and enjoying family life in civvy street.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): It was a very good-natured debate, but the Scottish National party can never resist. What assessment has the hon. Gentleman made of retention given that 45% of service personnel in Scotland will be paying a higher rate of tax than their equivalents in England?

Douglas Chapman: I will be happy to answer that when I come to that point in my speech. The armed forces continuous attitude survey of 2016 reported that the morale of “self, Unit and Service” has also decreased, with 61% of serving personnel thinking that morale was low, and 9% perceiving that it was high. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned that. Ensuring that retention is high up the Government’s agenda is a serious matter.

Housing for serving personnel is a long-running sore. The Minister is honest in his desire for improvements in housing quality and repairs. Will he give assurances that the collapse of Carillion changes nothing for forces families in the short term, but that it will change everything to do with build quality and the maintenance of homes in the long term?

I will surprise the Minister by ending on three positive points. We invite the Government to scrap the public sector pay cap and to follow the Scottish Government’s lead by introducing a pay rise of up to 3% for public sector workers. That would include all armed forces personnel and would have a positive impact on retention and morale. In Scotland, many lower-paid personnel will also receive a tax cut, as Scotland becomes the lowest taxed part of the UK after April this year. I recommend that the Minister look very seriously at the commission headed up my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) about pay conditions and a better family life for serving personnel.

Finally, the small nation of Denmark decided last week to increase her military spend by some 20%, to help to meet new threats and to continue her international obligations. If a small, independent country of 5 million people can increase its defence spend by that amount, why cannot the UK?

10.23 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who is a fellow member of the Defence Committee, on bringing this debate to Westminster Hall, and on being a doughty fighter in the Docherty clan and not being feart in pulling his punches when necessary in this type of debate.

Yesterday’s announcement about the security review seemed slightly inevitable, although I should put on the record my pleasure that the Government seem to have finally caved in to what I assume is cross-party pressure for a proper look at the defence and security budget. I noticed from his speech this week that that position was shared by the Chief of the General Staff.

Of the range of possibilities next year, one of the main issues we should be very careful about is what we wish for, crucially in respect of Brexit and its impact on the Treasury accounts. It seems incredible to me that most of the doughty champions of the armed forces want the UK to push ahead with a form of Brexit that is damaging to the economy, and therefore to the Treasury’s receipts that sustain the armed forces. The recent Defence Committee report on defence acquisition and procurement showed that financial headwinds, particularly the dollar exchange rate, have caused many problems in sustaining sovereign capability—the hon. Member for Aldershot alluded to that.
As ever, the men and women of our armed forces bear the brunt. Despite widespread support in the Chamber to lift the public sector pay cap, the Government have kept it—my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) mentioned that a moment ago. That has meant that those in uniform have taken a real-terms wage cut. Most of the projections leaked to the press for future adjustments would make yet more cuts to the Army of the kind not seen since Napoleon was a lad. The Government will find allies across the entire House if they lift the public sector pay cap.

One part of the defence budget—the deterrent—usually does not dare to speak its name, although taking it out of the Ministry of Defence was mentioned. Many of us agree that it should probably be taken out of the defence budget, but that would not suddenly make £205 billion appear in the equipment plan, just as Brexit did not mean that £350 million a week appeared for the national health service. Politics on the most basic level is about choices. I find it increasingly difficult to hear Members across the House call for preserving the size of our armed forces, argue for preserving certain capabilities and beseech the Government to put more in the pot, without even acknowledging that there is one part of the budget that is uncapped and, as the hon. Member for Aldershot said, out of control.

The Minister for Defence Procurement confirmed to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) in a parliamentary question in November that any review is off the table. Whatever it is called, a modernising defence review will have to find money to pay for a procurement pipeline that includes Astute submarines, F-35 fighters, Type 26 frigates and Ajax vehicles. It will find its bandwidth considerably squeezed the more the budget keeps rising. I challenge any of us to read last year’s National Audit Office report on the equipment plan and dispute those facts. The continuous at-sea deterrent that supposedly keeps us safe every day is failing if it makes us less capable in so many other defence areas.

Bob Stewart: May I point out to the hon. Gentleman that those of us who were in Germany for many years took great succour from the fact that we had a nuclear deterrent? People like me and other Members who possibly would have had to fight the Warsaw pact or the Russians were much comforted by the fact that they might not dare to fight us because of the nuclear deterrent, and therefore that our lives would be preserved. That is the link between the nuclear deterrent and conventional forces.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I have much respect for the hon. Gentleman but we disagree on the deterrent. The point I am trying to make is that a decision must be made about the type of investment that we require in the armed forces. This is a debate about armed forces personnel. On this position I disagree with him.

The “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015” said: “The Royal Navy delivers our nuclear deterrent, projects our maritime power and provides world-class amphibious forces.” It would be unrealistic of us to expect the Queen Elizabeth class carriers to be withdrawn from service. The current First Sea Lord has been presented with a scenario that his predecessor described as “a choice between having his left arm cut off or his right arm cut off”.

When he spoke to the Committee last year.

As we entertain the scenario of downgrading the status of an iconic capability such as the Royal Marines, whether by merging it with the Parachute Regiment or by removing its ability to conduct contested landings, we need to ask ourselves whether it is really worth preserving the deterrent. I do not expect most Members to change their minds overnight or at all, but the lack of practical debate—Government Members do not say in public what I know many of them say in private—does not bode well for honesty in the formation of defence policy.

Let me end on what I hope is a point of consensus. I acknowledge that there is not one person here who does not have the best interests of the armed forces at heart. I have an armed forces family. I praise in particular my colleagues on the Defence Committee, who have followed those interests doggedly whenever possible and pursued the MOD for its failings, without fear or favour. I am glad to say that, if there is one positive about yesterday’s announcement from Main Building, it is that the Defence Committee’s work seems to be working for a change.

Mark Lancaster rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am not going to take an intervention from the Minister because he will have the chance to sum up. I want to address something he said earlier about terms and conditions affecting recruitment and retention. Let us look at where the evidence lies, let us fast-forward to 1 October 2017, when the Regular force in Scotland stood at 9,970. The Government fail to change their minds overnight or at all, but the lack of practical debate—Government Members do not say in public what I know many of them say in private—does not bode well for honesty in the formation of defence policy.

Let me end on what I hope is a point of consensus. I acknowledge that there is not one person here who does not have the best interests of the armed forces at heart. I have an armed forces family. I praise in particular my colleagues on the Defence Committee, who have followed those interests doggedly whenever possible and pursued the MOD for its failings, without fear or favour. I am glad to say that, if there is one positive about yesterday’s announcement from Main Building, it is that the Defence Committee’s work seems to be working for a change.

10.30 am

Let us look at the numbers. In their manifesto, the Conservatives committed to an Army of 82,000. In Scotland, on 15 April 2014, the then Defence Secretary, who is now Chancellor, promised that “we will actually be increasing the size of our defence presence in Scotland…from a Regular force of some 11,000 personnel today, to 12,500 by 2020.”

Let us look at where the evidence lies, let us fast-forward to 1 October 2017, when the Regular force in Scotland stood at 9,970. The Government fail to change their minds overnight or at all, but the lack of practical debate—Government Members do not say in public what I know many of them say in private—does not bode well for honesty in the formation of defence policy.

Let me end on what I hope is a point of consensus. I acknowledge that there is not one person here who does not have the best interests of the armed forces at heart. I have an armed forces family. I praise in particular my colleagues on the Defence Committee, who have followed those interests doggedly whenever possible and pursued the MOD for its failings, without fear or favour. I am glad to say that, if there is one positive about yesterday’s announcement from Main Building, it is that the Defence Committee’s work seems to be working for a change.

Mark Lancaster rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am not going to take an intervention from the Minister because he will have the chance to sum up. I want to address something he said earlier about terms and conditions affecting recruitment and retention. Let us look at where the evidence lies,
starting with armed forces pay. We know that pay is an issue for members of the armed forces because the evidence tells us that. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body noted:

“In general, we heard about the lack of trust in the employer to maintain the offer in future, and an increasing feeling that people were not joining the services for a career, but to obtain training and skills before moving on to alternative (and possibly better paid) employment elsewhere.”

That is compounded by the public sector pay freeze, which, when inflation is taken into account, is a cut. Army privates who, on a salary of £21,000, are among the lowest-paid members of the armed forces, have had a cut of £400 per year. The Minister should look at the evidence in front of him—this is well documented and well researched—rather than simply pluck evidence out of thin air.

Mark Lancaster: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, I am going to finish my point. The Minister’s comments on tax were not based on any research or evidence. They were not based on anything beyond what he seems to think the issue might be. He is willing to ignore all the evidence, including the evidence I have just cited. That is before we even get to the appalling state of military housing, the risible pension increases that the Government have offered to members of the armed forces and their families, and the dreadful roll-out of the armed forces covenant in some parts of the country.

SNP Members make no apology for the fact that those who earn tens and tens of thousands of pounds—way beyond the average salary—may pay a bit more tax. Frontline squaddies in Scotland, who make up the vast majority of those serving in Scotland, will pay less tax than their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. I am happy with my Government’s policy of putting more money into the pockets of people in the armed forces, while the Minister’s Government continue to rob them day in, day out.

Mark Lancaster rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Minister will have 10 minutes to sum up, so I am not going to take an intervention from him.

Let me end with this. I am dismayed that we will not have a statement today on the splitting up of the security capability review, about which there has been one of the most unedifying public spats I have ever seen in politics. This country seriously needs to look at how it finances its Defence Ministers are not continuously chasing their

10.35 am

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing the debate and on the way he presented his arguments. I also thank Members on both sides of the Chamber for contributing to the debate, which, by and large, has been consensual. I think there is a unity of purpose among the Members who expressed their views.

Our starting point has to be the personnel deficits of 3.5% in the Royal Navy, 6.3% in the Army and 5.8% in the Royal Air Force. That must be a cause for concern for us all. There are problems with recruitment, as the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said—I share his views about Capita entirely—and there is concern about retention in the armed forces. We all know about the problems with accommodation and pay. Those concerns must be addressed.

We are also worried about the gaping black hole of between £20 billion and £30 billion in the Ministry of Defence budget over the next decade. We all know why that has happened: there has been a lack of coherent management in the MOD and we have bought a huge amount off the shelf from the United States of America while the pound has depreciated. We all know, too, that it is completely unrealistic for the MOD to call for yet more efficiency savings that cannot be achieved. That is all happening at a time when this country is increasingly under threat from terrorism and, as the Chief of the General Staff said in his speech at the Royal United Services Institute last week, from an assertive Russia.

There is a widespread view that defence expenditure must therefore increase. Many peers in the other place have expressed that view, and it has been forcefully expressed by the military. Earlier this week, the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), called for our military expenditure to increase by £7.7 billion to 2.5% of GDP. He issued a chilling warning:

“Our security is at stake.”

My view is that defence expenditure should be increased to at least the level achieved by the last Labour Government, yet we are seeing more and more cuts. Earlier this month, it was leaked that the MOD is considering three options. The first involves a personnel cut of 14,250. Under that option, marines would be cut by about 2,000 and the RAF would lose 1,250 personnel. Fifty-nine cap badges would be lost. There would be cuts to the Navy, to the Air Force and to the equipment of the Army. The other two options are no better.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Those figures may well be true, but the hon. Gentleman has to deal with the fact that, regularly, 50% of Army personnel leave before they reach the age of 30. How does he propose to deal with that problem?

Wayne David: A whole host of measures need to be put in place. Recruitment is an important issue, but so is retention. Pay, accommodation, respect for the armed forces and people’s prospects after they leave all have a material bearing on retention. The right hon. Gentleman is correct to raise that point.

The Defence Secretary said that the proposed cuts are unacceptable, and he is correct. As we know, he is having a battle with the Treasury for money, and Labour will be firmly on his side in that battle. We are also aware that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ellwood) has threatened to resign if these cuts are imposed. I support and respect that. If the Minister decides to issue a similar statement, we would support that as well.
Finally, we were led to believe that there would be a separation of the cyber capability and defence aspects of the national security and capability review, and that the Defence Secretary would make an announcement on that today. We have since been told that that will not happen. Will the Minister say when that statement will be made to the House, because it is of tremendous importance? When it was established, the national security and capability review was to be conducted on the basis of fiscal neutrality. The suspicion, therefore, is that moneys could be taken from Peter, the defence budget, to pay Paul, the cyber capability budget, which is totally unacceptable. We believe that there should be an increase in capabilities all round. This has been a good debate in both content and tone, and I hope that the Ministry of Defence will stand firm in its battle with the Treasury. If it fights for extra resources, the Opposition will be on its side, together with many Conservative Back Benchers and Members across the House.

10.41 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and I declare an interest as a serving member of the Army Reserve. I confirm that I have no intention of resigning from the Army Reserve, as that would not help numbers at all.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this important and timely debate. It follows a number of other debates on similar themes in recent months in Westminster Hall, the main Chamber, and another place. The Government welcome the opportunity to emphasise their strong commitment to the armed forces and the defence of our country, and I am pleased to do that again today.

I also thank my hon. Friend for his insightful observations. As a former officer in the British Army with many years of distinguished service, including in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, he has brought a wealth of knowledge and personal experience to the Chamber this morning. Other right hon. and hon. Members have also made contributions, and it is a privilege to respond to a debate of such quality. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), and the hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis)—I was particularly impressed by that speech and will return to it—for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

I also enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), but may I gently say that, in my limited experience after 12 years in this House, this is supposed to be a debate? I was simply going to make a helpful comment, which I will return to, and the House tends to appreciate it if we can have a debate, rather than Members simply standing up and having a bit of a rant. I admire his passion for the subject, but Members get a bit more respect in this place when they are prepared to have a debate. I am gently chiding him.

This debate has been about the size and strength of our armed forces, so in a major sense it is about our people. I therefore pay tribute to the many tens of thousands of servicemen and women whose selfless service keeps our country and people safe. We must do everything we can to persuade our young people that the armed forces remain a great place to work with many development opportunities, both professional and personal. We accept, however, that recruitment remains a challenge—that point was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex.

Record youth employment and a diminishing number of 16 to 24-year-olds entering the workforce over the next few years means that there will always be strong competition for new people. We are responding with a range of short and long-term initiatives to ensure that the offer of a career in the armed forces remains competitive. The services are recruiting through active and targeted campaigns, and increasing engagement and activity in communities where recruitment has been low. We are also working on recruiting and retaining specialist skills. There are some encouraging signs. The number of applications to join the Navy and the Army has increased compared with the same point last year, and outflow from the regular armed forces in the past 12 months has reduced. The reserves are a success and continue to increase in number.

British society is changing, and young infantry soldiers who come from our traditional recruiting grounds in the north-east and north-west now represent a much smaller proportion of our society. That is why we have set ourselves challenging targets to recruit from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community, and to get a better gender balance in the armed forces. There are signs that we are beginning to make progress in those areas, but it is difficult, not least because we must ensure that the right role models in our armed forces can inspire other people to join.

Being a bottom-fed organisation, it is sometimes difficult to get those role models in the right place at the right rank. Hopefully, the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which is proceeding through the House, will give us greater latitude in how we bring people into the armed forces, and potentially allow people to take career breaks, or—perhaps at an important point of their career—to work part-time or job share. No one suggests that that will be a silver bullet that will solve the problems, but hopefully it will make serving in the armed forces a little more compatible with the challenging pattern of modern life. I am pleased that in general there has been support for the Bill.

Wayne David: On recruitment, does the Minister accept that the approach of Capita leaves a lot to be desired? Will the MOD look carefully and critically at how it is fulfilling its contract?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point. There have clearly been challenges, and to suggest otherwise would be entirely wrong. I am particularly interested in recruitment, and I think that this package of measures will be the right thing. I firmly take on board what was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex, and we should try to move toward a blend of measures. I would not want to tie up enormous numbers of members of the armed forces.
solely in recruiting, but there is an important place for young role models who can inspire young people to join. Many of the back-room functions of the process can be done through Capita and others. We need a balance, and I am not sure that we have quite got that right at the moment.

Let me return to the theme of size and strength. It seems to be a day for Communist quotes, because I think it was Stalin who said: “Quantity has a quality all of its own”, which is a reasonable point. The worth of an armed force is ultimately determined by what it can do: the military power it can bring to bear, the readiness with which it can respond, and the effects it can achieve in the different circumstances in which it may be asked to achieve them.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central will expect me to say that new technology and new capabilities tend to reduce the service requirement for manpower overall, but I do not for one second say that that justifies a continued reduction in the size of the armed forces. It does not, but there is a balance to be found between embracing those new technologies and maintaining that Stalinist thought about quantity having a quality of its own.

Although fully trained, regular service personnel will continue to make up the majority of the military workforce, particular requirements can be met equally well by reserve forces, including the sponsored reserve. Our aim must be to make the best use of all the talent and ability that the country has to offer, including from those who can bring to the armed forces valuable skills acquired in civilian life. I have already mentioned the more flexible approach to military workforce planning—what we called the “total armed force”—which we are looking at along with the service chiefs. I hope to update the House on this forward. It is an attempt to embrace all the talent and ability the country has to offer, including from those who must be to make the best use of all the talent and ability that the country has to offer, including from those who can bring to the armed forces valuable skills acquired in civilian life.

We often talk about the number in the armed forces as if, magically, the whole force could be deployed in the field tomorrow. It cannot: no military can deploy its entire force in the field in one day. The true strength of an armed force is a combination of its total manpower—be that regular, reserve, or regular reserve—and the readiness with which it can be deployed.

Historically, we have deployed divisions; we should be fiercely proud of that, as few countries can deploy a division—the first size of armed force that has the full orchestra, so to speak, of capabilities to be deployed—but a division cannot be deployed tomorrow. It takes time; there is a readiness cycle for its deployment in the field. However, I am confident about answering the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot about our having a deployable division at readiness. We hold different forces at different periods of readiness, on a graduated scale. It would be wrong to go into detail about exactly what is held at what level of readiness, what is quickly deployable and what larger forces can be deployed over a period.

We often talk about threat. In my basic military training, threat had two components: capability and intent. A true threat exists when someone has capability and intends to use it. To go back to the speech of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, there is an argument that the biggest threat we face now, based on capability and intent, is probably in cyberspace. There are threats to the nation every day there. However, that is not to dismiss other threats such as the Russian threat, clearly articulated this week by the Chief of the General Staff. In that case, there is definitely capability, but at the moment probably no intent to use it. However, I am very mindful that capabilities can take a long time to build up, while intents can change relatively quickly. We need to be mindful of and careful about that.

The national security capability review was touched on, and Members are no doubt aware that the National Security Council sat yesterday and that the NSCR was on the agenda. It was agreed that an NSCR report would be published in late spring 2018. More importantly for the purposes of this debate, the result of the NSC meeting was that a further separate programme of work to modernise defence will now happen. That will be called the modernising defence programme.

The Defence Secretary will make a statement. It will not be today; there is a negotiation by the usual channels. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that they should not read anything into that. The right date is being sought to maximise attendance. Let us be honest: probably the last thing we want is a statement when most people have plans to go home or be elsewhere. The statement will happen soon, on a day—Members can guess which day—of maximum attendance in the House, for maximum scrutiny of the Defence Secretary. I offer my apologies to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, there is an argument

Wayne David: I thank the Minister; but can we have an assurance that the statement will not be made in the evening?

Mark Lancaster: That was one of the issues, to be fair. There is a genuine feeling that on a matter of such importance the statement should be made at the right time on the right day, when there will be maximum opportunity for hon. Members to quiz the Secretary of State; but nothing should be read into the timing. The hon. Gentleman has alluded to one of the potential problems, and that is the nature of business today.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: Should I give way? Well goodness me, I am a generous soul. I hope that will be a lesson to the hon. Gentleman.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The regular faces will know it is not my normal MO not to allow an intervention. I was perhaps unnecessarily wound up at the time. As to the splitting, with defence coming later, will that part of the review still be tasked with being fiscally neutral?

Mark Lancaster: It is not for me to offer a lesson in the development of grand strategy, but in my training it was always all about ends, ways and means. We are attempting to establish the ends: what are we seeking to do? Clearly we seek to counter the threats that the UK faces. As to means, effectively people always focus on the capabilities that we have. That has been one of the challenges that we have faced in the wider debate, where
individual capabilities have been plucked out that hon. Members feel must be saved at all costs, without their necessarily looking at the wider context of how the means and capabilities fit together. Equally, part of the capability is the finance—the ability to buy it. Means therefore include both physical capability and money. Ways are how we use those means. The piece of work in question will grow on the NSCR, and as it continues, clearly, if factors emerge and investment in certain capabilities is needed, that will be a negotiation with the Treasury.

Wayne David: Does not what the Minister said imply that his answer is yes, it will be fiscally neutral?

Mark Lancaster: That is not what I am saying at all. To be fair to my boss, the Secretary of State, he has made a strong case for greater investment in defence; and that negotiation will continue. However, before I get into lots of trouble by pre-empting what he will say in the statement shortly, I ask right hon. and hon. Members to indulge me with their patience. They will have the opportunity to ask all those questions shortly, during the statement.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Will the Minister deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, which is key to the point that the Minister correctly made about divisional size and operation, and the bringing together of the whole military orchestra in one place, which is that quantity has to matter?

Mark Lancaster: Certainly, a division, by definition, because of the orchestra of capabilities that it brings to the battlefield, and its ability to fight at various geographical locations, must be of a certain size. To correct a comment that was made earlier, the Conservative manifesto commitment was to maintain armed forces at their current size, and be able to field a division. That is our commitment, to which we are working.

On the question of spending, the Government remain determined to ensure that our armed forces have the people, equipment and training to defend the United Kingdom at home and overseas against the growing and diversifying threat to our security. That means that our armed forces will continue to be world-leading, with the ability to project power globally in a way that few other nations can match. It also means that we will deepen our relationships with allied powers and work to strengthen alliances such as NATO. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot mentioned concerns about the ability to train. He is quite right: Zapad 2017 was the major Russian exercise in Russia’s western area. In 2017 we had several NATO exercises, because working with our allies is crucial. We had Joint Warrior, which was a joint expeditionary force exercise, Noble Jump 2, which was a very high readiness joint taskforce exercise, and Swift Response. Looking forward to this year, there will be several major international exercises. We will have Saif Sareea 3, which will be the biggest UK-Omani exercise to be held for nearly 15 years; and Trident Juncture, which is the NATO exercise held every three years. I take my hon. Friend’s point that it is crucial that, to counter the threat, we work continually with our NATO allies, and exercise accordingly. Collective training is important.

Another certainty is that we are increasing spending on defence and will continue to do so. With a defence budget of some £36 billion this year, the UK is undoubtedly a major defence power. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife talked about the Danish defence budget; but actually it will not get to 2%. Its defence budget will be 1.3% of GDP by 2023, which is up from 1.2%. That is a welcome rise, but it still does not reach the 2% target.

I am proud that the Government have committed to increasing the defence budget further, by at least 0.5% above inflation every year of this Parliament. I am mindful that I should allow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot a minute to sum up, so I shall leave my remarks there, but I shall write to hon. Members on any questions I have not answered.
Public Transport: Boxing Day 2018

11 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered public transport on Boxing Day 2018.

Christmas 2017 is already a distant memory for most of us, with all the joys of Christmas and some of the minor irritations such as our football team losing, which happened to me in the case of Bradford City, or the turkey going in slightly late, which happened at my family gathering. But there were also other irritations, such as the absence of Boxing day rail transport in our country.

In my campaigns on this—I have represented various marginal constituencies in Yorkshire for about 15 years—I have always made the mistake of trying to draw attention to it in the month of December. People are concerned at that point and are making their travel plans. Social media on 26 December is full of people realising they cannot get out and do what they wanted to do. I thought I would try a different tactic this year and draw attention to the issue before January ebbs away, so that we can begin to make plans for Boxing day 2018. There is hope, particularly in the north of England, in God’s own county of Yorkshire, that this year there may be the first trains running on Boxing day since 1980.

Why on earth does that matter, and why is it worth the attention of the House? There are three or four reasons. I was very pleased last week to see the Prime Minister appoint a Minister for Loneliness. A 60-hour shutdown for our major national rail network is just too long. For people who are isolated over that period, getting out and about is massively important. I have referred to Bradford City’s home fixture this year, but football fans up and down the land look forward to the Boxing day fixtures. There are great horse-racing meetings—the King George VI Chase at Kempton grabs the attention of at least part of the nation—various rugby matches and so on, and people should not need a car to attend those events. In an age when the environment matters, that is even more important.

There is also retail activity on Boxing Day. For many of our shopping centres, both in town and out of town, it is an important trading day. This year, a lot of retailers experienced declines in sales on Boxing Day. It does not help if people cannot get to the shops and the sales to spend their money. There are a number of reasons. Quite frankly, a lot of people have to be back at work or need to travel to get to their desks, in their offices or in their restaurants on 27 December if not on 26 December. They cannot travel any distance to go home for Christmas if they have to be back at work on 27 December at eight o’clock in the morning. It affects people’s family Christmases.

Is there demand? I think there is. I draw attention to bus transport, since this debate is titled “Public Transport” and not just “Railways”. In London, I understand that buses have run on Boxing day for many decades, but outside London, the various big conurbations and cities across England have experimented over the last 10 or 15 years with running not a full service, but a service aimed at the shopping centres, football matches and so on. They have done that with some success.

Since 2007 in west Yorkshire, my area, the passenger transport authority, which has subsequently become the combined authority, has been running a service initially based in Leeds and Wakefield—it reached my Keighley constituency in the last three years. It is very well patronised. They have had to put extra buses on between Leeds and Bradford, because in some years they were completely full. There is an element of subsidy involved in west Yorkshire, but I was told that 65,000 passengers went on west Yorkshire buses on Boxing day 2016. They have not yet got the figures for 2017, but the experiment has worked well.

I had a letter from Mike Scott, the head of buses at Nexus, the passenger transport element of the combined authority in the north-east of England. He said that several of the bus services that it initially subsidised “are now provided by commercial operators at no cost”, because as people have got used to seeing public transport on Boxing day, they have used it more. Others, such as the Metro centre and Newcastle United, have on occasion subsidised buses because they see their commercial interest in getting people into Newcastle and letting them get home from football matches.

It has worked in the case of buses, but we have not seen a comprehensive train service on Boxing day in our country since 1980. In 1975, under the then Labour Government, the service began to ebb away. In 1975, no provision was made, but it came back in 1976. Members at the time raised concerns about the effect on people without access to a car who had to work on Boxing day, or who would not be able to visit friends and family. It was interesting that in reply, the then Minister Gordon Oakes commented:

“I believe it is essential that in our debate today we should not give the impression that there will be no public transport on Boxing Day. On the contrary, London Transport will run both its underground and bus services on 26th December.”—[Official Report, 21 November 1975; Vol. 901, c. 456.]

The emphasis is: if it is okay in London and London is all right, the rest of the country can make do.

It is interesting that, once the rail was privatised, the great airports of Heathrow and Gatwick had it put in their franchises that they should have a service on Boxing day, no doubt under the influence of London-based civil servants. Those were the only franchises in which that was specified. Of course, it is important that the great airports are connected on Boxing day, but there is also a great airport at Manchester in the north of England—Boxing day is its busiest day of the year. I will offer some hope before the end of my remarks, but until now there has been no service there.

Most of the time since 1980 outside Heathrow, Gatwick and Scotland, which has run a service as it is not a public holiday on Boxing day, there has been very little provision. There have been some services between Marylebone and Oxford on the Chiltern lines in recent years, which I think have been well used, but 90%-odd of the network has been closed down. It is interesting that no one in the rest of Europe closes down their network for that length of time. I am not suggesting services on Christmas day, but a lot of continental Europe runs a Sunday service throughout the holiday period. Somehow, they seem to get round the problem of engineering works. Where there is a will, there is a way.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Grogan: It gives me great pleasure to give way to the chair of the all-party rail group, no less.

Martin Vickers: It is in that capacity that I wanted to say that the hon. Gentleman is very welcome to come along to the group next time we have a meeting of the train operating companies to put the question directly to them. At the moment, unless it is in their franchise, very few of them provide a service. They ought to be more enterprising—we need more competition in the rail network.

John Grogan: I accept that the spirit of enterprise should be there, and I have some good news for the hon. Gentleman before I sit down. I will certainly take up his invitation—it will be one of the highlights of my parliamentary year to come to such an august body.

I do not want to adopt a particularly party political approach, but I would make a gentle reflection to both Front Benchers—it is a great pleasure to see the shadow Minister for Rail, my fellow Yorkshire MP and hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) in the debate, and I am glad she is taking an interest. There has been a tendency, as we might expect, that parliamentary year to come to such an august body.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) has rightly mentioned that quote every Boxing day since he has been in office, and rightly asks for progress. However, I have not yet seen either Front-Bench team say that we definitely will make progress. However the railways are owned, and whether or not the major franchises come back into public ownership under a Labour Government, I hope a commitment can be made to Boxing day transport. I hope both parties can commit themselves to that.

I said there was potential good news for Boxing day 2018. That is largely concentrated in the north of England. For the past three years, Merseyrail has run a service. That shows the power of devolution. Merseyrail has a particularly close relationship with the Mayor of Liverpool and the councils on Merseyside, which have a greater consultative role in relation to the terms of the franchise and so on.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am interested in this issue, coming from a Scottish perspective. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, there are some services on Boxing day in Scotland, but I get many complaints from my Moray constituents, including this year, that the service and the number of carriages are so reduced that the passenger’s experience is not great. Even though we have a service, it is very limited, with very few carriages, and ScotRail does a lot of maintenance on the railways on Boxing day because of the limited services, so there are many delays. Although there is devolution and there are some services in Scotland and other parts of the country on Boxing day, does the hon. Gentleman agree that these should be better services to ensure that people who choose to use the railways on Boxing day have a good experience?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. That is a speech. I call John Grogan.

John Grogan: I agree with the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). We have to provide a quality service such that people know when the trains are running and that they will be of good quality. We cannot run a ramshackle service, because people will not use it. My worry would be that someone would say, “Why are we running these services at all?” as happened south of the border in 1980.

As I said, Merseyrail has been running services. This year, it was very enterprising, to use the word of the chair of the all-party rail group. It contacted Liverpool football club, which had an evening kick-off at 5.30 pm, and provided trains well into the evening so that supporters could not only get to the game, but get back afterwards. Northern Rail, for some reason—I am not sure how this came to be the case and whether it was down to an enlightened Minister or an enlightened civil servant—has to provide under the terms of its franchise 60 services in the north of England on Boxing day 2018. I am very hopeful that some of those may even go to Keighley, because I have had a very helpful letter from the chair of the West Yorkshire combined authority, Councillor Keith Wakefield. He says that it is working with the Department for Transport and Transport for the North, perhaps to enhance the 60 services and have more. The letter states:

“The consultation response submitted by WYCA noted that the Leeds North-West network (the Airedale and Wharfedale lines) were identified as a likely priority for Boxing Day services in the Leeds City region, not least reflecting the high levels of demand they attract at weekends/holidays and reflecting the extent to which the signalling is automated (which could reduce costs).”

If Bradford City are at home this year, I will look forward, possibly, to getting on to my local train service, on the Airedale or Wharfedale line, to get to the match.

In this more optimistic picture, TransPennine rail has an obligation in its franchise to make proposals to Ministers and to Transport for the North to run services across the Pennines. I understand that it has emphasised making proposals for the aforementioned Manchester airport, and that that is with Ministers and Transport for the North. I very much hope Ministers take an enlightened approach. I well remember a meeting about this in 2009 with Lord Adonis, marvellous man that he is, but I think that he rather humoured me and his mind was on High Speed 2 and very important projects such as that. These are little details, but I feel confident that this Minister is a man of such detail.

Martin Vickers: On the subject of TransPennine, which provides the main services via the south trans-Pennine route between Manchester airport and Cleethorpes, when the Minister has those discussions, will he make special mention of the fact not only that my constituents want to get to Manchester airport, but that of course people will flock in their thousands to Cleethorpes, where Grimsby Town will probably be playing at home next Boxing day?
John Grogan: They will, and the seaside in winter is particularly attractive.

I end by saying that I have every hope that both Front-Bench teams will get behind the idea of Boxing day transport. Devolution will help. This is one way of ensuring that the northern powerhouse in particular—obviously, I am concerned for the rest of the country as well—is powered for one extra day a year.

11.14 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I thank the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) for his interest in this matter. I also thank the chair of the all-party rail group, my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), and my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), for their contributions.

Public transport must have at its heart the needs of the travelling public. I am clear that we must continually strive to meet those needs as they change and evolve, and I will do my best to answer some of the points made during this debate. If I cannot answer them in full, I will happily write to the hon. Member for Keighley afterwards.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the issue of Boxing day services principally affects the rail sector—he noted that bus services by and large continue to operate on 26 December—so to that degree I will focus my remarks on rail. As he rightly noted, our rail network is part of the lives of many people across the UK and important to addressing social needs—he rightly highlighted the issue of loneliness—which is why the Government continue to invest at record levels to ensure that the service across the country is delivering reliable and punctual rail services to meet the needs of our economy and society.

Indeed, on 12 October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced our intention to commit some £47 billion—a record sum—to our rail network in the period 2019 to 2024. That is on top of a previous record level of investment, which will see about £50 billion spent on reliability and major transformational infrastructure enhancements up to 2019. All that is in addition to HS2, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned and on which we are spending about £55 billion.

That means that, since 2010, more than 7,000 new carriages have been ordered to provide extra space for passengers and to replace many outdated trains. We are setting challenging targets for passenger experience in operators’ franchise agreements that cover passenger satisfaction and standards of service quality. Increasingly, we are including financial incentives to ensure that they deliver on those targets. That can include requirements to reinvest penalties in improvements for passengers.

We are committed to making the railways accessible to all. For the first time, we are introducing a specific delivery plan in our franchise competitions that will require bidders to set out how they will meet the needs of passengers with disabilities. That reflects our commitment to delivering a rail network that is centred on the passenger—providing the services, capacity and experience that rail users want.

To come to the heart of the debate, Boxing day services are just one of many passenger needs that we are seeking to fulfil. I will say a few words about our approach to Boxing day services, which has evolved over time, as the hon. Gentleman noted, and no doubt will continue to evolve.

Our franchises have always had the discretion to explore the operation of Boxing day services on a commercial basis. Since 2015, we have required franchisors, at a minimum, to deliver services on Boxing day, and to, at a minimum, maintain current levels of Boxing day services. In addition, our invitations to tender include requirements to consult passengers and user groups on the demand for Boxing day services. That is reported back to the Department, along with the commercial viability of any such proposals.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is particularly interested in the consultation and associated reports prepared by the Northern and TransPennine Express frachises. I can confirm that those have been submitted and are being considered by the Rail North Partnership. I appreciate that he would wish me to confirm that we will be running services on both franchises, but I am sure that he will also understand that we should allow Rail North, the franchises and Network Rail the opportunity fully to consider and assess the feasibility of the proposals first. I also note that, in focusing on the needs of our passengers, we must look at the needs of the widest number of the travelling public. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, the rail network uses periods of lower demand, which will usually include Boxing day, to complete essential engineering works—essential, as he knows, if we are to undertake maintenance work that is critical to the reliable performance that passengers demand, and essential, too, for major upgrade work, delivering the additional capacity on the network that passengers want.

The hon. Gentleman focused rightly on the north of England. I gently remind him that we are spending £13 billion on northern transport—the largest investment in a generation—£3.8 billion of which will be invested in rail schemes. By 2020, the great north rail project will see the arrival of brand new trains for customers across the region. Northern and TransPennine Express will deliver more than 500 new carriages, with room for 40,000 extra passengers, as well as 2,000 extra services a week. We hope that this will help transform the passenger experience and improve reliability.

Elsewhere, recent rail franchise awards will deliver brand new, more reliable trains for passengers travelling on South Western, East Anglia and London Midland services. This year will also see the completion of Thameslink and Crossrail, which will deliver desperately needed new capacity, thereby improving performance reliability for passengers and freight. On the Great Western network, we are investing an unprecedented £5 billion to deliver faster, more reliable services and new trains with thousands more seats.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important subject. Our railways clearly matter tremendously to those who use them, and passengers rightly expect that we will respond to their changing needs. We have a clear vision for delivering on this in future. This means a relentless focus on meeting the needs of passengers; awarding contracts on the quality of service provision and on price; investment in infrastructure to deliver improvements in reliability and increase capacity; and new and refurbished trains that increase capacity and improve the passenger experience.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.
Pubs Code 2016

[MR DAVID CRAUSBY in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the application of the Pubs Code 2016.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I would like to say that it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, but I spoke in the equivalent debate in January last year and I hoped then that I would never have to speak in such a debate again. However, given the way things have evolved, it is obvious that I need to, so I am here yet again.

I am something of a veteran of this issue. The initial predecessor to the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills did an inquiry into it in 2004, and subsequent inquiries were held in 2009, 2010 and 2011. I was a member of the Committee in 2009 and Chair of it in 2010 and 2011. Looking back, I remember that Ted Tuppen, the former chief executive of Enterprise Inns, described the MPs who were campaigning on pub companies as morons. I am proud to say that I am probably one of the last surviving morons—by that definition—in this House.

The issues have been standard and constant throughout the evolution of this debate and the subsequent legislation. They arise first around the tensions between the pub companies and their tenants—I know they are commonly described as pub operating businesses now.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I want to ask a question on behalf of the Nottingham branch of the Campaign for Real Ale and its pub protection officer, who wrote to me about this issue. The point they make is that the process of obtaining a market rent only option is massively complicated and virtually impossible for an unsupported tied tenant to use without expensive legal support. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the legislation is to be useful, it must be easily accessible?

Mr Bailey: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an important point. This has been pursued through Parliament for nearly 15 years. If, at the end of the day, we do not demonstrate that our pursuit of this issue and the implementation of the legislation is effective, we will have failed in our duty. I am dedicated to ensuring that it is successful.

The crux of the issue is the mismatch between the power of the pub companies and their tenants. With that mismatch in power comes a mismatch in rewards. Basically, many pubs were being driven into closure and tenants into bankruptcy by virtue of the fact that the pub company was taking a disproportionate amount of the income that they were raising through their services.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating this debate. Does he agree that another problem is that the adjudicator has a tendency to make his decisions in private, thereby preventing a bank of knowledge from being built up by tenants, who could perhaps use some of the decisions as precedents?

Mr Bailey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. To a certain extent, I was going to cover that, but his precise point is a welcome addition, because transparency is the key. That would give guidance to tenants who were looking for the market rent only option. It would enable them to see how viable their application is and on what grounds they could challenge the pub company, if the pub company refused or obstructed it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I will be writing to the Minister about my constituents’ experience of the Pubs Code Adjudicator following Paul Newby’s visit to York, at my invitation. Despite his commitments about expediency and communications, pubs such as the Golden Ball in York are still waiting 13 months later to hear what is happening about their case. How can that be fair, and how can it be right?

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know that many tenants feel that this procrastination over resolution is playing into the hands of the pub companies, and that it is, in some cases, deliberately designed to drive up expenses and deter anybody from making such applications.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I want to ask a question on behalf of the Nottingham branch of the Campaign for Real Ale and its pub protection officer, who wrote to me about this issue. The point they make is that the process of obtaining a market rent only option is massively complicated and virtually impossible for an unsupported tied tenant to use without expensive legal support. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the legislation is to be useful, it must be easily accessible?

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is one of the complaints, and I will be discussing some of them in a few moments.

Prior to the implementation of the legislation, subsequent Committees sought the industry’s agreement on a voluntary code, but subsequent inquiries demonstrated that the pub companies, despite paying lip service to a voluntary code, were actually not conforming to it and not making any progress on it. It was then in exasperation—almost desperation—that the Select Committee decided that enough was enough, and that it was time to implement legislation. Subsequently, the legislation materialised.

The key issue, above all else, is tied tenancies and the market rent only option. The argument is that tied tenants have to pay a disproportionate amount of money for their stock and other services, and that, as a result, the pub company gets a disproportionate share of the income arising from the premises. If a tenant seeks to go free of tie, the pub company will implement conditions in the negotiations that remove any financial advantage from that course of action. The legislation, by giving tenants the option of applying for a market rent only option, is designed to overcome that handicap. The way in which the process is being implemented is a matter of huge concern, and it needs further consideration by the Pubs Code Adjudicator and the Government.

The Pubs Code Adjudicator report in July 2017—bearing in mind that the legislation came in one year earlier, in July 2016—said that there were two overarching principles in the code. The first was “fair and lawful” dealings in relation to tied tenants. The second, which I have touched on, was the “no worse off” principle, which sets out

End
“that individual tied tenants should not be worse off than they would be if they were free of the tie”.

Eighteen months after the introduction of the pubs code and the Pubs Code Adjudicator, it is time to take stock and assess whether the objectives set out in the pubs code—I just defined them—are being met, and, if not, what needs to be done.

Before I do that, I have to touch on the controversy that raged over the appointment of Paul Newby as the Pubs Code Adjudicator. I will not dwell on the whole catalogue of concerns, but it is well known that there are accusations of conflicts of interests arising from his past employment with the valuers and surveyors Fleurets, because it had extensive interests with the pub companies, and from his personal investment in it. I said in the debate last January that unless he divested himself of that particular investment, then in no way should he be the Pubs Code Adjudicator because he had an obvious and transparent conflict of interest. He has not done so. Given that confidence in his commitment and impartiality is crucial to earning the trust of pub tenants, that must be of huge concern. I will come back to this issue in a moment.

He has had opportunities over the past 18 months to demonstrate his effectiveness; however, looking at his performance, we see that it is possibly a slight understatement to say that the implementation and the progress made under his supervision fall short of the level needed to achieve the legislative objectives. The first concern is the slowness of the adjudication process. Between July 2016 and March 2017, arbitration awards were made in only 15 of the 119 cases accepted for arbitration. In the cases specifically relating to the market rent only option, the figure was 12 out of 104. Later in the year, in August, the adjudicator published a market rent only verification exercise report, which demonstrates that of the total of 497 market rent only notices, only 11 were actually converted into agreed market rent only tenancies. Of the 130 arbitration cases listed on 31 July 2017, 79 had been delayed for more than three months, and 12 for more than six months.

Now I will come back to the point that I was making earlier. The slowness of arbitration is not the only issue; impartiality is also a problem. The Chartered Institute of Arbitrators has upheld four of the 12 challenges made by pub tenants to the adjudicator's decisions. That demonstrates the lack of confidence of tenants in the industry in the robustness and impartiality of the way in which he is exercising the code. To have a one-third failure rate in such a key, sensitive position is absolutely unacceptable.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is making a very solid case. A further conflict of interest in dragging out these cases is that doing so is economically disadvantaging tenants. Has he discovered the same fact?

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend raises another significant point. By continuing to act on the case, Mr Newby is acting in breach of the code of conduct of the professional institute of which he is a member.

It is also significant that successful negotiations between the pub companies and tenants were rare. Eight times as many cases were referred to the PCA for arbitration, and four times as many went to independent agreement, as decided by bilateral negotiations between the tenants and the pub companies. It is not difficult to understand why. There is now overwhelming evidence that the pub companies' historic antagonism, intimidation and bullying has continued, and the confrontational culture has prevailed, deterring tenants from taking, seeking or achieving market rent only options as a result of bilateral negotiations with the pub companies.

That is confirmed by the market rent only verification exercise of August 2017. The report states:

“Almost without exception, tenants and tenant advisers reported that while the POBs are abiding by the letter of the Pubs Code, to varying degrees they are not acting within the spirit of the Code; and that some are taking a legalistic approach to the Code.”

The second highest number of calls to the Pubs Code Adjudicator inquiry line related to the behaviour of pub companies, and they included accusations of intimidation, bullying and delay tactics. Those are not my words, but the words of the report.

I do not have time to examine every device used by the pub companies to frustrate negotiations but will pick out just a few. First, they include processes in their negotiations with tenants that are designed to push up costs, and include conditions not commonly found in tied tenancies or pre- and non-code free-of-tie agreements.

Secondly, there is insistence by the pub companies for a brand new tenancy agreement, rather than a deed of variation to an existing tied tenancy. That enables pub companies to introduce new terms and requirements not historically found in a free-of-tie agreement, but that introduce substantial additional upfront costs.

Thirdly, deposits and advance rents are designed to make the market rent only option unaffordable. Lastly, there are unreasonable, unexpected and novel improvements of dilapidation requirements, including things such as a new roof, new pumps, resurfacing of car parks, cellar cladding, fire rules assessments and, I believe, patios as well. I would stress that those are only some of the strategies used by the pub companies to circumvent the spirit of the law.

Arising from a letter from my hon. Friend for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, on 3 November 2017, the Pubs Code Adjudicator acknowledged “that very few MRO notices served by tied pub tenants convert into MRO tenancies, and that bilateral negotiation and agreement between pub-owning businesses and tied pub tenants appear to be by exception.”

That is a formal confirmation from the Pubs Code Adjudicator that, in effect, it is not working. It is clear from the verification exercise that the pub companies...
are using their legal expertise and superior bargaining power to perpetuate the status quo and to thwart the intended objectives of the pubs code legislation.

In the same letter, the Pubs Code Adjudicator says that he is prepared to use his enforcement powers to ensure compliance if necessary. We have been operating with the code for 18 months, and there is overwhelming evidence that it is necessary and reasonable to ask why—given the evidence that has emerged in that period—he has not done it already. Instead, the adjudicator has published a compliance code for pub companies which, frankly, would have expected to have been produced much earlier. Predictably, the pub companies have reacted with an antagonistic letter to him. I am afraid that, on the basis of earlier precedent, it is only the threat of legal action that will move the companies.

In the same letter, the adjudicator says that he will make recommendations to Ministers about business practices that he believes are unfair to tied pub tenants but are not breaches of the pubs code. Again, the evidence about that has been there for a long time, so why has he not done that before? I ask the Minister this question: if the recommendations from the adjudicator are forthcoming, or indeed even if they are not, will he make the appropriate changes to the legislation to ensure that it meets its objectives?

In his letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West, the Pubs Code Adjudicator asserts that his aim is to help to reshape the culture of the industry. To date, there has been absolutely no sign of that. The pub companies are intransigent and have enormous resources at their disposal. To change the prevailing culture, a much tougher approach is needed. The PCA is running out of time and it is time that the Government sought a much tougher approach is needed. The PCA is running out of time and it is time that the Government sought a much tougher approach.

The Government need to make a couple of headline adjustments to the legislation or the code to ensure that the code is effective and the problems that I have outlined are overcome. Many such changes would do that, but there are two key ones. The first is to ensure that the definition of the market rent only option makes clear the right of a tenant to pay an independently assessed market rent, and only that rent, to the pub company. Secondly, the only changes to deeds of variation that should be allowed are the severing of tied terms and the rent being an independently assessed market rent. Those two alterations would go an enormous way to addressing some of the important grievances that have emerged so far, but many others could be made.

I will conclude by saying that, as I said earlier, I have been involved with this for a very long time—many Members from all parties in the House have been equally committed. I pay tribute to my predecessors as the Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and its predecessor Committees, and the many campaigners in the many voluntary groups who have been so assiduous and dedicated to ensuring that we drag these companies kicking and screaming, by whatever legislation is necessary, to confront their responsibilities as operators of important community facilities that play an absolutely vital role in so many people’s lives, and in the lives of so many communities. I will not rest until that is done and I hope that other Members and the Government will work with me to ensure that we achieve that goal.

2.53 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure, Mr Robertson, to serve under your chairmanship, and I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on securing a debate about an issue that, as he has just pointed out, is so important to so many of the pubs that are of such great value in our constituencies and our communities.

The Chipping Barnet area, which gives my constituency its name, was once famous for its pubs and coaching inns, serving people travelling on the Great North Road on their way to and from London. At the height of the coaching era, there were probably more than 30 pubs in a comparatively short stretch of road along Barnet Hill and Barnet High Street.

Charles Dickens, whose meal at the Red Lion in Barnet was once cut short by the news that his wife was in labour, had Oliver Twist limping into Barnet and “crouching on the step...wondering at the great number of public-houses (every other house in Barnet was a tavern, large or small)”. Further back, in 1667, Samuel Pepys also dined at the Red Lion in Barnet, enjoying what he described as “some of the best cheese-cakes that ever I eat in my life”.

And in 1762 the traveller William Toldervy commented positively on various Barnet pubs, including the Red Lion and The Mitre.

Only a handful of Barnet’s old pubs survive to the present day and those that are still open for business face some difficult challenges and circumstances, including the Old Mitre Inne, which attracted that good write-up by Toldervy some 250 years ago. It is a great pub that is very popular with my constituents. Unlike many pubs, it is primarily dependent on what I gather are described as wet sales—in other words, it has not morphed into a restaurant, although it serves some really excellent food.

The pub is run by Gary Murphy, who has recently been granted a Pubs Code Adjudicator arbitration in relation to his dispute with his pub company. It has taken eight months of correspondence, legal advice and hassle to get to that stage which, as the hon. Member for West Bromwich West has already suggested, is a demonstration that this process moves too slowly. We need to find a way to ensure that the pubs code process and the adjudication process can move more swiftly to deliver fairer outcomes for people running these much-valued and much-appreciated pubs.

When Mr Murphy asked to exercise his right under the code to move to a market rent only arrangement, the pubco asserted that that required a new lease, which is costly to negotiate, with legal fees to pay and stamp duty and so on. Moreover, the pubco proposed onerous new terms, including payment of six months’ rent up front in advance, and the obligation to redecorate the premises completely, inside and out, every three years. My constituent believes that the MRO arrangement could and should be delivered via the cheaper and simpler mechanism of a deed of variation, which we have already heard some points about this afternoon. A second problem is that the pubco refuses to accept that any final MRO settlement should be backdated, in accordance with the relevant backdating clause in Mr Murphy’s existing lease.

Those two issues mean that it could cost Mr Murphy well over £100,000 to get his MRO. That has to be against the spirit of the pubs code and it sounds like it is against the letter of the code as well.
I understand the very serious concerns that have been expressed by the hon. Member for West Bromwich West, many of which are echoed by the Campaign for Real Ale in the very helpful briefing that it has provided for this debate. However, I take a somewhat more optimistic approach. With the establishment of the code, we have seen positive steps in the right direction and now need to build on the progress that has been made. Nevertheless, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that pub tenants are given the protection that was envisaged by Parliament when it adopted the legislation on the pubs code.

As we have heard, the Pubs Code Adjudicator has started to make decisions and a number of them appear to have been helpful. For example, I gather that there have been cases where the PCA has declared that the pubco must offer better terms to its tenant than those that had been originally proposed. That includes cases where the conclusion has been that a deed of variation can be used and a new lease is not required.

Welcome as those decisions are, however, waiting for individual cases to determine general points of principle is part of the reason why this process is slower than it should be in coming to the aid of our local pubs. It would be very helpful if the adjudicator were to issue further general statements on how he proposes to approach key aspects of the code, including those covering some of the issues that have already been raised this afternoon.

I believe that that would mean that disputes between tenants and pubcos could be settled more quickly, and with less cost and less stress, than they are currently. I very much hope that the adjudicator will consider publishing statements of principle, in particular in relation to the two problems that have arisen in The Mitre’s dispute, namely deeds of variation and backdating clauses.

In conclusion, the pubs code and the PCA are capable of delivering fairer outcomes for tenants. In doing so, they could be a lifeline to the local pubs that so many of our constituents value. A few relatively simple changes in approach could achieve a great deal to ensure that the system works more effectively and more quickly to deliver the outcomes intended by Parliament when it adopted the legislation. I hope the adjudicator and the Minister will carefully consider the points made in the debate about how that might happen in practice.

3 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), who has been an incredibly important contributor to us getting as far as we have towards justice for pub tenants and a fully functioning, fair market in our pubs industry. My hon. Friend made his case in a typically impressive fashion and laid out many of the issues that face all those who want the pubs code to work in the way that Parliament originally intended.

I do not propose to repeat all the history that my hon. Friend laid out, but it is important to remember that Parliament, and subsequently the Government, took the fairly unprecedented step of intervening in a market—and despite the rhetoric, that has not been the Government’s modus operandi over the last few years—because of historic market failure. There was recognition that pub companies had failed to get their house in order, despite numerous opportunities to do so, and that there was an unfair imbalance in the relationship between powerful pub companies and tenants, who were individual small business people.

For that reason, hon. Members in all parts of the House voted to support the introduction of a market rent only option in the pubs code as part of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. The support of Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members meant that the Government were defeated, and the market rent only option was put in. It is important for us all that that works, and that we deliver on the principles intended by the 2010 to 2015 Parliament.

I would like the Minister to clarify that he is responsible for the pubs code. I was under the impression that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), had taken over the role.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I confirm that I have that portfolio. That has happened only in the last few days, but I am and will be responsible for pubs. I am listening eagerly to what the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members are saying.

Toby Perkins: I thank the Minister. If that was not press released, he has just released it. I congratulate him on that important role. He may well know the history, but others may not.

One of the founding principles of the pubs code’s introduction, as laid out by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) when he was Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, was that there should be a rebalancing of the level of reward between pub companies and tenants. The Government’s intention was specifically that tenants should be better off as a result of the pubs code’s introduction.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West referred to two key principles: that the market rent only option should be on a fair and reasonable basis, and that tenants who were tied should not be worse off than those who were free-of-tie. I will come back to that point.

Perverse and bizarre as it may sound, the introduction of the pubs code was simultaneously late to arrive and rushed. It had a short period of implementation and took a long time after the legislation was passed to be delivered. As a result, sufficient preparation was not done by Government, or by some companies, to get ready for its introduction.

The appointment of the Pubs Code Adjudicator was surrounded by controversy. My hon. Friend referenced the inordinate delays and some of the methods used to prevent landlords fulfilling their rights to go market rent only. It is important to remember that many tenants are in a perilous financial position when they seek to go free-of-tie. They are not in a position where inordinate delays, very substantial outlays of cash or huge legal costs are attainable.

If we want to deliver the opportunity—the right—for the tenant to assess an independent market rent and decide whether they want to have a landlord-tenant relationship, or whether they want to receive all the services from a pub company, it is important that the delays are not inordinate and that false additional charges
[Toby Perkins]

are not put in to prevent them from being able to take up that right. That is one of the strategies that seem to be being used very deliberately.

Most tenants have a five-year contract period. If they come to the end of a contract and attempt to get a free-of-tie rent assessment, the clock is ticking on their next five-year contract. That delay is being put in there, but if they subsequently go free-of-tie or get an arbitration or adjudication award in their favour there is no opportunity to backdate that to the start of their five years—all the more reason why the principle should be that the adjudicator carries out their role in the most timely fashion possible. Any tenant who manages to get an independent assessment and decides to take that up does not get that rent backdated. The code should be amended so that rent is backdated to the point of application. I ask the adjudicator to adjudicate on that and the Minister to clarify that in his remarks.

For many tenants, there is a narrow window in which they can take up the right to get an independent assessment. At the end of their contract, they have to let their pub company know. They are often waiting for a new assessment and under the impression that they are still part of a negotiation by the time that they realise that they have missed out on their opportunity to take advantage of it.

My hon. Friend referred to the conflict of interest that many people feel Mr Newby had when he took on this role. There are two important elements of that for tenants’ confidence in the process. We should be clear that many tenants would like the opportunity to take up their right, but have lost confidence in the process. They believe that if they try to take up that right, they will only take on additional cost, so they are not taking advantage of this. I am sure that that disturbs all hon. Members who wanted the legislation to be introduced.

There is a financial conflict. Mr Newby continues to hold shares and to be owed money by Fleurets, which has many leading pub companies as its customers. Whatever the questions about his history, it is absolutely wrong that he did not divest himself of that interest when he took on this role. We are talking about a relatively small sum—although significant for an individual—so given the importance of the industry and the legislation, it would have been far better for him to have divested himself of that.

The point about the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators ruling against the PCA’s arbitrating on four different cases is significant. The Chartered Institute of Arbitrators’ spokesman said that when a challenge was upheld, an arbitrator’s appointment in that dispute is “immediately terminated”, and they should not be involved in that case again. In response to that, a spokesperson on behalf of the Pubs Code Adjudicator said that because his responsibilities were established by an Act of Parliament, the PCA did “not accept that the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators has any jurisdiction to appoint or remove an individual from the role of arbitrator in a pubs code arbitration.” That is an important matter of law for the Government, and also a matter of direction.

I believe that as a matter of law, the PCA should have listened to the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. Even if it is true that the institute does not have the power to remove him, a sensible arbitrator would say, “Given that an independent body says that I have a conflict of interest, it surely makes sense for me to stand down and appoint a truly independent arbitrator.” The question of the extent to which the Pubs Code Adjudicator is both an adjudicator and an arbitrator is significant, because arbitrations happen in private and adjudications happen in public.

What we have seen from the Pubs Code Adjudicator so far is that he is much more of an arbitrator than an adjudicator. Might the Government consider separating those roles? The role I envisage for the PCA as a spokesman for the code is undermined by the fact that so much of his dealings are done in private, so he has not taken on nearly enough of a forceful role, which is what I would like him to play. If he criticises some of the pub companies, as he does, that perhaps makes it more difficult for him to arbitrate in private with them, so there are real difficulties in all of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West referred to the section 40 powers of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015, which impose a duty on the Pubs Code Adjudicator to notify the Secretary of State if he believes the code is being breached and not followed. It is clear from his public pronouncements that he believes the code is being breached, but I am under the impression that there has never been a section 40 notice given to the Secretary of State. If that is the case, will the Minister or the Secretary of State pursue that with the Pubs Code Adjudicator? If he is public is saying that there is wrongdoing, why has he not written to the Secretary of State with suggestions about altering the code to clarify and strengthen his case, or made the report that he has a duty to make?

There are two or three key questions in the pubs code that it is important to clarify. One of them concerns market rent only. The right to market rent only is laid out in the Act, and that should not need any arbitration. It is a fact that if someone reaches one of the trigger points, they are entitled to ask for a market rent only option. The pub company has a right to make an offer, but if the tenant believes the offer is not fair, they have the right to go to an independent arbitrator. For some reason, the Pubs Code Adjudicator considers all the different applications to be arbitrations, but an independent assessment should not be a matter of arbitration. That is absolutely the principle of the clause in the Bill that we all approved.

On the market rent only option, the fact that someone would pay rent for the pub and not be tied on the drinks that are sold is absolutely accepted by the tenants and the pub companies. The question then arises: which of the other terms in the contract should also be a part of the contract? The pub companies would say a market rent only option means market rent only, and that is the basis of the entire relationship, whereas the tenants say that anything that is common in the industry that was part of the original contract should be part of a subsequent contract. Will the Minister clarify that?

Finally, to be positive, the appointment of the Deputy Pubs Code Adjudicator is welcome. We have seen a real difference since she was appointed. I would like to see her take an ever greater role. Some tenants are getting a better tied deal as a result of the threat of going free of tie. However, the question of deeds of variation is important. Will the Minister set out his view on that?
In conclusion, how many times, if at all, has the Pubs Code Adjudicator written to the Secretary of State to report failure to adhere to the spirit of the code? What is the Government’s view on whether terms that were in a previous tied contract should remain in free-of-tie contracts? Do the Government agree that Mr Newby should accept the verdict of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, and do they believe that the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators has a right to a view on those questions? It is important. The pubs code is a vital opportunity for the industry. It is important that we all make it work.

3.15 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on securing this important debate.

As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, the pubs code does not apply to pubs in my Scottish constituency of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk. However, that does not mean that this debate is not important to pub owners across Scotland. One of the real positives of devolution is our ability as legislators to learn from, improve on and replicate any legislation passed in other nations of our United Kingdom, if it is shown to be effective. There are plans for a similar pubs code and adjudicator in Scotland in a private Member’s Bill promoted by Neil Bibby, a Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament. He believes that tied pubs in Scotland would “be subject to similar legislation, protection and opportunities as those in England and Wales” if his Bill became law.

Although not perfect, the protection now offered in England and Wales is perhaps evidence that Government intervention might be the answer to helping pubs thrive, and I am sympathetic to a cause that looks to make this equal across all of the United Kingdom. However, it is worth reminding hon. Members that the pub landscape in Scotland differs from that in England and Wales. Most pubs in Scotland are independent free trades, whereas in England the majority are tenanted, so it remains unclear as to how effective the proposed Bill in Scotland would be. I look forward to hearing what my MSP colleagues in my party and others make of the legislation.

I am supportive of anything that can be done to help pubs across Scotland and the wider United Kingdom. It is no secret that, over the past few years, many have been shutting down at an alarming rate. I am sure hon. Members from rural constituencies like mine are particularly aware of this. None the less, all is not doom and gloom. The importance of pubs in our communities is profound. For hundreds of years people have been able to congregate in our pubs with friends, neighbours and family members. No doubt many of this country’s finest ideas and movements have been dreamt up at a night in the pub. This sentiment is truer today than on any other, on the eve of our celebration of Robert Burns. The pubs’ practical role is clear, too. The great “Pub is the Hub” initiative helps publicans expand their offering into being the local newsagent, post office or village shop in communities that have lost those services, increasing the viability and integral value of a community pub.

In Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk alone, 800 jobs are supported by the pubs and drinks sector, and it is growing. Great pubs such as the Auld Cross Keys Inn in Denholm are regularly mentioned in CAMRA’s “Good Beer Guide”, and good pubs need good beer. In the Borders, those are supplied by the fantastic Born in the Borders and the award-winning Tempest brewery, to name just two. Thriving distillers are creating innovative gins and bringing whisky production back to the Borders for the first time since 1837.

I am very proud to highlight the innovation and achievements taking place in my constituency and across Scotland, but we must also consider the great work that the Government have done to help improve the livelihoods of publicans and the communities they serve. Freezing duty on wines, ciders, beers and spirits is one of the most prominent. That was something I was more than happy to call on the Chancellor to do because I know and understand the benefits that are felt in many rural communities in my area and across the United Kingdom. In addition, the pubs code, while by no means perfect, demonstrates that the Government have the long-term interest of pubs at heart. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government plan to address the concerns that were raised about the pubs code and the adjudicator, and how the Government plan to support the pub sector across the United Kingdom.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on bringing the matter forward today. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said that it does not directly affect his constituency, and neither does it directly affect Northern Ireland, but that does not lessen our interest in the issue. I have spoken on it, and asked questions about it, before. I want to speak about the principle of the matter, although it is only England and Wales that are affected.

I have long held the view that we need to consider who audits the auditors and who holds to account those who hold the rest of us to account. I have been dismayed at times, when, trying to represent my constituents, I have requested information from accountability bodies. It would appear that the matter before us presents another example of the need for more accountability, as the hon. Member for West Bromwich West suggested.

I want to give credit to someone who is no longer in this House, and whom the hon. Member for West Bromwich West will well recall—Greg Mulholland, who represented Leeds North West. He fought the case in the Chamber whenever he had the opportunity. I was betwixt the two—the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on one side and the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on the other. I was delighted to be involved in the intervention.

Mr Bailey: I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). In fact I received a comprehensive brief from Greg Mulholland about an
hour before I came into the Chamber. I had a feeling that somehow his beady eyes would be upon us today to ensure that we would articulate the viewpoint on which he has campaigned so effectively for many years.

Jim Shannon: I thank both hon. Gentlemen for their comments which, along with mine and others’, are a recognition of the tremendous work that the gentleman in question put in, in this Chamber. We all recognise that his efforts were one reason we have got so far forward.

Others have endeavoured to take us the extra mile through their efforts, and I was made aware of the details from the briefing that was most helpfully provided by the Library. We do not often say it, but I thank those researchers for their diligent work. They provide tremendously factual and detailed information to sharpen the memory a wee bit and help in recalling what is important—the briefings also provide a signpost to further excellent information.

I am aware of the importance of pubs in my constituency, as all hon. Members will be. In rural areas in my constituency, more often than not the pub is the central focus of attention for meeting, entertaining and eating—just somewhere to meet. The importance of pubs cannot be underlined too strongly. I think it was just a few weeks ago, perhaps just before Christmas, that there were pubs closing. The rate of pub closures across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is alarming. I think that the pubs code and the Pubs Code Adjudicator are part of a methodology to try to hold back the tide of closures, so it is important that that is in place.

There was a community project where a collective got together and used their own investments to restart their pub with a major refurbishment. They did so for a purpose. They recognised that the community had lost something important and they wanted to reinstate it. Pubs are important in contributing to the economy and providing jobs, and as focal points for leisure and meeting.

It seems to me that hon. Members stepped in to stop the monopoly that was affecting small pub tenants. The spirit of the law under the pubs code was to allow a tenant to request a quote from their pub-owning company for a rent only agreement when their tenancy was due for renewal. We also established a position whereby there could be arbitration and mediation to ensure that the spirit of the law was being followed. That job lies squarely in the hands of the Pubs Code Adjudicator. Members have outlined credible and legitimate concerns, and we look to the Minister, as we often do, for a comprehensive response. Questions have now been asked as to whether the adjudicator is impartially fulfilling the role. In a few cases, the professional arbitrators body has stepped in to ask for someone else to arbitrate. Sometimes we must ask why something is happening: is there a failure in the present system? Some Members have set out a case that there is. The Minister must deal with that in his response.

I believe that the spirit of what we strove for was giving the little man or woman a chance. That might not mean every case being granted, but it does mean every case being fairly considered. Perhaps that means that the involvement of a third person is needed. I stand by the bringing in of a deputy to take up the cases that are questionable or that need to be reviewed or looked at again. That is what the spirit of the law has been. No man in this world is infallible and we all understand that we must submit to allowing others to step in at some stage to give oversight to something if there is a different way of seeing it or a clearer way to understand it.

As an example of such a difficult issue, if a lady came to the constituency office for help with serious intimate problems, she might prefer to speak to one of the girls in the office. Anyone would know what to do: set themselves aside so that they could do that. Why cannot that happen in the present difficult matter as well? I have no issue about handing such a case to one of my capable staff, who understand the issues very well. The best interest of the people in the case is most important. That is the view to take.

We must look at what we sought to achieve and find a way to bring that about practically. That is what I support today, and what other right hon. and hon. Members have argued for. Just as an auditor would be entitled to audit my affairs, they must be open to having what they do audited. That is true accountability. Each one of us is ultimately accountable to someone. That was the spirit of the pubs code—to help the little man or woman. Let us uphold that spirit today.

3.28 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on bringing to the Chamber an important debate that affects many people’s lives.

Having managed bars during my career, I want to say a few words for the people who work in pubs and the hospitality industry. It can be a difficult and demanding job, but also very rewarding. All those people put in a shift and a half on many occasions, and do us proud, regardless of which nation of the UK they work in.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West talked about difficulties with the adjudicator in England and Wales. He went into welcome detail about the challenges for operators—unfair expenses and difficulties in getting market rent. There were many things for the Minister to respond to. The impartiality of the operation is also an important factor to take on. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the onerous conditions placed on publicans, which I think will ring true for people who have been in such a difficult position.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) said that the imbalance between powerful pub companies and people who are trying to run pubs is an historic market failure, which it is.

Toby Perkins: Obviously, we have introduced the code of practice—the hon. Gentleman has heard about some of the issues with its implementation, which hopefully Scotland can learn from. He will be aware that in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, Scottish National party MPs voted for that code, because even though it was England-only legislation, they hoped that a similar provision might be introduced in Scotland. Will the SNP support the private Member’s Bill when it reaches the Scottish Parliament?

Drew Hendry: I intend to cover that point, and will answer it fully in a moment or two.
I congratulate the new Minister for pubs on his remit. If he listens today and is able to make the required changes, I am sure many people will raise a glass to toast his appointment. It is pleasing to be able to agree for a change with the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). It is a rare occurrence. He mentioned a private Member's Bill in Scotland—I will return to that—and rightly said that the pub landscape in Scotland is different from that in England and Wales. He mentioned the importance of pubs in the community, and again I agree. In areas where pubs are successful, they make a vibrant offering to the economy. He also mentioned Burns. As he will be aware “gude ale comes and gude ale goes”—wise words indeed. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made an important point about who audits the auditors, which the Minister should address. He also made a point about community.

On the private Member’s Bill, there is cross-party support in Scotland for looking into a statutory code, and to back that up the Scottish Government commissioned a study to look at various pub models. Work on that is ongoing, but it is looking at whether pubs in the tied sector are more unfairly treated than those in other sectors. The conclusion of the initial investigation was that, as I said earlier, it is difficult to compare the market in England and Wales with that in Scotland, because they are so different due to Scotland's independent free trade model. The Scottish Government are currently looking into whether such legislation is required, and I understand that discussions have been continuing right up to the minute about how to take that forward.

Since the Minister for pubs is here, I wish to underline that pubs need support. In Scotland, the SNP Government are working closely with public bodies and the industry to support jobs, infrastructure and the hospitality sector. Interestingly, the introduction of minimum unit pricing, which targets very cheap alcohol, could help the pub economy in Scotland because it will prevent people from buying cheap drinks in supermarkets, and allow them to spend more time in the controlled environment of a pub. The alcohol minimum pricing is set at 50p a unit. The chief executive officer of the Scottish Licensed Trade Association, Paul Waterson, has said:

“Cheap priced alcohol has turned Scotland into a nation of stay-at-home drinkers. Some 72% of total alcohol sales in Scotland are off-sales; 80% of this total, is sold by supermarkets. When people drink in uncontrolled environments, alcohol-related problems increase significantly.”

The brewing and pub industry in my constituency has had considerable success. Cairngorm brewery is nearby, as is the Black Isle brewery. The oldest bar in Inverness is Gellions, which was formed in 1841, and the Best Bar None awards have just declared through their best bar scheme that 22 venues in Inverness have won awards for outstanding efforts in helping to create a safer environment for the public. Will the Minister look into the small business bonus that has operated successfully in Scotland? Two out of five pubs now pay zero or reduced rates thanks to that bonus, which helps their viability.

**John Lamont:** Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that, because of the reforms to business rates introduced by the Scottish Government, many pubs, including many in my constituency, have seen their business rates go through the roof? The basis on which rates are now calculated means that many businesses are paying much more than they were under the previous regime, yet they are not seeing any additional income and many pubs now face closure.

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Gentleman is trying to make a point. He will also be aware that the Scottish Government have acted to restrict the increase in rates for the hospitality trade, and put measures in place to ensure that pubs and other small hotels and businesses are not disproportionately affected.

In conclusion, the Minister has an opportunity to make a big difference to the pub industry and I hope he will listen to the points raised by hon. Members about the situation in England and Wales. I also hope that he will consider other measures to support the licensed trade, and ensure that the pubs in our communities are viable.

3.36 pm

**Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on—yet again—securing a debate on this topic. I did not attend the debate on pubs last year, but I did attend the one before that. I am no longer the shadow pubs Minister; that is now my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), but sadly she has the flu and has sent her apologies for today’s debate.

**Richard Harrington:** I hope she gets better quickly.

**Bill Esterson:** I will pass on that message from the Minister.

Given that I follow the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), I will point out that my constituency includes the oldest pub in Lancashire, the Scotch Piper Inn—there is a link there of some sort. We have three microbreweries and two micropubs, the Beer Station and the Corner Post. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a good point about the importance of pubs as community hubs, and I agree with his other comments about the need for accountability in the implementation of the code.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West set out the key issues with his usual forensic accuracy, and he mentioned the concerns about the appointment and continuation in post of Mr Newby. I raised concerns about conflicts of interest in the debate two years ago, and such concerns have continued. Sadly, the predictions about Mr Newby's difficulty in obtaining the trust of pub tenants have been all too well demonstrated. The cases against him by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators—that he has continued to arbitrate and has not accepted the decision, and that he is in breach of the code of conduct for a body of which he is a member—have not helped, and they continue to give the impression that all is not well with the implementation of the pubs code.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) was modest in not mentioning his role in securing cross-party agreement on amendments to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill in 2015. The cross-party agreement had a lot to do with his work, as well as that of Greg Mulholland and other
Members across the House. We had the insertion of the market rent only option, but the delivery of that is missing, as is any assurance on the intention that tied tenants should not be worse off than they would be if they were free of tie. My hon. Friend made those points extremely well. As he said, it is vital that we make this work. That is why it is so important that we are having this debate.

I will go through three points for the Minister, who I welcome to his new role. His brief is interesting and exciting, and it is important for many people across the country. I hope he is able to get to grips with the real challenges and concerns that remain. Three questions have been brought to my attention in preparing for this debate. They have been covered, but I will attempt to summarise them. First, the Government may make the point that the code is complicated and will take time to bed in. That is true, but it is overly complicated and completely unnecessarily so. As other Members have said, that complexity has allowed pub companies to use their resources and their power in the relationship—my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield made this point—to make it difficult for pub tenants to challenge them and achieve the fair market approach that they should be entitled to. Because of the size of the legal bills, it is simply not possible for pub tenants who attempt to use the code to come up with the necessary resources.

The second point that the Government may make is that the Pubs Code Adjudicator, through the Government, was not prepared for the huge take-up. Few staff were in place at the start, and there was a delay in putting in place a deputy adjudicator, despite the overwhelming evidence of abuse. There were 15 years of inquiries by Select Committees, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West set out in his opening speech. The system was not set up in the right way, and it should have been.

The third point that the Government may make is about whether there has been an improvement in the financial balance between the pub-owning companies and pub tenants. Ballpark figures suggested to me are that a pub company would typically earn £90,000 from an average pub, which possibly breaks down to £20,000 in rent and £70,000 from tied products. The tenant earns just £10,000. Because of the process, the delays and the inaction from the adjudicator, it is difficult to do anything about that; but for those who try, there has been something of a change, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield alluded to. There may be a slight improvement, with a £5,000 or £10,000 reduction in the rent and an increase in the tenant’s income to £15,000 or £20,000, but that is still not a realistic living wage for someone running a pub, and the pubco is still earning £80,000 or £85,000.

The point is that legislation was supposed to leave the tenant no worse off than they would be if they were free of tie, not marginally better off than poverty levels. That is the point being made by the campaigners. I pay tribute to all the campaigners who have lobbied so hard over the years—including for this debate—advocating for pub tenants. I include in that Liverpool CAMRA, which has been in contact with me a number of times over the years.

On their own, the three areas that I have set out are grounds for the Minister in his new role to make an early commitment, today or after he has considered the debate, to carry out a proper review of the application and implementation of the pubs code and how the adjudicator is operating. If he can address that and the other points made by my hon. Friends, we will make some real progress.

I am tempted to say—so I will—that the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) demonstrated a certain failure by a Government of which she was a member for some years to support a pub in her constituency. I can assure her that the next Labour Government will stand up for pub tenants in a way that so far has not happened under this Government, and that will not happen unless they make the changes touched on in this debate. I was grateful to the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for pointing out that in Scotland, Labour is at the forefront of introducing a pubs code north of the border.

Drew Hendry: It is a cross-party position.

Bill Esterson: Well, there is a Scottish Government of one minority party. Perhaps they will learn from what has happened here and get the implementation right.

We want to hear from the Minister, so I will make only a few further remarks. Tenants’ experience has revealed the process to be drawn out and complicated. Many have to turn to professional legal support, which is expensive and time-consuming. Most worryingly, there have been suggestions that the pubcos are knowingly gaming the code to make it more difficult for tenants to achieve market rent only. That essential plank of the pubs code sought to redress the balance between pubcos and pub tenants.

The adjudicator’s own independent report on the allegations suggested that pub-owning businesses may be operating the code in a way that makes it hard for tied pub tenants to access their MRO rights. It revealed the shocking lengths to which some pubcos go to wear down tenants, including intimidation, bullying and antagonistic, delaying and frustrating behaviour. Tenants are often given terms that make MRO appear as unattractive as possible, such as being arbitrarily forced to provide six months of MRO rent upfront. Some pubcos have refused to allow the deed of variation of lease, thus forcing tenants who want MRO to agree a new lease under unfavourable terms. That is pretty damned. I give credit to the adjudicator for carrying out that review, but it is what he does with it and how quickly he acts that matters.

There is identified failure in the full implementation of the code, and Parliament’s intentions have so far not been followed. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and I thank Members for their comments. I hope he can give us a proper assurance that there will be the action that is needed, and not just words.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I very much thank all Members who have spoken, particularly the hon. Member for West...
Bromwich West (Mr Bailey). I make clear that I was gesticulating to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Selton Central (Bill Esterson), simply because I wanted the time to be able to go through the points he was raising. His comments, like those of everyone else, were extremely useful. I will do my best in the time allocated, conscious of the fact that I need to give the last word to the hon. Member for West Bromwich West, who secured this debate on a serious matter.

I was made the Minister with responsibility for pubs just this week. One can never say in politics that something is not a temporary job, but pubs are part of my portfolio—I accept that the shadow Minister is here because of the sickness of his colleague, and he dealt with that extremely well, as he always does—and I want to learn. Today’s debate is part of the learning process. The Government remain fully committed to the pubs code, because we intend to ensure that tied tenants can operate in a fair environment that allows their businesses to thrive.

Many Members, but in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), went through what the Government are doing to support pubs. The announcements in Budget 2017—the freezing of alcohol duty and the extension for another year of business rate relief for pubs valued under £100,000—are important, but we are here to discuss the pubs code.

The pubs code regulates the relationship between more than 500 tied pubs in England and Wales and their tenants, and there are six pub-owning companies involved. In total, 11,500 tied pub tenants are covered by the pubs code, so it is quite a lot, given that it is comparatively new.

We all know the principles, which I do not have time to go through. The code was intended to ensure fair and lawful dealings by pub-owning companies in relation to their tied tenants, and that those tenants should be no worse off than if they were not subject to any tie. It is now 18 months old. The shadow Minister asked whether the Government would carry out a review. That was an important point, but the legislation makes it clear that the Secretary of State will carry out a review of the pubs code and the performance of the Pubs Code Adjudicator every three years, with the first review period running from July 2016 to March 2019. That does not mean that I am avoiding anything, but the law is very clear. We will not just ignore the situation until that time, and I am very conscious of the points the hon. Gentleman made.

The tenants are engaging with the Pubs Code Adjudicator, Mr Paul Newby, and his office. His role is very clearly to oversee the pubs code, and to encourage and monitor compliance by the businesses in scope. He has the enforcement powers to arbitrate individual disputes concerning the pubs code. It is still early days, but I can see that individual tenants do not have confidence in that approach, given the many people in the Gallery today and the comments that have been made by hon. Members, reflecting what they have been told by pubs in their constituencies.

I hope many people have confidence in the PCA’s decisions. Some tenants have reported publicly—I looked at the reports before the debate—that PCA decisions have left them better off. However, I would be very ignorant, blind and deaf to what has been said today if I said that everything is fine. I realise that there is a problem. Many hon. Members in the Chamber have spent a lot of time and effort getting the legislation to the stage that it is at today and monitoring its implementation. I do not intend just to say that everything is fine. I recognise the points made about the PCA’s performance.

As a result of today’s debate, I read the correspondence between the PCA and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, with whom I dealt many times when working on my previous portfolio and for whom I have a lot of respect. I read the letter that she wrote to the PCA last year. There are key concerns about the speed of the arbitration process. Clearly, the PCA’s office has faced far greater demand than predicted, and the number of referrals has been significantly greater than was foreseen. At the PCA’s request, we have taken action to build up the team. The appointment of a Deputy Pubs Code Adjudicator, Fiona Dickie, who started at the beginning of November last year, has been mentioned. She is supporting Mr Newby in enforcing the pubs code, including arbitrating individual disputes. If it is under-resourced, it is our job to ensure that that is not the case. The PCA seems to be very conscious of that matter, and has not as far as I know asked for resources that have not been given.

The statements of principle on clauses mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) seem to me a very good idea, and I will look into that straight away. Officials may tell me that it cannot be done for some reason, but it seems to me, on the face of it, to be a very good idea to look into.

I am very conscious of time, Mr Robertson, but on the arbitration point, the PCA has received 225 cases for arbitration and accepted 186 as valid referrals. Of the accepted cases, 165 related to the market rent only tenancies that have been mentioned today. The PCA has issued 93 final awards. The fact is that Parliament chose arbitration as the means to resolve such disputes under the pubs code. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) asked why it was always in confidence. Arbitration, by definition, is a confidential process—that point was made later in the debate. We do not see individual cases. It is not right that the Government should see such cases such as that of Gary Murphy, the constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, because that is not how an arbitration system works. That does not take away any comments about the merits of the case, but it is not right that we, as the Government, are in a position to second-guess the arbitrator’s result. That is just how the system of arbitration works, but hon. Members might feel that it is not the right system.

The PCA has already published 40 products on its website, which I looked at before the debate. It provides a lot of information and guidance on the pubs code and PCA activities. As has been mentioned, it published the result of a verification exercise to understand the tenant’s experience in applying for MROs. When that was published, the PCA undertook work with the pub companies to inform the development of a compliance handbook that was published just before Christmas, setting out minimum standards for pubs companies to comply with the pubs code MRO requirements.

The point about the lack of enforcement was a valid one. Perhaps on another occasion I will be able to go into greater detail, when I have more time. The PCA has
set out his approach to investigations and enforcement in statutory guidance, and stands ready to take further action.

On the conflicts of interest point that was made about Mr Newby, the Secretary of State explained to the BEIS Committee that the appointment process was in full accordance with the code of practice for ministerial appointments to public bodies. I cannot comment on this one in particular, because I was not involved in it, but I have seen that practice for many other appointments that I have been involved in as a Minister. The process is very thorough, and I cannot believe that things were not disclosed and not considered properly. The panel concluded that Mr Newby had no particular conflicts of interest that should call into question his ability to do the job. I know what hon. Members meant—they are being very gracefull in not chuntering—but there were proper processes.

The Government support the pubs trade. In the short time remaining, I would like to say that I have never met Mr Newby. I intend to send him a copy of the Hansard report of today’s debate when it comes out tomorrow, and ask for a meeting with him—perhaps in two or three weeks, to give him a little time—where he can provide answers to the specific questions that have been raised. After that, it is my intention to speak again to the hon. Member for West Bromwich West, and ask him to attend a meeting with me to go through those responses.

3.58 pm

Mr Bailey: I belately welcome the Minister to his new role and portfolio. I do not envy him trying to grasp the ins and outs of the issues surrounding this topic, which some of us have been dealing with for many years. Having seen him perform before, I am confident that he will demonstrate both the commitment and competence to address our concerns properly and effectively.

A couple of things emerged from the debate, the first of which is the enormous expertise within the ranks of the House. I refer particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). Without his actions in 2015, we would not be as far as we are in the debate, and I think that deserves formal recognition, as does the work of Greg Mulholland in the past. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for his prosecution as locum for the other shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss).

I welcome the assurances given by the Minister, and would be very happy to work with him whenever I can to ensure that the issues that have been raised today are addressed. On the point about conflicts of interest, I was open-minded, but I think that the decisions of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators and the implications are serious. I ask him to examine those very carefully.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the application of the Pubs Code 2016.

RBS Closures (Argyll and Bute)

4 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered RBS branch closures in Argyll and Bute.

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. The Royal Bank of Scotland’s decision to close 62 of its branches in Scotland—a decision that will leave 13 towns in rural Scotland without a single bank—is, in short, a disgrace, and will inflict further long-lasting reputational damage on the Royal Bank of Scotland. For it to have announced the decision to close almost one third of its branch network so callously, without even the courtesy of a consultation period with the communities involved, is quite frankly appalling. For a Royal Bank of Scotland spokesperson to respond, when asked why it did not consult before announcing the closure plan, that “we are not required to consult communities in advance” just shows the contempt in which we customers are held.

One would have thought, hoped and certainly expected that having been bailed out by the public purse to the tune of £45 billion, the Royal Bank of Scotland would have exercised a degree of humility before steaming full speed ahead with a closure plan on this scale. One would have thought, hoped and certainly expected that, being 73% owned by the public purse, the Royal Bank of Scotland would have consulted its largest shareholder before making this shameful announcement, which will cause long-lasting damage to communities across Scotland, both urban and rural.

I would be interested to learn from the Minister if Royal Bank of Scotland management ever consulted the UK Government ahead of the announcement. If it did, what advice did the UK Government give the Royal Bank of Scotland regarding its bank closure programme?

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituency faces the loss of four branches, not only in Inverness but in the thriving tourist towns of Grantown, Aviemore and Nairn. Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the Federation of Small Businesses, which has said that this is bitterly disappointing news not only in Inverness but in the thriving tourist towns of Grantown, Aviemore and Nairn. Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the Federation of Small Businesses, which has said that this is bitterly disappointing news for not only people, but businesses in the highlands that will now have difficulties with cash transactions?

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a point that I will come to with some vigour later. The decision of the Royal Bank of Scotland to turn its back on so many of our communities, particularly those where it is the last bank in town, despite an earlier promise not to do such a thing, is a scandalous abdication of its social responsibility to rural Scotland, and to those people who were forced to keep it afloat when it threatened to sink without trace during the financial crisis a decade ago.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. In my constituency, we are losing a branch in Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats. Does my hon. Friend agree that
the Royal Bank of Scotland appears to have totally misjudged the public mood, and does not understand the deep sense of anger about the fact that while it is publicly owned, there is no sense of social responsibility or financial inclusion in these decisions?

**Brendan O’Hara:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If the Royal Bank of Scotland was not aware before of the anger that this has caused across Scotland, it is very aware now.

It has been well documented that in my Argyll and Bute constituency, RBS plans to close three branches, in Campbeltown, Rothesay and Inveraray. I cannot begin to describe the sense of anger and the growing hostility in those towns, and right across my constituency, at the decision to close those local branches. My constituents are well aware of the hardship that the closures will cause across our communities. It is that anger and burning sense of injustice that has led so many of them to sign my parliamentary petition, which I launched just before Christmas. In Inveraray, Rothesay and Campbeltown, there is not one shop that has refused to take a petition to gather local signatures. I have the petitions here, and will be lodging them on the Floor of the House in the very near future. That is testament to the anger felt across Argyll and Bute at this callous closure plan.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** It further underlined the annoyance to see the Prime Minister wash her hands of the situation at Prime Minister’s questions today, following a question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). Surely the chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland cannot be gliding on to BBC’s “Question Time” ignoring this issue? Ross McEwan cannot continue ignoring invites to meetings. These people, with their salaries, should show respect to the people and justify what they are doing. The UK Government should make sure that these people are not making monkeys of them, either, and should ensure that they go.

**Brendan O’Hara:** My hon. Friend makes a very powerful case. Like the Royal Bank of Scotland at the beginning, the UK Government have underestimated the sense of anger within our rural communities. We must keep up the pressure on the UK Government to act, and act swiftly.

**John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con):** The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful case, much of which I agree with. In my constituency, I am losing six bank branches. I suspect the anger in my communities is equal to what he is experiencing in Argyll and Bute. Does he share my concerns that the bank is putting too much additional pressure on the post office network, which I do not think has the capacity to deal with that extra custom? Post Office Ltd is saying one thing about what the network can deliver, and post office operators are saying something very different.

**Brendan O’Hara:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The idea that the post office network in our rural communities can somehow pick up the slack on this is nonsensical. It is an absolute fantasy and it will not work.

Without any consultation whatever, RBS has decided that people in Campbeltown who wish to continue banking with it must now endure a 17.5-mile round trip to Oban. Alternatively, they could drive an hour to Claonaig, take a 30-minute ferry to Lochranza on Arran and drive over the hills for 40 minutes to bank at the branch in Brodick. RBS customers on the Isle of Bute, in order to remain RBS customers, will be expected to take a ferry to the mainland, get off at Wemyss Bay and drive or get a bus to Largs. No matter which way one looks at it, a visit to the nearest branch of RBS for customers in Campbeltown and Bute will be a day out of their lives.

Worse still is the position of the people of Inveraray. The closure of the RBS branch in Inveraray, despite previous assurances that RBS would not close the last bank in a town, means that there will be absolutely no banking facilities in that town at all. It borders on the unbelievable that a town such as Inveraray, with a booming tourist industry and three good-size hotels, and boasting numerous cafés, bars, restaurants and high-quality clothing outlets—a town that has an estate and a castle that is a magnet for tourists—will be left without a single bank. The Inveraray-based author and journalist, Marian Pallister, who launched her own online petition against the closures, was spot on when she said:

“The Inveraray branch is used by businesses, individuals and charities throughout Mid Argyll. Online banking is not a valid alternative in many rural areas and now businesses and charities will have to make a 75-mile round trip to the nearest RBS branch. Inveraray is a tourist hub and while this closure disadvantages local people, it is a death sentence for the local tourist industry.”

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says. I do not represent an area that is losing branches, but I represent the headquarters; RBS is based in my constituency. Does he share my disappointment that RBS appears not to have researched whether the areas where it is closing branches were the same—or not the same—as those with broadband blackspots? The facilities that these areas need to replace the bank have not yet been rolled out to them.

**Brendan O’Hara:** I absolutely agree. It is a double whammy for so many of our rural communities. Whether RBS likes it or not, there are still plenty of people who rely on a local, accessible bank in their town or village: the elderly, who still depend on an over-the-counter banking facility; people with learning difficulties, who have built a relationship with bank staff and trust them to help with their banking needs; small shops and businesses—of which we have an abundance in Argyll and Bute—that still primarily use cash; and, of course, foreign tourists, of whom we have a plentiful supply in Argyll and Bute, looking for a cash machine or the ability to change currency, for which a local bank is essential. Moreover, as the hon. Lady said, people do not yet always have sufficiently reliable broadband to bank online, and let us not forget that some people still do not want to bank online. Every one of those groups will be affected.

**Drew Hendry:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way once again; he is being very generous. He makes the point very powerfully about access for people in rural communities, and for those who are disadvantaged in...
different ways. Online banking just does not cut it. For example, people cannot get cash from their computer, and when the branches go, so do the cash machines, which further disadvantages businesses and people in our communities. Does he agree?

Brendan O’Hara: I absolutely agree, and I find it utterly bewildering that the work was not done—or, if the work was done, that the Royal Bank of Scotland did not reach that very obvious conclusion.

Let me be clear: I have no doubt that the number of people accessing their local branch is falling, but I question the way in which RBS has collated the numbers. It is twisting and manipulating them to make them justify a predetermined case for branch closures. The Royal Bank of Scotland appears to have a pretty unique way of calculating the number of customers accessing its branches. My right hon. Friend for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said in the main Chamber just before Christmas that “RBS is trying to create a picture of these branches as a relic of the past”—[Official Report, 18 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 883.] RBS is saying that “demand for branch banking” has declined to such an extent that customers are abandoning branches in their droves.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con) rose—

Brendan O’Hara: I will make some progress before I give way again.

Using RBS’s own statistics, however, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber showed how misleading those numbers are. He explained that the justification given by the Royal Bank of Scotland for closing a branch in his constituency, in the town of Beauly, was that only 27 people a week used it, yet the Beauly branch has almost 3,500 customers and processed 29,000 transactions last year; 29,000 transactions from just 27 customers does not seem right to me. As I said, I cannot help think that the figures have been calculated in such a way as to simply justify a pre-planned closure.

If the Royal Bank of Scotland wants a meaningful, open and honest discussion about closing local branches, then let us have one, but let it be predicated on facts, not the spin and obfuscation that we have witnessed up until now.

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend makes a powerful argument. He talks about statistics, the number of customers using banks, and those figures being used as a lever to close branches in order to cut costs, but one way of cutting costs would have been not to award £16 million in bonuses last year.

Brendan O’Hara: I could not put it better myself, so I will not try to. Let me be clear: there is more to these ruthless closures than the effect on individuals and businesses. As many know, Argyll and Bute is a beautiful but remote part of the country. With that remoteness come many demographic and economic challenges, but we are determined to overcome those obstacles. Argyll and Bute Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Argyll and Bute Economic Forum, Scottish Rural Action and I, along with many others, have been busy telling folk that Argyll and Bute is open for business. Together we have been actively promoting Argyll and Bute as a great place to live, work, raise a family, invest and open a business, but the Royal Bank of Scotland has kicked us in the teeth.

As Cleland Sneddon, the chief executive of Argyll and Bute Council, said:

“as the person who represents the taxpayer interest...of course my interest is the Argyll and Bute, Argyll and Bute Council, the Argyll and Bute Economic Forum and Scottish Rural Action, who is a constituent living on the Isle of Bute, said:

“I believe RBS has a responsibility to those rural communities that have banked with them for generations and this decision appears to have scant regard to their particular needs...Argyll and Bute Council has called on RBS to urgently review this decision”.

Nicholas Ferguson, chair of the Argyll and Bute Economic Forum, was equally scathing:

“For the last few years, major efforts have gone into changing the depopulation trend in Argyll and Bute. To do this, we needed to create jobs and major progress has been made...But Argyll is a place of many small firms.

These rely heavily on local banking services and the plans by RBS to close their offices in three of our most important towns would be a major setback...As the UK government is the principal owner of RBS, I would strongly request that this decision be reversed.”

Those two are not alone. Emma Cooper of Scottish Rural Action, who is a constituent living on the Isle of Bute, said:

“It is our opinion that these branch closures demonstrate a lack of care and compassion from RBS about rural communities and vulnerable people, who will be disproportionately impacted by the decision, and the process by which these decisions were made was unethical.”

As the Minister can tell, Argyll and Bute is demanding action on the issue. He does not need me to remind him that there is a precedent: George Osborne, when he got involved as Stephen Hester was leaving RBS, told the BBC’s “Today” programme that “as the person who represents the taxpayer interest...of course my consent and approval was sought”.

So there is precedent, and it is an undeniable fact that the Government have the power to intervene. It is only a matter of whether they choose to exercise that power and to get involved.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Brendan O’Hara: If the intervention is extremely short.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making a very important point. Have not the Government demonstrated that they have intervened on matters relating to management of the Royal Bank of Scotland? Nothing is more important to our communities than the maintenance of the bank branch network. The Government have a responsibility and a duty to ensure that RBS recants this decision.

Brendan O’Hara: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The Minister should be in no doubt: the people of Argyll and Bute, Argyll and Bute Council, the Argyll and Bute Economic Forum and Scottish Rural Action demand that the UK Government intervene to stop the closures. Will the UK Government choose to get involved, or will they ignore the overwhelming opinion of the
The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry.

I warmly commend the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) on securing this debate and speaking with such passion and determination. Let my first words be that the Government recognise how often banks are seen as an intrinsic part of the community fabric. That point has been made by several Members this afternoon, and the hon. Gentleman has reaffirmed it eloquently.

We have heard a lot about the closure of physical branches. I believe that this is the fourth time that the hon. Gentleman has raised the issue in the House since RBS’s announcement last December. I want to make clear my sincere sympathy for the concerns that he raised on behalf of his constituents and that hon. Members raised during the debate.

I reassure the Chamber that one of my key priorities as Economic Secretary is to promote and support financial services that deliver for their customers, making those services as accessible as possible. However, the hon. Gentleman must appreciate that the way we bank is going through a period of unprecedented change. Online and mobile technologies mean that customers—perhaps some of us in this Chamber—are reducing our use of high street branches quite drastically.

Kirstene Hair: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I will give way but I will be very sparing in giving way, because I do not want to run out of time to say what I need to say.

Kirstene Hair: I thank the Minister for giving way. On accessibility, my constituents in Montrose have been told that they will have to travel to Arbroath, but RBS will give no confirmation that Arbroath will remain open for the foreseeable future. I agree that accessibility is of the utmost importance, but it is understandable that constituents are concerned—they do not know what the future holds for the next nearest branch.

John Glen: I will come on to a number of practical steps that I think can challenge the banks’ logic and help hon. Members across the House.

We have to acknowledge the change in the way that we use banks, and the fact that banks will adapt to reflect the shift in consumer patterns. That means making tough decisions, such as modernising their services to maintain profitability. I go back to what I said two weeks ago on this spot: the decision is not for the Government, and it is important that I explain why. I acknowledge the point that has been made about Stephen Hester, but there is a material difference between the Government, as the largest shareholder, being consulted on the matters the chief executive is, and the day-to-day operational decisions made branch by branch. There is a reasonable difference in the level of involvement. Each bank’s branch strategy, including whether to open or close individual branches, is for the management of that bank to determine. The Government rightly do not intervene in those commercial decisions in this bank or in any other bank.

Ian Blackford: I will not take an intervention, because I need to make some progress. Likewise, the Government do not manage the RBS Group; that is headed by its own board, which is responsible for strategic direction and management decisions. By its own volition, RBS has announced a number of branch closures in line with its commercial strategy. Obviously, banks will keep a number of factors in balance when they make these decisions: customer interests, market competition and other commercial considerations. The decisions are theirs to take, but they are also theirs to defend.

I say to the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate that by bringing the matter to the attention of the House again, he is doing a very good job of challenging the bank to justify the decisions it makes. It is for the bank to do that. Indeed, two RBS executives gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee on this very matter last week, and they were pressed on their rationale. I have read the transcript, and they made it clear that customer behaviour is changing and bank branch networks logically are changing to reflect that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Minister said that only 1% of RBS customers in Scotland use any of its branches on a weekly basis. I am going to carry on, I am afraid, but I will address a number of points that flow from that.

The banking industry estimates that branch visits have fallen by roughly one third since 2011, and that more than one third of our adult population regularly uses mobile banking apps. The Office for National Statistics estimates that 63% of adults used the internet to bank in 2017. It is not the Government’s role to speak for RBS, but its own figures paint a similar picture of substantial change. Strikingly, I understand that RBS estimates that only 1% of RBS customers in Scotland use any of its branches on a weekly basis. I am aware that there are disputes over that, and I will address that point in a moment. The banking industry is changing to accommodate this shifting customer behaviour. However, the Government recognise that closures have an impact on customers who still need or want to bank in person. We have addressed that and ensured that measures are in place so that everyone can continue to access banking services.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Minister said that only 1% of customers are accessing those branches. On an island of more than 1,000 people, that does not square with RBS telling us that only 13 people went into the branch. I do not need MI5 on the Isle of Barra to tell me who goes in the branch. We see exactly who goes in there. Twenty went in on the morning that RBS made...
that announcement. It got rid of a load of employees and hired people from an agency. Surely, as the largest shareholder, Government have to have some oversight over the cowboy behaviour that has been going on at the Royal Bank of Scotland—it is not Scotland any more.

John Glen: I am grateful for that intervention, but I will not take any more. I will address how the bank can be challenged on this point in a moment.

I want to make four points in the remaining time I have. First, I want to discuss the Post Office. The Government has improved face-to-face banking services at the Post Office. With more than 11,600 Post Office branches in the UK, it offers a robust network to ensure that customers have a physical opportunity to bank locally if they choose. We should not forget that 99.7% of people live within three miles of their local post office, and 93% within one mile. We are going to experience a cultural change in the appetite and behaviours around using post offices.

Earlier last year, the UK’s banks and building societies and the Post Office reached a new commercial agreement that set the standard for the banking services available at the Post Office—balance inquiries, cash withdrawals, cash deposits and depositing cheques—to ensure that there would be a uniform level of service across the country. That agreement means that 99% of personal customers and 95% of business customers can do their day-to-day banking at the Post Office. With more than 11,600 Post Office branches in the UK, it offers a robust network to ensure that customers have a physical opportunity to bank locally if they choose. We should not forget that 99.7% of people live within three miles of their local post office, and 93% within one mile. We are going to experience a cultural change in the appetite and behaviours around using post offices.

I am aware that for the service to maximise its potential, the banks’ customers must know about it and know how to use it. That is why my predecessor wrote to the Post Office and to UK Finance last month; I am expecting a response today and I expect to see substantive commitments from all involved. We can all do our day-to-day banking at the Post Office and we should spread that message far and wide, especially to those of our constituents who may be worried about this issue.

Secondly, I will address a number of the concerns raised by hon. Members about the access to banking standard. As well as bolstering the Post Office, the Government support the industry’s access to banking standard that all major high street banks have agreed to. The standard commits banks to a number of outcomes when a branch closes: first, that they will give at least three months’ notice of a closure and explain their decision clearly; secondly, that they will consider what services can still be provided locally and communicate clearly with customers about alternative ways to bank; and, thirdly, that they will ensure that support is available for customers who need extra help. That support includes help for the digitally excluded who want to learn how to bank online, and guidance for those who regularly use branches and who need to be shown where and how to use the local post office that can help them.

I understand that RBS has undertaken substantive discussions with MPs and other local stakeholders on the future of banking in the communities affected by closures.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

John Glen: I am not going to give way again. Where it has not done so, it is incumbent on RBS to engage with Members of Parliament to do just that. In excess of the notice required by the standard, RBS has given six months’ notice of these closures. The access to banking standard is the practical way to shape a bank’s approach to local areas, and I encourage every Member to ensure that their community is aware and able to engage with their bank directly. The Lending Standards Board monitors and enforces the access to banking standard. It will monitor how RBS and other banks fulfil their obligations to their customers. The board can be contacted by Members of Parliament if they have legitimate concerns about the way in which the process is being fulfilled. That new and additional scrutiny is a necessary and welcome addition to the way the standard works.

Thirdly, I will address the current account switch service. Should other banks offer more extensive local facilities, the Government have made it easier than ever before to switch to an alternative, using the current account switch service. The switch service is free to use. It comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and it redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. That means that, more than ever, banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones.

Finally, a number of points have been made about access to cash. I understand that RBS is considering whether an additional mobile bank branch would be required in the constituency of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute. More widely, the Government continue to work with industry to secure the provision of free access to cash. In December, LINK—the organisation that runs the ATM network in the UK—committed to protecting all free-to-use ATMs that are a kilometre or more from the next nearest free-to-use ATM. This is a welcome strengthening of its financial inclusion programme.

I acknowledge that this is a very difficult matter, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing it to the House again. I commend all hon. Members who have contributed. I believe that I have set out clearly where there are some options to challenge the banks, if they feel justified in doing so.

Question put and agreed to.
Heathrow Airport: Public Consultation

4.30 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public consultations on Heathrow airport.

It is a privilege to introduce this debate. The whole issue of Heathrow expansion is of course massive and will be debated extensively in the next six months, but I want to focus on the various consultations and ask the Minister how they fit together, how the Government are responding to them, how responsive the Government are to evidence and how far they have committed themselves to fundamental decisions.

I will refer to three specific consultations. The first is the major consultation on the national policy statement—the basic strategy document—which finished in May and was reported on by Sir Jeremy Sullivan. The second is the more recent consultation on the adaptation of the NPS, which finished in December and related to new bodies of evidence on air quality and passenger numbers. The third is the consultation that is taking place at the moment. A glossy document came through my door a few days ago, and it is probably going through hundreds of thousands of others. That raises a fundamental question, because the proposal in it is different from the Government’s. How do the proposals fit together, and how many residents in London are supposed to respond to that consultation?

I will concentrate on the second consultation, and the main document I will refer to is the response of the four councils—Richmond, Wandsworth, Hillingdon and Windsor. It is worth mentioning in passing that those councils between them incorporate the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the shadow Chancellor and me, among others, so they are not totally devoid of political interest. Let me focus on the two main respects in which the questions in December’s revised consultation were framed—air quality and passenger numbers—and how they change our perspective on this subject.

Air quality is important because it involves not just aesthetic considerations but matters that directly impinge on human health and mortality. We start from a position where NO₃ emissions and particulates are at dangerous and illegal levels according to internationally recognised standards, and the most recent evidence suggests that emissions are rising, not falling. That is the context in which we have to look at the new evidence on air quality.

Since the original NPS consultation, the Government have produced their own national air quality plan. One of the problems with that is that it does not specifically take into account Heathrow. Will the Minister say how it would differ if it did? It also does not take into account the plans of the Mayor of London, who is in the process of formulating proposals for what I think he calls an ultra-low emissions zone. There are issues with how that will be implemented, given that the Government will not give special consideration to funding it. The arithmetic of London government suggests that the Mayor’s plans for reducing emissions will be almost entirely offset, if not worse, by those originating at Heathrow.

The bigger question is whether those emissions need to be produced at all. On the basis of the Government’s original estimates, it is possible that there might be such a switch to public transport that there would not be any additional cars on the road. I believe the Government used the phrase “no more cars on the road” in the original formulation of their NPS. However, to achieve that, they would have to achieve an enormous change in modal split: something like 70% of vehicle journeys would have to be by public transport.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and apologise for arriving just after he had started. He is right, but does he acknowledge that, according to Transport for London’s own statistics, to accommodate the projected increased traffic to and from Heathrow would cost around £18 billion? That assumes that current trends would continue—in other words, that the same proportion of people would drive to and from Heathrow. Even based on those status quo assumptions, we would require £18 billion of additional investment, which Heathrow will not pay, the Government have said they will not pay, and TfL is unable to pay.

Sir Vince Cable: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I want to dwell a little on that £18 billion figure which, as he says, is based on rather conservative assumptions. Where that will come from is one of the big unanswered questions. The Government say that they will not provide financial support. The airport itself has come up with £1 billion towards the £18 billion, but it is already a highly leveraged company. Questions have been raised about its balance sheet, and particularly about the large-scale tax-avoidance schemes that have enabled it to finance its debt so far, so how will it raise yet more to fund the infrastructure? The only way that could happen is if the airport very substantially increased landing charges. One of the reasons why major airlines such as British Airways have turned against Heathrow expansion is that they realise that that would be a necessary consequence. The other potential source of funding is TfL, but it is highly constrained by public sector borrowing restrictions and the need to fund Crossrail, which will be a major burden on its balance sheet in coming years.

TfL has spelled out in detail how the public transport infrastructure would have to be provided, and much of it is highly problematic. It would have to go a lot further than some improvements to the Piccadilly line and the Elizabeth line. It would involve, among other things, improving southern rail access. However, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) well knows, that is problematic. The southern rail route runs through my constituency and his. If the route to Heathrow ran through his constituency, there would be serious problems with prolonged closures of level crossings, and the line through Kingston and Wimbledon is already congested. It is not at all obvious how that improvement is feasible—it has not even been sketched out—and there is a big question for the Government about how it would be funded.

The other question that the revised consultation raises is about increased passenger numbers. It is important to stress that the revised figures—the Government’s own numbers, not anyone else’s—suggest that the national economic benefit of airport expansion would be significantly
greater at Gatwick than at Heathrow. That is a reversal of the Airports Commission’s analysis. Do the Government accept that conclusion? If they do not, perhaps they will explain why not. If they do, how do they propose to respond? They could say, “Well, we don’t care, because we’re not really interested in national economic benefit. We’ve decided we’re going to have a hub airport.” However, that would raise two big questions: why proceed with a national hub airport if it is less economically beneficial than the alternative, and why not ask or expect Gatwick to provide its own hub facilities, which it is perfectly keen and anxious to do?

The other factual information that has emerged from the new passenger numbers is that Heathrow airport will fill up very quickly. On current assumptions, it will start in 2026 and be full by 2028. That has knock-on consequences. There will be very little resilience, the airport’s authorities will be tempted to switch from domestic routes to more profitable international routes and it will make it much easier, given the monopolistic position, to push up fares even further.

Then there are the consequences of the higher passenger numbers, which are new. There is the impact on noise, which I think is of concern to all the constituencies whose MPs are in the Chamber. The original assurance given by the Secretary of State was that, when Heathrow was expanded, no more people in London or the areas around it would be affected by noise. The current numbers suggest that an additional 90,000 will be. Again, do the Government accept that?

What is important is not simply the aggregate numbers, but how that very large number of individuals—are directly affected. That relates to take-off and landing routes and the trajectory of the aircraft. At the moment, we have no information on flight paths, which is crucial to making an informed decision on how the project will affect our constituencies.

My final point on the data is that, although connectivity is one of the major reasons why Heathrow expansion is being considered, the new data suggests that connectivity to other British cities will decline with Heathrow expansion, from eight major destinations at present to five, and will be smaller than were Gatwick to proceed. I ask the Minister to consider how the Government regard this new evidence, which casts doubt on the feasibility of the proposal.

I will round up by raising the more basic question of how the Government are approaching consultation. Have they come to a conclusion, in which case we are going through a ritual, or are they meaningfully engaging in dialogue, listening to evidence and seeing it as a genuinely iterative process? One important step is how we are to see the consultation that Heathrow airport itself is now engaging in. It is important for our constituents to understand that what Heathrow airport is proposing seems substantially different from what the Government are proposing.

One of the options the airport is looking at is moving and substantially shortening the runway. I understand why it would want to do so, because that avoids all the horrendous problems of tearing up the M25 and rebuilding it under a tunnel, with all the costs involved. If it is changed in that way, that substantially affects the noise contour; I think there are 20,000 people who would face much more intense and intolerable noise levels, many of them in the constituency of the shadow Chancellor. There is a question how that would be dealt with.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. This is a timely debate. I have to confess that I have not received the same volume of consultative literature in the north of the borough of Ealing as he has, for various reasons. I wonder whether, among the data of the passenger and transport movements to and from the airport, there has been a disaggregation that identifies the cargo and freight movements—specifically because the economy of Northern Ireland is almost entirely dependent on cargo freight movements into Heathrow airport. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about passenger movements, but is there a disaggregation that identifies cargo movements to and from Heathrow?

Sir Vince Cable: I cannot answer the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I hope the Minister will be able to. There is a specific issue about freight, not just in the air, but on the ground. One of the contributing factors to a lot of the worries about air quality relates to freight on the ground, which is linked to air journeys.

I have one minute left for my presentation, so I will conclude by trying to probe further how the Government see this consultation. The Secretary of State said in July that the Heathrow expansion project, along the lines that were originally identified, would definitely go ahead. We are left with the question of whether that is inevitable if the evidence changes? We now have evidence based on the Government’s own numbers to suggest that Gatwick is a more economically attractive alternative. Does that matter? How much more attractive does it have to be before the Government might consider the fundamentals around the location? If the air quality evidence is so damaging, at what point do the Government reconsider their options?

Fundamentally, going back to the intervention by the hon. Member for Richmond Park, we are potentially talking about large Government subsidy if the airport is to avoid a very large increase in landing charges or funding from sources that we cannot yet identify. Is there a level of subsidy and Government funding that is unacceptable? We have new evidence, which is emerging all the time and is becoming progressively less favourable to the case for Heathrow, so I will leave this question with the Minister: how open-minded are the Government to that new evidence, and how will they progress the project?

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. I have four Members standing, and it might be of interest to the House to know that I plan to call the Scottish National party spokesman at eight minutes past five. If you could bear that in mind, that is about five and a half minutes each.

4.46 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince
Cable) for securing this debate. I am minded to speak positively about Heathrow expansion, but I must initially mention the issues affecting the four councils, so eloquently described by the right hon. Gentleman, which include air quality and ground-based infrastructure.

Heathrow expansion is a UK-wide issue, and the ripple effects of expansion will go far and wide throughout the United Kingdom. All parts of the UK have a stake in it, and in this consultation. The need has been clearly identified for greater airport capacity in south-east England, so that we can have not only more international but more domestic flights, including—this may be a selfish statement—to and from Scotland. In recent years, flights between Scotland and London have been restricted due to a lack of capacity. Improved connectivity would also benefit Scotland's economy.

Expansion will allow our airports to turn that situation around, restoring services that existed previously and introducing new ones. More opportunities to get to London from Scotland and vice versa will make travel, be it for business or pleasure, far more convenient. That is why I welcome Heathrow's commitment to a £10 million fund to support new domestic routes as part of its expansion plans. With more domestic and international flights, Heathrow expansion will help link Scotland to emerging global markets. Heathrow's recent reduction in landing charges for domestic flights will make domestic flights more accessible, and I am convinced that it will incentivise more flights in the future.

It will therefore come as no surprise to right hon. and hon. Members that Heathrow expansion has the support of most Scottish airports. When I say most, I understand that Edinburgh airport is not enthused by it, but I think there is a commercial link between the ownership of Edinburgh and Gatwick. The Scottish Chamber of Commerce and the Scottish Government are fully supportive of the expansion, and I hope that their voices will be heard and taken on board in this consultation.

The benefits of Heathrow expansion will be felt particularly strongly by residents and businesses in Ayrshire. South Ayrshire's very own Prestwick airport, which is not in my constituency but the neighbouring constituency of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), is one of six airports expected to be added to Heathrow's domestic network by 2030 as a consequence of the third runway. Flights between Heathrow and Prestwick, in addition to being good for Prestwick, will make travel to London and around the world much easier for my constituents and for people across south-west Scotland.

I am also pleased to note that Prestwick has been included on the list of potential logistics hubs serving Heathrow expansion. The four successful sites will pre-assemble parts of the expanded airport for delivery to Heathrow; I am looking forward to Prestwick being selected as one of those, bringing new jobs and investment to Ayrshire. I am optimistic for Prestwick and for the Ayrshire communities, where the aerospace park is a major employer. The Ayrshire growth deal, which is in the pipeline but not coming as fast as I would like, will include plans for Prestwick to become an aerospace hub. Heathrow therefore has good reason to work with Prestwick. As a site with great access to air, road, rail and sea, it is an ideal candidate for a logistics hub, and I hope Heathrow will give due consideration to Prestwick's bid.

4.49 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Sir Henry. I thank my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), for securing the debate. I also thank the Library, which released this week an excellent summary of where we are and how we got there. It is neutral, dispassionate, but factual, and pulls together all the references that we need for such a debate. I also thank the No 3rd Runway Coalition for its help in briefing some of us for the debate.

I will not cover, as we have covered between us many times before, the details of the impact of a third runway; the net cost to the economy, according to Department for Transport figures; or the increased air and noise pollution. We have had, and will have, many other opportunities in this House and other places to raise those issues. I want to focus on the current public consultation, but I will just give the context. My constituency, Brentford and Isleworth, lies immediately to the east of Heathrow airport. Two thirds of my constituents live underneath the approach path for the two runways on westerly operations, and the other third of my constituency will be underneath the approach path to the third runway, so this is a massive issue for my constituents.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way so early. I would compliment her on her speech, but she has not given it yet, although I know it will be brilliant, because she is an absolutely stalwart campaigner on this issue. Does she agree that one problem with the consultation is that we know that hundreds of thousands of new people will be affected by noise, but we do not know which hundreds of thousands, because the Government and Heathrow have yet to tell us where the new flight paths will be, which renders the entire consultation process entirely disingenuous, if not dishonest? It is a bit like saying, “We’re going to put a new incinerator in your constituency, and we’d like to ask people their opinion, but we’re not going to say where it’ll be put.” Surely the entire basis of the consultation’s legitimacy has a question mark hanging over it.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman, another constituency neighbour, has stolen one of my key points; I will come on to that.

As I was saying, my constituents live under either the current or the proposed—or inevitable—flight paths. Also, living between central London and Heathrow, we have the traffic congestion and the associated air pollution, so this is a really big issue for us. I have been dealing with the issue for more than 15 years—before coming to this place, I was a lead member of Hounslow Council—and it feels like we have been involved in perpetual consultation. Again, the Library report lists a lot of those processes. In the autumn, there was the Government consultation on the draft national policy statement on airports, and I felt sorry for DfT staff in that consultation, because the answer to so many of the questions that local residents asked them were, “I’m sorry; I don’t know,” or, “I’m sorry; we don’t have that information yet.” I see the same thing happening with Heathrow airport staff in the newly relaunched consultation. Last week, Heathrow Airport Ltd launched its consultation on a slightly different proposal from that covered in the NPS consultation, but as far as my constituents are concerned, there is not a lot of difference.

I was saying, my constituents live under either the current or the proposed—or inevitable—flight paths. Also, living between central London and Heathrow, we have the traffic congestion and the associated air pollution, so this is a really big issue for us. I have been dealing with the issue for more than 15 years—before coming to this place, I was a lead member of Hounslow Council—and it feels like we have been involved in perpetual consultation. Again, the Library report lists a lot of those processes. In the autumn, there was the Government consultation on the draft national policy statement on airports, and I felt sorry for DfT staff in that consultation, because the answer to so many of the questions that local residents asked them were, “I’m sorry; I don’t know,” or, “I’m sorry; we don’t have that information yet.” I see the same thing happening with Heathrow airport staff in the newly relaunched consultation. Last week, Heathrow Airport Ltd launched its consultation on a slightly different proposal from that covered in the NPS consultation, but as far as my constituents are concerned, there is not a lot of difference.

Zac Goldsmith: So this is a massive issue for us.
What is clear in the Heathrow consultation is what is not clear; so little is said. I have to read out a key quotation from the consultation document:

"we have been assessing the design options for developing a scheme which meets the government’s requirements for an expanded airport, whilst responding to the needs of local communities and mitigating environmental impacts."

That makes it look like we will see some detail, but the document goes on:

“We are still working through this process, therefore there is not yet a fixed master plan for the expansion of Heathrow.”

If it is not yet possible to map the detailed impact on local communities, what is the point of consulting right now?

What my constituents want to know is this. First, where is the approach path to the third runway? There is no reason why that cannot be mapped now, because the runways are there. We are within 6 miles of the airport, and all flights will be locked into final approach; it is basic physics. So why cannot we be told where the approach path is, how high the planes will be and how wide the approach path will be? We are not in one of the areas where there can be concentration or spreading out. We are so close to the airport that all planes have to be locked in, at least on approach. I think it is deliberate that we are not being told. The thinking is, “It’s okay, because we’re going to tell people that they are going to be underneath the flight path.” I challenge Heathrow airport or the Department for Transport to tell us that we are wrong.

There is very little information on respite. We have a marginal improvement on previous situations, in that there will be no night flights for six and a half hours, but in the real world, no night flights does not actually mean no flights overhead for those night periods. It means no scheduled night flights, but there might be emergency flights, VIP flights, medical flights and so on. There is probably a good reason for all of them, but at one of the busiest airports in the world, there is seldom a time when there are actually no flights at all during those periods, and certainly the rules are not as strict in the UK as they are in other jurisdictions.

What will the air quality implications be if there is no diesel scrappage scheme? How will a congestion charge affect the many local businesses and residents that need to travel around the airport even if they are not actually using it? What will the new transport infrastructure be? There have been many questions about that. And of course nationally we are all concerned about who will pay for this. There is no clarity on how the runway, terminal buildings and essential work will be paid for, and there is certainly no clarity or agreement on the essential traffic impacts. The issue of traffic impacts is not just about passengers or people who work at Heathrow. It is not just about freight. By the way, the aim is to double the amount of freight going in and out of Heathrow with no additional freight vehicle movements. There is no clarity about how that will work, and I challenge any transport engineer to map it.

The issue that no one ever seems to mention is the additional flight servicing. There will be 47% more flights with runway 3. That to me means 47% more journeys in and out of the airport servicing those flights. I am thinking of the catering vehicles and the long-haul flight crews, who stay at our local hotels and are bussed in.

There is nothing about that, but of course it will put additional pressure on the local transport infrastructure. I can see that I do not have any more time. I have deliberately focused on the omissions from the consultation and the issues that most affect local residents in Brentford and Isleworth.

4.58 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. This consultation is really just the latest consultation for Heathrow—the fruit of the poisoned tree. The issue has been heavily politicised over a long time, under successive Governments, but things really went wrong during the period of the Airports Commission. Prior to 2010, David Cameron made promises, which he then decided he did not want to keep, and we had the protracted and rather embarrassing saga of the commission stringing out the process, using assumptions that were already out of date, and producing a report that in the end said what the Government then wanted it to say and allowed them to change tack. Those are tactics that Heathrow has used for more than 30 years, and nothing really surprises me, but both the NPS consultations and the latest one are tarnished by that.

Nothing in this consultation, as my constituency neighbour to the west, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), has just said, tells us about flight paths. That is the key point that people want to know. Without that, it becomes an almost vacuous exercise. Yet we are not to know the flight paths, we are told, until 2021, after all the major decisions are made. There is nothing in the consultation about who will pay—particularly, as has been mentioned, who will pay the estimated £18 billion for public transport. Getting these glossy pamphlets through the door, as one does on a regular basis from Heathrow, sends the subliminal message, “This is a done deal. Get used to it. Get what you can out of it by way of mitigation.” It simply is not good enough.

The point on mitigation is interesting. We hoped that campaigns such as the one the Mayor of London is fighting; the action he is taking to improve air quality; advancements in air transport, which can lead to noise reduction; and planned improvements—such as Crossrail and upgrading the Piccadilly line—to public transport in London, would improve quality of life and enable Londoners to go about their business better, but they will all be sacrificed to mitigating the additional burdens, inconveniences and health hazards that Heathrow intends to inflict on us. Why should that be the case? Why should Londoners have to pay financially, through their health and through the inconvenience in their daily lives for this white elephant project to go ahead?

We are still talking about hub airports here, which to a large extent have had their day. There are alternatives. We are talking about London as if it was going to have a single airport, rather than a number of airports, each serving different areas, because of the size of the community in London and the south-east that they serve. It is no more than propaganda. It is out of date.

We have heard today that the financial figures have been looked at again. Let us see who we are serving here. We are serving a company that is 90% foreign-owned, that is debt-laden and that, as far as can see, pays no tax other than the VAT it pays on the sales from shops—
increasingly it is a business in that way. We have opposition from the airlines that are unwilling to pay the greatly enhanced landing charges that will be levied in order to pay for this white elephant project. Everybody seems to pay except the shareholders of Heathrow Airport Holdings. Yet at the same time we are being told that Gatwick is a better option, not only, as we have always known, in relation to congestion, noise and pollution, but in terms of financial effects, both locally and on the national economy. There is very little left to recommend Heathrow as an option. Once again, as has been set out, we are going through a farce of a consultation.

I will end on that point. We will be here again, probably in another month, having another debate on Heathrow. We will be here in 10 years, wondering why London does not have additional airport capacity, as we wondered 10 years ago. The sooner the Government grasp the nettle, the better. I wait to hear with interest the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) on the Front Bench. Very wisely, the Labour Front-Bench team has set a series of tests and not prejudged the issue. As time goes on, we will see that those tests will not be met. I hope to hear encouraging noises from my hon. Friend, as I often do.

Zac Goldsmith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: Very briefly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): That’s not fair.

Andy Slaughter: I am so sorry; I will not give way, as there is a further speech to come. I will end on that, and I wait to hear what the Minister has to say.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon. It might be helpful if the Member was aware that I will call the Scottish National party spokesman to wind up at 5.8 pm.

5.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Sir Henry. I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for bringing the issue to the House. I put on record that I am a very vocal supporter of the Heathrow extension, as is my party. We supported this to enhance the connectivity of Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom. It is for this reason that we are also, in our relationship of confidence and supply with the Conservative party, looking at the end of the air passenger duty for Northern Ireland flights, which we hope will go further than that. Certainly it is our intention to look across the rest of the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) put his marker down. I am putting my marker down.

Let us be quite clear: we are not in decline mode; we are in build-up mode and we can do better. The key for us is the enhancement of connectivity in routes and flights. The Democratic Unionist party was the first political party in the United Kingdom to back Heathrow. We have always maintained that expansion will support growth in Northern Ireland and strengthen our great Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. More cargo travels from Belfast through Heathrow than any other UK airport. We need to continue the vital link and the supply chain between Northern Ireland’s businesses and their clients in every corner of the globe. That is a clear issue.

A 2017 report produced by the Freight Transport Association found that air cargo and night services in the United Kingdom is currently worth some £5.5 billion per annum or £20 million per working day. It estimates that the customs value of the typical export item shipped on a night service is ten and half times that of standard air freight. The vast majority of the £5.5 billion, let us be clear, is achieved from productivity gains. In the wider economy, we all gain from connectivity—Northern Ireland gains and the rest of the United Kingdom gains—rather than just the operators of the service. These impacts are also spread geographically across the United Kingdom, with express and priority cargo services used by businesses based in all regions of the country. Northern Ireland is an integral part of this business and we rely on this service, the build-up in this service and the ability of the airport to carry that out at the correct times. Things go from Belfast City and Belfast International airport, to Heathrow, to the rest of the world. That is an example of connectivity. We are all gaining.

Zac Goldsmith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: I am sorry, but I am constrained by time.

The issue now arising is the question of who will pay for the £14 billion project. It cannot be the airline user in its totality, as this will clearly and undoubtedly take away from the viability of routes by upping the price and putting people off the service. I mentioned earlier about the air cargo. I had a quick conversation with a member of my staff, who was looking for the cheapest trip. That was the trip to Heathrow and it was also at night time, so for a girlies’ weekend away they were able to do that. I suggest to hon. Members here that, if they want to reciprocate and go to Belfast, we are very happy for that to happen.

The price very much indicates what happens when it comes to who pays. Heathrow passenger charges have trebled in the last decade. We cannot afford any increase. I look to the Minister for a very careful response. I support the expansion and register concern about the cost going completely to the end user. That is why I am asking the Government to step in and ensure that, as opposed to a little increase, simply no increase is acceptable.

To conclude, as a Northern Ireland MP who seems to be continually fighting to have parity with the rest of the mainland, I am fighting again for my corner of the wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to be allowed to benefit from this expansion and not penalised with greater charges, which put businesses off from investing in Northern Ireland due to the connectivity, and which put tourists off from sampling the beauty and wonder that is found on our shores, as many hon. Members know. I ask the Minister gently to make clear that the costs should not and must not be at the expense of connectivity for Northern Ireland. We can all gain. Let us do it together.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I now call Alan Brown from the SNP. It may be of interest to know that I want to call the Labour spokesman after five minutes.

5.8 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. Hopefully I will not take the full five minutes.
I suspect that, as always with any debate on Heathrow, there is a divide between for and against. It would seem that those against would be the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who introduced the debate, and the hon. Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). My neighbour the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke in favour of Heathrow expansion. I must say that I fall into the “for” camp as well because of the potential benefits it can bring to Scotland.

In supporting the principle of a third runway, air quality considerations, noise considerations and other potential neighbour nuisance aspects still need to be considered and cannot be overridden. I look forward to the Minister responding to the issues brought forward by the right hon. Member for Twickenham. I also thought the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth made some valid points in terms of actually identifying what the approach paths are and making them public. Clearly, the people near the airport need to understand that and the comments on respite and night flights are valid, as are the points about flight servicing requirements and how that could impact air quality. The Government need to take those aspects into account.

The SNP is in favour of the third runway because of the potential benefits it could bring to Scotland, including up to 16,000 jobs and connecting Scotland to a more global market. Ideally, the expansion will allow Scotland to open up and increase connectivity.

Zac Goldsmith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This is the same point that I was going to make earlier. BA has announced that later this year it will be cutting half its routes between Leeds Bradford and Heathrow. Does that not show that the economics of domestic flights and domestic connections just does not stack up? The promises on greater connectivity between Scotland and Heathrow can be delivered only with the help of Government subsidy, and as far as I know there are no promises relating to that.

Alan Brown: I disagree. Clearly, the Government can have a role in terms of public service obligations—that can be considered. Heathrow has offered to guarantee slots to Scotland, and therefore I am not sure. In the existing climate, it is clearly much more difficult because Heathrow is so congested, hence the whole premise of a third runway to open up that connectivity.

It is clear, as the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock said, that all the airports in Scotland bar Edinburgh are in favour of this expansion. Northern Ireland is in favour of it. The hon. Member for Hammersmith mentioned hub airports. The reality is that hub airports want this. In my ideal world, if Prestwick and Glasgow could expand and pick up some of these new world markets, that would be great, but they are saying that that is not a reality and that they need that connectivity to Heathrow. That is where the critical mass is—that is just the reality of the situation. I also clearly support the idea that Prestwick could become a hub in terms of service delivery for the construction of Heathrow and of-site fabrication, which would be a welcome addition to the Ayrshire economy.

On the consultation, I am aware of some of the asks of the Englefield Green Action Group on statutory noise limits, which my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) has campaigned for and which I support. Air quality targets obviously need to be considered. They have suggested considering targets on a reducing, tapered basis, which is reasonable, and possible Civil Aviation Authority enforcement powers for airline operational performance on matters such as ascent angles—they appreciate that Heathrow is doing a name-and-shame process with airlines at the moment.

Overall, the Government need to consider these measures and respond accordingly. They need to look at air quality and produce a coherent air quality plan that looks at diesel HGVs, transport refrigeration units and construction vehicles, which will clearly be an issue in the construction of a third runway at Heathrow and need to be considered. I look forward to the Government’s response, how they will accommodate the revised proposals that Heathrow is now consulting on and how they will take this forward in the foreseeable future.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate. He has been a long-standing campaigner on Heathrow expansion.

The Labour party supports the expansion of airport capacity in the south-east, subject to our four tests being met. However, the Government’s draft airports national policy statement, published in October last year, and the responses to it have raised more questions than they have answered. The updated passenger demand forecasts show an increase in passenger growth, with a third runway at Heathrow to be full by 2028. The third runway will open in only 2026. That means that all take-off and landing slots will be full just two years after opening, which is a point made by the right hon. Gentleman. Does the Minister agree that that limits the potential benefits of increased airport capacity?

The NPS states that none of the cost of a third runway will fall on the taxpayer, and that it will be met by private funding. Yet it does not provide any evidence to support that. There is a reference to an independent assessment that has been carried out, but it has not been published. There seems no reason not to publish that assessment unless there is something to hide. Will the Minister agree to release that document?

The commitment that there will be no net increase in airport-related traffic is essential to ensuring that expansion is sustainable. Transport for London has estimated that to achieve that, between 65% and 69% of passengers would have to travel to the airport by public transport. The NPS sets an unambitious target of 50% by 2030, going up to 55% by 2042. TIL has said that that will lead to a substantial increase in vehicle trips on the already congested networks. Furthermore, the western rail access and southern rail access are essential for expansion, but TIL is concerned that the NPS gives no firm commitment on that. The Department for Transport has estimated that costs will be about £5 billion, but TIL puts the figure closer to £15 billion. The difference seems to be TIL costs for southern rail access.

Given the difference between the NPS and TIL estimates on both costing and public transport targets, and the fact that TIL is the highways authority and public...
transport authority that completely surrounds Heathrow, I find it absolutely astounding that it has been excluded from the service access steering group for Heathrow by the Department for Transport. Will the Minister explain that decision?

We all recognise that air pollution is one of the biggest health crises facing the UK, leading to an estimated 50,000 premature deaths each year. On air pollution, the Government have frankly been found wanting. They have failed to give local authorities the powers they need to protect air quality and failed to support sustainable transport. Those failures threaten not only public health, but future investment. Will the Minister take this opportunity to explain how he will ensure that legal levels of air quality will be achieved if Heathrow is expanded? What resources has he or the Government directed to that important task?

The revised NPS has increased the estimate for carbon emissions from the third runway, but it does not explain the national implications. Will that lead to the sacrificing of growth at regional airports or more challenging limits for other sectors? Can the Minister shed some more light on how the UK will meet carbon emissions targets with the expansion of Heathrow?

Noise is another area in which the revised NPS does nothing to alleviate the concerns of hundreds of thousands of people who are affected by the issue. I think that point was made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). The noise assessment in the NPS uses indicative flight paths, and the actual flight paths will be published only after the decision on Heathrow’s development consent order application is made. There is no requirement for them to bear any resemblance to the flight paths published in the NPS. The revised NPS uses 2013 as a baseline, which allows the airport to bank technology changes when they should be used to alleviate the noise impacts of the airport. Given the importance of the issue, I would be grateful for the Minister’s thoughts on whether the noise assessment in the NPS gives an accurate account of the noise impacts.

The Minister will be all too well aware that right hon. and hon. Members from all parties have strong views on both sides of the argument regarding expansion at Heathrow, so any decision must be based on hard evidence and considerations, within their stated preference. I think that point was made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park, so any decision must be based on hard evidence and transparency. As we have seen today, many questions seem to remain unanswered.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is an honour and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I greatly admire the way in which you have steered the debate to—I hope—a satisfactory conclusion and allowed a number of hon. Members from all parties to contribute. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Henry), the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on securing this important debate.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows—indeed, as he indicated—the consultation on the revised draft airports national policy statement closed on 19 December. I am the new Minister with responsibility for aviation in the Commons, with the rich experience of 10 days in the job and the accumulated expertise that goes with that. The debate gives me the opportunity to thank the tens of thousands of respondents to the February and October consultations.

As the debate has shown, the Government are not afraid to take controversial decisions when they deem them to be in the national interest. I note the diversity of views around the Chamber and the voices that are supportive of the Government’s strategy, as well as the concerns that have been indicated.

For decades, the UK has failed to build the capacity needed to match people’s growing desire for travel. The revised aviation passenger forecasts published in October show that the need for additional capacity in the south-east is even greater than was previously thought. There is a significant cost—tens of billions of pounds—to failing to act, and there are potential benefits to acting.

I will come to the many issues that have been raised, but I start by reiterating why, for additional capacity in the south-east, the Government’s preference is for a new north-west runway at Heathrow. The revised analysis shows that the north-west runway scheme will deliver the greatest benefits the soonest, and that it will continue to offer the greatest choice of destinations and frequency of vital long-haul routes. It has been asked how that relates to revised numbers for Gatwick, and I emphasise that the decision is not purely an economic one. It is also a question of when those benefits are delivered, the strategic nature of the location and the vastly greater volume of freight that goes through Heathrow.

That is the Government’s preference at present, but I emphasise that no final decision—indeed, no decision of any kind—has been taken on the matter. To that extent, to answer the right hon. Member for Twickenham, the Government are absolutely open to contrary arguments and considerations, within their stated preference.

Zac Goldsmith: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I will finish the thought, if I may. I have relatively little time remaining, and lots of questions have been asked.

As the right hon. Member for Twickenham knows, not only is the whole process governed under statute by the Planning Act 2008, but an independent former lord justice of appeal, Sir Jeremy Sullivan, has the specific job of advising on the consultation process. That is designed to give the public comfort, and to support the importance and independence of the process. It was found that a new north-west runway would deliver benefits of up to £74 billion to passengers and the wider economy over 60 years, and that it would offer the greatest benefits for at least the first 50 years. That will secure the UK’s status as a global aviation hub. This is a national project in the national interest that enhances the country’s ability to compete with other European and middle eastern airports. It will help UK businesses to connect with markets by delivering an additional 43,000 long-haul services from across the UK in 2040, and it will provide the kind of domestic connectivity that will fuel regional growth across the UK—the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

There is a wide range of views, which is why the matter has been the subject of one of the largest consultations ever undertaken and why the Government have been keen to ensure that the consultations were full and fair. Hon. Members have mentioned the enormous
amount of literature that has been posted out, and rightly so; a very keen effort is under way by the Government, regarding the NPS consultation, and by Heathrow—an entirely independent, separate entity—to gather public information. On the Government side, that includes delivering 1.5 million leaflets and holding dozens of information events and other such consultations.

It is also worth noting that, as the right hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned, Heathrow airport launched its own consultation on 17 January. Of course, there are differences between the aspects on which Heathrow has been consulting and the proposals in the NPS. That is to be expected from a system that is run in a non-judgmental and independent way. That consultation is set to run for 10 weeks and will close on 28 March, with 40 public information events to be held. For what it is worth, all hon. Members should thoroughly encourage the public—those affected and those with a wider interest—to take part in it. It is the first opportunity for the public to comment on and inform the proposals of Heathrow Airport Limited directly, and potentially to shape them.

Zac Goldsmith: As the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable)—my neighbour—has said, we know that the economic benefits of the two options on the table are broadly in the same area, in terms of connectivity. Heathrow is already the most polluting airport in Europe, and it will become more so. It is the noisiest airport in Europe, and it will become more so. It is the most expensive option, and the most legally difficult to deliver. Does the Minister at least understand why people who question the Government’s decision suspect that it may be born not of a rational process of elimination, but of a form of crony capitalism? It is hard to understand why the Government would opt for the option that has so little going for it.

Jesse Norman: Given the minuscule amount of time remaining and my desire to allow the right hon. Member for Twickenham to speak at the end, I will be very brief. I absolutely register my hon. Friend’s point. Air quality has been extensively discussed today. I remind him that the Government have assessed the impact of the Heathrow north-west runway scheme on the air quality plan. Within that analysis, it appears to be compliant, and that is before taking account of any mitigation measures that Heathrow could apply. That is the basis on which the Government are proceeding.

I will pick up on a couple of other quick points in the minute or so that remains to me. There has been some concern about different costings over surface access. The Government do not recognise TfL’s numbers, which appear to include schemes that are not directly related to Heathrow. The infrastructure contribution that the Government make will be related not to the airport, but to the other incidental benefits that transport has for users.

In response to the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), it is worth mentioning that he should recognise that Heathrow is substantially better equipped to handle cargo volumes. To take non-EU cargo alone—the wider world, as it were—Heathrow handled about £130 billion of cargo to those countries in 2016, compared with less than £1 billion out of Gatwick. Such significant differences play a part in the wider economic picture that is being built up.

Finally, on the detail on flights, proposals to change the UK’s airspace need to follow the Civil Aviation Authority’s airspace change process, which is the regulatory process that the Government have adopted. It is not in the Government’s hands to vary that in this context. As with other aspects, we will follow due process.

Sir Vince Cable: I will wind up quickly. I thank hon. Members who have given their diverse views and argued their cases extremely well. I want to reiterate a few points. As far as the responsiveness of the Government is concerned, I am gratified that the Minister said in his concluding remarks that they still have an open mind. Many past comments cast some doubt on that. I am also grateful that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) said that the Opposition are approaching the issue pragmatically and in terms of tests, and that they have not come to a final conclusion on it. Those responses give me some encouragement that there is a lot more to argue for.

I emphasise the basics of the argument: the NPS revisions—the new round of evidence that has been produced—point clearly to the fact that the Minister’s initial comment is simply wrong. There is no suggestion any longer that this is the best economic option; it clearly is not. The Government’s own figures and analysis show that Gatwick would be better for the national economy. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said in his last intervention, it is not just that Gatwick would be better for the national economy, but that Heathrow would be far more polluting, would have a far more damaging noise impact on people under the flight path and would be very much more expensive for Government and passengers. I welcome the responses that we have received.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered public consultations on Heathrow airport.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
I started to discuss the matter with various interested parties. The Democratic Unionists with whom I discussed it certainly want a statute of limitations applying to the military forces, the police and the security agencies, but they have grave difficulty with applying such a statute to former republican paramilitaries. Only yesterday, for the first time, I was given the opportunity to have a discussion, which I welcomed, with three of the Sinn Féin elected MPs. I think it is true to say that they were interested in something that already seems to apply to republican paramilitaries, but they were not interested in something that would apply to the military, the police or the security agencies. There is also a certain lack of clarity, to put it mildly, about the present policy. As we discovered in our discussions yesterday, there is even failure to agree on whether existing limitations on the sentences that can be given to convicted paramilitaries apply to service personnel as well.

What are the existing restrictions? I think we know what they are. As part of the agreements that have been reached after so many years, so many negotiations, so much death, so much tragedy and so much trouble, it was agreed that no matter how great the offence or how numerous the victims, if paramilitaries were convicted under the terms of the agreement, whether they had killed dozens, scores or even just a few individuals, they could not be sentenced to more than two years in prison. The likelihood, therefore, is that they would not serve more than one year in prison.

There seemed, however, to be no agreement on whether that restriction applies to the military. I do not know if the Minister will be able to enlighten us today; if not, I hope that he will write to us with a definitive answer. The Sinn Féin MPs definitely thought that it did, yet previously I had it explicitly put to me by a lawyer for one of the service personnel currently facing trial that the two-year maximum, no matter how heinous the offence for which a republican or presumably any other paramilitary is sentenced, did not apply to the military. If it does not apply to the military, the imbalance between the unlimited sentences that can be imposed on soldiers and the two-year sentences—one year actually served in jail—that can be imposed on paramilitaries is so egregious that it is hard to imagine that the Government should not seek to impose at the very least a cap for all who may be affected by any proceedings. However, I want to try to take a wider view, and I appeal to all who were involved, one way or another, in the tragedy that was the troubles of Northern Ireland to try to take the broader view, too.

It has been put to me in very stark terms that people who suffered losses during that period, even if it was only 40 years ago, cannot rest until those matters are resolved. I share their understanding of the matter, and can perceive something of what they feel, because my family was caught up in the holocaust, and the part of my family who were still in Poland in the second world war was annihilated, with the exception of one very small family unit that was saved by courageous non-Jewish Poles. Even though it happened a few years before I was born, I felt for years after the war that the people who killed them should be hounded forever, yet that is not the situation that we face today, because we have already decided that—in the interests of an overall settlement—there should be a limit of two years on the sentences that paramilitaries can face, so by no stretch of the imagination can the punishment be said to fit the crime.
We all know where we first began to hear about truth recovery processes: in South Africa, after Nelson Mandela came out of prison and changes occurred. The decision was taken in South Africa to draw a final line under all the horrors on whichever side, or by whatever part, whether we are talking about state authorities, revolutionaries or innocent civilians caught up in someone else’s crossfire. There, it was decided that in the interests of peace and coherence and the possibility of building some sort of united community, a line must be drawn, but that families must have closure and the best possible opportunity to find out what had happened to their loved ones. That led to people who had been involved in terrible activities coming forward and giving testimony, secure in the knowledge that, even if they were incriminating themselves, they would not be prosecuted. That is how there was some form of resolution for those people who had been bereaved, in the sense of public accountability and the discovery of the truth. It was not only a brilliant and magnanimous concept, but a legal requirement. There is a legal requirement to investigate; there is not a legal requirement to prosecute.

The trouble in the situation in Northern Ireland—I hope I will not strike the wrong note by seeming to be flippant at this point—goes back to the origins of the troubles in 1969. I went to university the following year, 1970, and while I was at university in Oxford, I made a friend called Martin Sieff. Members might deduce from his surname that he has the same sort of background as I do. I remember him trying to explain to me the depth of division between the communities in Northern Ireland. He said, “For example, there was one occasion when I found myself cornered by a gang on the street. They asked me that age-old question: are you a Protestant or a Catholic?” Martin thought he had the perfect, truthful answer; he said, “I am a Jew.” They said, “Yes, but are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?” I am not trying to be flippant; I am trying to indicate that there are irreconcilable and deep-seated beliefs at work here.

The role of the Defence Committee means that our concern has to be for the welfare of the service personnel. We do not wish to see hundreds of old cases reopened, in the absence of any new evidence, which would mean that they were highly unlikely to be successfully brought to a conclusion—if a conviction is regarded as successful. People would nevertheless be put through a tremendous ordeal at a late stage of their life. At the end of it all, in the vast majority of cases, it would almost certainly be found that they did nothing more than their duty and did not commit any offence at all. The Committee’s concern in the report had to be to make a recommendation about what should happen to those personnel. We were unanimous in our belief that a statute of limitations should be enacted for any troubles-related offences, or alleged offences, up to the date of the Good Friday agreement.

We felt that it is for the Government of the day to go wider and decide what other groups beside service personnel and associated police and agencies ought to be included, but we did not shy away from pointing out that the unanimous expert legal advice we received from the four professors made it quite clear that if a statute of limitations were introduced for anyone, it had to be introduced for everyone. That will be very difficult to accept for the different parties across that terrible divide in Northern Ireland that we are seeking to repair. The Unionists take the view that some people should benefit from a statute of limitations, but not others. The republicans take the view that others should benefit from a statute of limitations, but not the people whom the Unionists wish to see benefit.

I will go as far as I can without breaking any personal confidences, and it may be that I am misinterpreting the signals, but from my conversations with people on either side of the argument, I sometimes get the impression that they are held captive by the response they feel they have to make to the people who elected them and brought them to this House. I sometimes detect—perhaps I am wrong; perhaps I am misreading the signals—that, in their heart of hearts, they know that there is either going to be a statute that applies to everyone, or no real solution that applies to anyone, but they will never be able to articulate or promote that.

It is a step forward that the Government have said that they will hold a consultation in which a statute of limitations will be one of the options aired. I believe that sometimes people must seize the opportunity to take a lead. There is nothing of a legal nature to prevent this Parliament from enacting a statute of limitations. If it applies to everyone and is coupled with a truth recovery process, it will maximise the chance of people finding out what happened to their loved ones and of avoiding the poisoning of the settlement so far reached by a constant succession of cases being brought before the criminal courts.

I wish to end on another factor, which I hope the Minister will take back to his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office. I was particularly impressed by it in the meeting I had yesterday with two Labour colleagues, in which I met the Sinn Féin MPs. From their point of view, it seemed to me—I hope I am not misrepresenting what they said—that one particular ongoing issue was the failure to hold inquests into the deaths of many of the people who died during the troubles.

If we could set to one side, as a route of trying to get to the truth, dragging a succession of old men through the courts when there is insufficient evidence against them, and if as part of an overall settlement we could all decide to go ahead with a statute of limitations that applied to everybody, that might open up the possibility of inquests being held. A combination of inquests being held into deaths that have so far not had inquests, and a truth recovery process in which people know they can come forward to say what happened without any danger of incriminating themselves, might be the basis of a step forward.

Today’s debate is only one piece in an enormous jigsaw that people have been trying to put together to come to a conclusion that enables the communities in Northern Ireland to live at peace with each other, and that—as far as we are concerned—ensures that soldiers who did their duty are not hauled through the courts.
many years after the event, when no new evidence is available. I hope that people do not have too great an expectation that the production of an individual report or the holding of an individual debate will do anything other than add to the momentum.

One thing that the Defence Committee can claim, however, is that we have focused attention on one specific remedy that offers a way forward. If it was a way forward with no disadvantages, of course people would have signed up to it or something similar long ago. There are disadvantages to every policy possible, and people will have to make sacrifices. People do make sacrifices, and have made them. The question is: is it better to go down the route of endless court hearings, deepening divisions and the poisoning of the more positive links that have slowly and gradually built up, or is it better to take a leaf out of the South African book?

I conclude with this thought: if it was good enough for Nelson Mandela, after all he went through and all that the people he represented went through, should it not be good enough for us and the Northern Ireland communities?

1.52 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

As ever, it is a privilege to follow my Chair on the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and to be rejoined by some of our former colleagues who served on the Committee in the previous Parliament, because we discussed this issue. I do not intend to speak for long, but I want to talk about the people and why we need to handle the situation so delicately.

Many colleagues will want to be aware that families touched by this issue are sitting in the Public Gallery. Every time we look at the issue of Northern Ireland, we need to remember that this is about people—people on all sides of all communities—as well as service personnel, including those who are serving now, those who may want to serve in future and those who served during the troubles. This impacts on every part of our military. I am speaking today as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, and our responsibility to the covenant is mentioned in the report’s conclusions and recommendations.

Given the political situation in Northern Ireland, not for a decade has there been a more difficult time to raise the issue we are discussing. I do not envy the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my neighbouring MP, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who has to deal with some of the challenges. None of us wants to make her job more difficult as, in the months ahead, we work towards a political settlement in Northern Ireland.

The issue, however, has an impact on people throughout the country, including those of our constituents who are ex-serving personnel. There is not a veterans’ brunch or breakfast that I visit at which people, including members of my own political party who served during the troubles, do not regularly—by which I mean monthly—express their concerns to me about what it might mean for them as they approach their 70s and 80s. They are concerned that legal action may be hanging over their shoulders. As hard as it is for the families who are still suffering the legacy of the troubles, it is also hard for those people who served during that time. We have a responsibility to them, as well as to the families, to give them reassurance going forward.

There is also a knock-on effect for those who may be looking to serve in future. We saw such an effect from Iraq, with the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. If we are continually looking to judicial responses and the law, people will simply stop signing up because of fears about what will happen to them even 30 or 40 years after their service.

The issue is not straightforward by any stretch of the imagination, but it was right for the Defence Committee to explore it and I am proud of our report. That report raises the issue and adds to the burden on the Minister, for which I apologise, but the issue is one we can ignore no longer. We need a settlement that is agreed by all parties, whichever side of the conflict and the troubles they were on.

Our brave service personnel were acting under orders. We asked them to do many things for us; we need to have their backs when they need us. As delicate as the subject is, I hope that everyone will approach it in the same way as the right hon. Member for New Forest East, who led the debate. We need to move forward and we look to the Minister for guidance. I hope that the report’s recommendations will be followed.

1.56 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir David. I will keep my remarks short, because I have been struck down by the lethal man flu—a very dangerous thing of the sort that would have kept the Minister in bed for a week.

On the issue of historical allegations, I have a recent history in the military and with the Iraq Historic Allegations Team and so on, but at times I feel that we cannot make it clear enough that individuals such as me and those I served with absolutely want to see the rule of law upheld in every nature of engagement that we are involved in. It is completely wrong to assert that we are looking for some sort of cover-up, or even enabling, of illegal activities. That could not be more wrong. We join the military and become part of it because we believe in it and in its mission—that what we are doing is making the world a better place.

It is fantastic to hear the thoughts of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Select Committee, on the situation. We are indeed going to have to have uncomfortable conversations. We are going to have to get together intellectually to work this out. Why are we going to have to do that? Because it does not work for anyone at the moment. The only people who benefit from the existing situation are lawyers, who I know for a fact are being encouraged to practise in Northern Ireland because they see the issue going on and on. I am afraid that that is not acceptable for the victims, their families or, of course, our armed forces.

We know all that, so what are we going to do about it? A couple of options are clear and straightforward on the face of it, but they also represent deep challenges. I echo what my right hon. Friend said, which is that nobody will get a 100% solution. I gently say to those
who continue this fight—I will always continue it because I think it is the right thing to do, but there are those who have been in it for far longer than me—that there will come a time when my generation will want to move on, whether they served in Northern Ireland or were affected by crime or other events there. The sympathy that is absolutely with those who have suffered wrong, whichever side of the divide they are on, will not last forever.

We have a unique opportunity to work this out and to make a solution work. A statute of limitations is important, but we have to be so careful about how it is applied. Under the Good Friday agreement, paramilitaries faced a maximum sentence of two years, but that does not apply to the security forces. That is such a binary issue and it is not acceptable. We should have moved on from that.

I have huge sympathy with those who feel that they have been wronged in this process. My experience of dealing with cases of people killed in operations, or with those who have lost sons, daughters, husbands or wives, is that ultimately what they really want to know is what happened. Of course, they want recompense—people talk about compensation crime and time in prison—but what they really want to know is what actually happened. We are not doing those affected by the troubles a service if we carry on in this manner, which in no way will uncover what actually happened.

Doing those people a service requires bold leadership. It requires someone who will sensitively bring everyone together. It will require compromises, because the current situation is not reconcilable. Above all, it will require courage. People talk about courage in the military, but there is another element, which is moral courage—the courage to do things that are difficult because the bigger picture is worth it. Northern Ireland is clearly a wonderful place and it has a bright future. The young people of Northern Ireland want to leave this in the past. Let us help them do that by really coming together in a mature, forward-looking way, with the victims and their families absolutely at the centre. Let us do that in a magnanimous way that can really achieve something for the families, but also halt the totally unacceptable practice of pensioners who have served in this country being relentlessly under scrutiny, when in some cases nobody else is alive to recount the incident.

Let us seize the initiative of this report. I strongly welcome it and I am very pleased that the Government are going to do a consultation on it. We have to have the awkward conversations, because not having them does not work for anyone. It is incumbent on us as political leaders not to rest until we have solved the issue of historical allegations in Northern Ireland.

2.2 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I follow three Members whose contributions were different in many respects. They are all engaged in this issue and have considered it thoughtfully throughout the Select Committee inquiries. It is a privilege for me serve on the Defence Committee and to be a part of the inquiry.

While I was listening to our esteemed Chair, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—I mean that respectfully—I was thinking of Otto von Bismarck’s quote about legislation being a bit like sausages: no one needs to see how they are made. The right hon. Gentleman and I have had many private conversations about this report. He knows very clearly that my party colleagues and I are not supportive of an amnesty and that many victims in Northern Ireland—whether they are victims of republicanism, nationalism, Unionists, loyalist paramilitaries or of state forces—collectively do not believe in an amnesty, nor are they interested in having the hope or the pursuit of justice snuffed out. That is the environment in which it is important to consider this report.

This morning I was listening to BBC Radio Ulster, which had a contribution from Northern Ireland victims about Holocaust Memorial Day. One victim, Alan McBride, lost his wife on the Shankill Road when she went to her local fish and chip shop to get an evening meal and was blown up by the IRA. He spoke about a day of reflection in Northern Ireland, which is 21 June. I did not know this, but he shared the reason that 21 June was selected: victims across the Province had sought to find one single day in the calendar on which there has not been a troubles-related death, but they could not. They could not find a single day when someone had not died as a consequence of the troubles. They focused on 21 June because of the solstice representing a change in culture and weather, and the hope and aspiration of warmth and sunshine.

Our history is harrowing. Anyone who has been personally or directly affected by it is left with the scars and the emotion of the troubles of Northern Ireland. The report is about who “guards the guardians”, to use the phrase from a previous Defence Committee report. It is about how we look after those who protected society in Northern Ireland, not those who persecuted and were prosecuted for the most heinous crimes in Northern Ireland.

A total of 300,000 service personnel served in Northern Ireland—there were 27,000 of them at the height of the troubles—and 1,441 human beings who we, as a nation, asked to serve and protect our interests, perished. They died. Three hundred individuals died as a direct consequence of engagement with security forces, but that does not mean 300 murders. It is important to make that point. It does not mean that 300 people were murdered at the hands of the state: 300 people died engaging against the state. They were legitimate deaths—deaths that arose out of conflict and out of those individuals who we asked to defend us standing on the frontline and defending us as best they could.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend and his colleagues on the Select Committee for the huge amount of work they have put into the report and its conclusions. Does he agree that there is a stark difference between someone who went out with murder on their mind to hurt and to kill in the pursuit of terrorism, and the brave men and women of our security forces and armed forces? They went out night after night and day after day to serve and to protect, and some were involved in difficult operational decisions with very tragic outcomes. We should be protecting them, as opposed to a terrorist on the loyalist side, a terrorist on the republican side, or somebody in the armed forces who went out with the intention to murder. That is not what this is about. It is about protecting those who are honourable and who went out to serve and protect.
I agree most fundamentally with my hon. Friend. She has been engaged for almost a decade in the policy matters and implications of legacy issues in Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to her for the work that she has done. These are not easy issues at all.

I am not saying that those 300 deaths were murders or unlawful, but that should not mean that they are immune from investigation. I say that most clearly: they should not be immune from investigation. I will quote from the “Who guards the guardians?” report led by the hon. and gallant Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) on the inquiry into the Iraq Historic Allegations Team:

“With the prospect of investigations into British deployments in Afghanistan and Northern Ireland, the Government must prove both in private, but especially in public that in adhering to the pursuit of justice and the rule of law, it does not lose sight of its moral responsibility and its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant with those who have served.”

I was disappointed that the Government dismissed those lines.

Given what we have attempted to do in Northern Ireland thus far in dealing with the legacy, this report barely surmises that the overall process of investigations into fatalities in Northern Ireland has been deeply unsatisfactory. The instability of investigatory bodies, the limited resources and manpower provided to them and the continuing question marks over their independence have delivered a vicious cycle of investigation and reinvestigation that fails service personnel, their families and the families of those who died.

I respectfully suggest to the Minister—the Chair of the Select Committee should know my views on this as well—that dealing with this issue through the prism of Northern Ireland does not work. As parliamentarians who stand up in this national Parliament and ask individuals to put their lives on the line for our protection and our security, we should not look at this issue through the prism of Northern Ireland alone. A consultation is fine, and I have nothing against people submitting their views, but the principles with which we are engaged go far beyond the Northern Ireland context. I am not asking for anything that would be injurious to investigation or to upholding the rule of law.

When I say that, I am acutely aware that there are relatives of victims of the Ballymurphy massacre sitting in the Public Gallery—relatives who have sought for years to achieve truth and justice for their loved ones for that incident, which took place over a number of days in August 1971. I say very gently—this applies to their case and to many others in Northern Ireland—that the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of justice are two noble pursuits, but one does not always lead to the other. Someone can have truth but not get the justice they seek; someone can have justice but not get the truth they think they know. That is the mix that we deal with in Northern Ireland, but a statute of limitations would not, in our view, change the ability to get an investigation or to get closure, or remove the state’s responsibility or what it has to do to be article 2 compliant.

I disagree with the Chair of the Select Committee about this. The year 1973 was a watershed. That was when the investigatory process in Northern Ireland was fundamentally changed because the impartiality or the suitability of investigations had been questioned. The state can have confidence that where there was an investigation post-1973, that process was robust and article 2 compliant. I acknowledge that the Ballymurphy massacre predates that, and I do not stand in the way of any victim who seeks to pursue justice for their loved ones.

It is wrong to say that a statute of limitations would have to be extended to both state and non-state actors. We propose a statute of limitations on the basis that the state has discharged its duty. This is not immunity. This is not state immunity. This is no protection for a class of people. This is the state saying, “Where there has been an investigation and nothing came of it, we will move on after a defined period of time.” That is why looking through the prism of Northern Ireland is wrong in this context. This will apply in four years’ time to Afghanistan, and in five or six years’ time to Iraq. A 20-year statute of limitations could apply to armed conflicts throughout the world, provided we do not deviate from international standards. I do not accept that this has to be all-encompassing.

I draw a distinction: the Government in London created conditions that were preferential for the perpetrators but seemingly did nothing for the protectors. If we are looking for equivalence in the system, we need to look further than the two-year early-release scheme, although that is a key part. There is a distinction. Two serving members of the security forces were in prison at the time of the Good Friday agreement and did not benefit from the two-year release scheme. The perpetrators of heinous paramilitary acts in Northern Ireland kept no records, have no files and provide no honesty or truth in a process that could lead to justice for the loved ones of their victims, be they members of the security forces or not. That is another clear disparity.

If you had asked the Northern Ireland parties to agree to an on-the-runs scheme, they would have asked you to run on, but the Labour Government did produce an on-the-runs scheme. They went out of their way to give comfort to those who had committed heinous paramilitary acts that they would not be pursued for prosecution. Our state—this country and its Government—has given no protection to the people it asks to engage on our behalf. It has given no protection to security forces personnel who served in Northern Ireland or in other conflicts, but it was prepared to give odious on-the-run letters to paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.

John Downey is a famous example. He killed 11 members of our security forces in Hyde Park and seven horses associated with their work. When he was brought to the Old Bailey, he produced an on-the-runs letter and said, “I have an assurance from this state that I will not be prosecuted for my actions.” John Downey walked. There is no parallel between the way our state protects the people we ask to protect us and its casual, laissez-faire protection of paramilitaries.

The legal evidence that the Committee received was interesting and compelling, but most importantly—albeit there are different views, ambitions and perspectives on the Northern Ireland issue—our expert witnesses agreed that it is entirely in the UK Parliament’s power to enact a statute of limitations. We call on the Government to do so as a matter of urgency in the next Parliament. That is the nature of our report. That is what we ask for from our Government. Although there will always be different ambitions, different tactics and different approaches in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland is but one part...
of this process. The Government must decide whether they are prepared to redress their approach to legacy issues and to our service personnel and start protecting those who protected us.

2.16 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): That speech by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) was astonishing and deeply moving. Thank you.

This is personal to me. I am one of the 300,000 soldiers who served in Northern Ireland. I completed seven tours there as an infantry officer. I spent three years there. I first went in the early months of 1970 as a 20-year-old second lieutenant. To be honest, I was utterly shocked that on my first tour I was operating on the streets of my country with weapons. That was not the sort of soldiering I had expected. After all, I had been at Sandhurst since 1967. We withdrew from Aden in 1967, we had a year of peace in 1968, and then the British Army was sent into Northern Ireland in 1970. I was very uncomfortable about it.

When I went to Northern Ireland just after the start of 1970, we were deployed to Londonderry, principally to protect the Catholics. I even had a Catholic girlfriend for a time. I was unmarried. [Laughter.]

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We’re a confessional.

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman; he always gets me.

In my seven tours, I certainly witnessed bombings and fatality shootings involving military personnel. I want to centre on how we felt and how we approached it. Our approach started with our instructions, which were called, “Instructions for Opening Fire in Northern Ireland”—the so-called yellow card. I have mine here. This is the 1980 version. It is meant to fit into a pocket, so that soldiers have it with them the whole time. The problem is, when a soldier is in contact, they cannot get the card and think, “Oh, what can I do?” It has to be remembered. It has to be built into a soldier what he or she should do in a case where they might use firearms. It has to be instinctive.

So that people understood the rules, there were huge instructions on pre-operational tour training. The rules were clear and pretty precise as to what a soldier could and could not do. Let me read them, because they are on one piece of paper. This had to be in a soldier’s mind: we were to use minimum force in all situations, and open fire only as a last resort. No live rounds were to be carried in the breech, unless we were ordered otherwise or were about to fire. Challenges were always to be given before firing, unless to do so would increase the risk of death or grave injury to us or anyone we considered was being engaged by terrorists. Challenges were to be clear: “Army. Stop or I fire!” We were ordered to open fire only if someone was committing an act likely to endanger life and there was no other way to stop them.

There are examples on the yellow card of when a soldier can open fire:

“Someone firing or about to fire a weapon; someone planting, detonating or throwing an explosive device, including a petrol bomb.”

in the early 1970s, petrol bombs on William Street in Londonderry put a third of my platoon in hospital with burns before any firing took place. We did not fire; we did not even consider it. We did not even draw our batons.

The next example is

“Someone driving a car at a person, and there is no other way to stop him.”

Some hon. Members may be old enough to remember the case of Corporal Lee Clegg, who was convicted of murder in 1993. He fired at a car as it approached him, and as it passed by he turned around and shot through the window. The yellow card is precise: he was not in danger any more, so he should not have fired. I will return to that.

The examples continue:

“Only aimed shots were to be fired; no more rounds than necessary were to be fired; and be careful not to hit anyone who is innocent.”

Those rules were put into all of us. We practised them. We spent ages in a classroom learning them. We also practised scenarios in exercises, and were judged on whether we had done the right thing.

To decide whether to open fire was an enormous decision, and often—I saw it several times—indecision and worry about whether to open fire resulted in it not happening until it was too late. Fire could have been returned. We all knew that shooting incidents would be investigated, and we had to justify what we had done.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. and gallant Friend is giving moving first-hand testimony on soldiering in Northern Ireland and the issues surrounding that. He is describing a situation where something has happened. What impact does that have on the soldier concerned?

Bob Stewart: Soldiers were frightened sick of going to court. They would much prefer to be in the field than face some sort of judicial procedure. In 1986 I was the lead Army witness in Belfast Crown Court for the Ballykelly bombing. I had a string of my men going into court behind me, and although they had not opened fire and they had not done anything wrong, they were absolutely petrified about going to court. Luckily, in the end, I gave evidence, we had lunch and the plea was changed. My men did not have to give evidence, but in answer to my hon. Friend’s question, they were petrified and loathed it, simply because it is so far out of their ken.

The trouble is, decisions to open fire had to be made in seconds. That is against the background of a poor soldier, sometimes only 18 years old, having to think all the time, “Am I making the right decision? Is this right? I don’t want to kill someone.” We are human beings. Soldiers are not brutes. If they are, they should be out of the Army.

Those questioning soldiers’ decisions to open fire always have the luxury of ample time to examine what has happened, normally from a warm, comfortable room rather than an operational situation. So often soldiers who open fire are frightened sick and having to make a decision very quickly. Of course, they are often in real danger of losing their own life.

In all fatality shootings that I was involved in, the soldiers had to prove that they acted within the law—often in court. The Army, and the special investigation branch in particular, were not nice to them. There was no cozying up. The interrogations—that is what they were—
were not cosy. In 1978, I remember telling two soldiers that they were to be investigated and possibly charged with manslaughter. They had just saved their own lives by using their pistols to extricate themselves from a deadly situation, and they were shaken from the experience. They accused me, their officer, of abandoning them, and they used pretty ripe language about me. I felt rotten, as I totally understood how they felt. I explained that they had to be investigated to prove that they had acted legally and that the matter would then be over forever.

I believed then that that was right, but in recent years I have become increasingly worried in case I was wrong. In that case, I let my men down badly by what I said at the time. As politicians, we have a duty to ensure that soldiers such as my two men in 1978 are protected from the time. As politicians, we have a duty to ensure that they were blown up, trapped or beaten to death. You are the untouchable, and 30 years later, you have flashbacks of the unforgettable face of death and destruction. You rebuild your life, raise your children and grandchildren, and try to return to civilian life and forget what you have seen. You get to your state pension and settle into retirement. Then, one day, you get a knock on the door: someone is preparing a case to prosecute you for following those orders.

If they asked for a description of your colleague's last seconds as he gasped for breath in your arms, having been blown up, you could easily describe that; it is irrevocably, indelibly imprinted on your mind. However, asking for details of individual outings and cases will be very different. You followed orders; that was the only detail you really needed to know. The hon. Member for Beckenham outlined exactly what a soldier does, in case we needed real, live evidence of that. He put it succinctly: soldiers followed orders. They did not question an order or ask for a brief on it; they followed it. That was the job they did.

By interviewing these men, we are not seeking justice but allowing a minority of people to seek vengeance, not against specific perpetrators, but against anyone who dared to wear a uniform. That was the only crime: being British and serving the Queen. To this day, that is enough for some people to want to destroy someone. The question is why some people are facilitating that, and how we can stop it. Figures show that investigations into former Army personnel account for a minority of legacy investigation branch cases, but that is still a disproportionately high number—some 30%—given that the total level of Army involvement in killings stands at 10%.

I have asked before in this Chamber why the life of someone killed in a skirmish with the Army is worth more time, effort and money than the life of someone killed by an unrepentant republican terrorist, who is walking around with a mayoral chain around his neck. We all know cases where that has happened; I named a very clear one in the House of Commons in the last term. That life is not worth more; it should not be. We must cut off the ability of those with a litigious republican agenda, who are determined to rewrite history, to weave a web of conspiracy theory and collusion, and make it seem like it was ever okay to bring workmen out of a van, let one of a certain religion run, and murder the rest in cold blood. The Kingsmill massacre has been very real in many people's minds over the last period of time.

Those are the people whom some seek to appease through this continued attack on service personnel. It has to end. For the sake of real justice it has to stop. By all means, if soldiers lured civilians into an area by all means, if soldiers lured civilians into an area by means of a honey trap and murdered them, let us investigate that, regardless of the uniform. But that is not the way it was; it was the other way around for those three Scottish soldiers. I tabled an early-day motion for them just a short time ago. I ask: where is their justice? There is not a level playing field, and it needs to be levelled.

Lexie Cummings's family, from Strabane in West Tyrone, need the closure that has been given to those who sought the investigation into Bloody Sunday. My cousin Kenneth Smyth's family mourn still. Do they not
deserve the time that has been wasted on dragging old men out of their beds on the mainland and asking them questions that were above their pay grade, when they simply followed orders in a country where possibly half the people despised them for their uniform, and perhaps half of those people were willing to do something about it?

**Bob Stewart:** I want to pick up on one point that the hon. Gentleman—my very good friend—said. He said that soldiers followed orders. The decision to open fire was an individual matter; in the vast majority of cases, soldiers did not open fire because someone ordered them to. I cannot think of any cases where people opened fire on an order. They opened fire because they made the decision, based on the yellow card.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Clearly, the yellow card was given by the British Army for guidance on what to do, and soldiers followed that, so the soldiers on the ground followed the rules. There was not a man over their shoulder saying, “Right, fire now.” They made the decision based on the rules, which were clearly laid down for them. I had a yellow card myself, and I still keep it—as a bit of a keepsake, if for no other reason.

I will say it again: if soldiers stepped beyond their role and knowingly and willingly committed offences, then that is very different from what is happening here. I ask everyone to please see the difference.

I support the Committee’s recommendations, and appeal to anyone with any sense of decency and natural justice to do the same—except for a few minor parts that my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would like to do the same—except for a few minor parts that my hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), said.

The Government need to act. I appeal to them to respond to those who wore a uniform. As one who still lives under threat—not of prosecution, but because of the Government’s persecution—I use that word deliberately—men who did no more than wear their uniform and follow orders in a country where possibly half the people despised them for their uniform, and perhaps half of those people were willing to do something about it.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I would like to pay tribute initially to my dear friend and late constituent, Surgeon Captain Rick Jolly. Many people will know of his work in the Falklands and the heroic work he carried out there, but some may not know that he served as the medical officer of 42 Commando and was deployed in Belfast early in his career.

I welcome the Defence Committee report. I want to tell a story—it is a true story about another of my constituents. I first met this gentleman many years ago when I worked in a local village as a doctor’s receptionist in the NHS. One day we had a power cut, and this kindly man from across the road came over bearing a kettle of water so that we could make a cup of tea. Over the years I worked at that location, I got to know my kindly neighbour. His name is Dennis Hutchings. He is now in his late seventies and is not a fit and healthy man: he has incurable chronic kidney disease.

More than 40 years ago, Dennis was a gallant soldier doing his job in the very difficult sphere that was Northern Ireland. In his own words, “It was a war zone.” He served for 26 years in the Life Guards with distinction. During his time in Northern Ireland, he and another soldier were involved in a shooting. I understand that the situation was investigated at the time by the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the soldiers were told that they would face no further action.

I now come to the present day—more than 40 years down the road. One newspaper reported that a couple of years ago Dennis was “arrested and interrogated 25 times by police investigating”. It went on to say that he “was held for almost 85 hours before he was charged with attempted murder and on one day he was quizzed ten times over 11 hours.”

This gentleman was told that there would be no further action at the time of the original investigation. A different newspaper outlined the information available, saying that “there is no forensic evidence, no weapons from the time and all the witnesses are dead”.

Many have described what is happening as a witch hunt. This is the real face of these investigations—a kindly, elderly gentleman being hounded by the authorities for years just because he did his job more than 40 years ago to the best of his ability and as he was ordered to do by his country, and served in Northern Ireland.

The Government say in their response to the Defence Committee report:

“The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise from the nation that those who serve and have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, will be treated fairly”.

I welcome that, as the mother of somebody who serves in the armed forces. However, I do not think that Dennis Hutchings is being treated fairly. Over the years, he has become my friend, and he is my constituent. What is happening to him is wrong. I do sympathise with the families of the victims. I know what it is like to lose a loved one—to have them snatched from you prematurely—so I can speak with authority. Dennis Hutchings is my friend and my constituent, and what is happening to him is wrong. If the armed forces covenant is to mean anything, this attack on Dennis Hutchings must stop now.
British military personnel. I am grateful to the chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), for his detailed explanation of the Committee’s deliberations. It would need the wisdom of Solomon to come up with a true solution to this problem, and I do not envy the Minister, who has to sum up the debate.

We have heard many examples of how stressful the process has been for the individuals and families involved. Many have been left in limbo while investigations drag on. As we know, the legacy investigation branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland is currently reviewing all deaths attributable to the security situation that occurred in Northern Ireland between 1968 and the Good Friday/Belfast agreement in 1998. Any decision by the legacy investigation branch to prosecute is of course referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland. That is an independent process, without UK Government involvement.

We must have confidence in the institutions of the police and the judiciary in Northern Ireland to serve the people. It is for Stormont to reform them if they are not serving them well, and I certainly hope that we can see Stormont functioning again fully in the future. That said, none of us wants former or, for that matter, current members of the armed forces to be treated unfairly when accusations of wrongdoing are made. We all know that the huge backlog of cases with the Iraq Historic Allegations Team meant that serving and former service personnel faced extended periods of uncertainty over the accusations that had been made. We must have adequate resources for investigating allegations so that that does not happen again, or in this case. We all support the idea of justice being done, but that includes fairness to our armed forces personnel, who are entitled to due process in answering allegations made within a reasonable timeframe.

The Select Committee has very helpfully suggested to the Government four possible options and has itself made a recommendation in favour of option one, namely enacting a statute of limitations. I note that the Committee did not recommend the fourth option, which is to cease investigations into former service personnel and stop complying with the European Court of Human Rights interpretation of our obligations under the European convention on human rights. It is important for me to state the Scottish National party position on this issue. We wholly oppose any attempts to abolish it. Any derogation from article 2 of the European convention on human rights as a response to the situation would blur rather than define the high standards that we rightly expect and overwhelmingly see delivered by our armed forces, so I am grateful that the Committee does not recommend that course of action. It would send entirely the wrong message to the rest of the world about our commitment to human rights.

In conclusion, our service personnel should rightly be held to the high standards of behaviour that we expect, but they should also be fully supported by the Ministry of Defence when allegations are made.

2.46 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is indeed a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I start by paying tribute to the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and to the members of the Committee for their work in producing the report. This is an extremely important and profoundly serious issue and wholly deserving of the Committee’s attention. The Chair of the Committee made a very considered and thoughtful opening contribution to the debate. He outlined the Committee’s approach and, obviously, the need to consider all views.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) talked about the delicate nature of the issues that we are discussing—delicate for families and for armed forces personnel. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) made his contribution with the added knowledge from his military service. From the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), we heard a very moving reflection on the troubles. He reminded us of the complex and delicate nature of the issues that we are discussing. From the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we heard a personal reflection on his time in uniform, as we did from the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who as a young infantry soldier served in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) gave an account on behalf of one of her constituents and talked about the links to the armed forces covenant.

The past presents many difficult and unanswered questions to families and individuals in Northern Ireland, as well as to those across Britain, including our armed forces veterans who served in Operation Banner. In all communities, there is a desire for truth and clarity about what happened to loved ones, and the quest for answers has not diminished with the passage of time. Like many hon. Members across the Chamber, I am of a generation that vividly remembers the troubles, as well as the anguish and conflict that that period represented. It is always worth reminding ourselves of the good work that led up to the landmark achievement of the Good Friday agreement. We are all committed to a future for Northern Ireland that guarantees peace and security for all citizens.

The report deals specifically with the issue of fatalities involving British personnel who served in Northern Ireland. We rightly expect the highest standards of conduct from our service personnel, and we know that members of our armed forces are keenly aware of that. Where there are allegations about improper or unlawful behaviour, they must be investigated fairly and thoroughly. Of course, there have been cases where investigations have, regrettably, not been fair. The Opposition welcomed the closure of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, because that forum relied too heavily on referrals from one discredited law firm and was simply not working.

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

On the separate issue of fatalities in Northern Ireland, we are clear that the best means of dealing with this is through the full implementation of the Stormont House agreement and the institutions that that agreement provides for. The Stormont House agreement addressed many important issues relating to legacy, including providing for an independent historical investigations unit to take forward outstanding investigations into deaths relating to the troubles.
I know that there is deep frustration on all sides about the lack of progress towards fully implementing the agreement. One of the many groups eager to see progress is the Ballymurphy families, who earlier today met the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). I know that their desire for progress is shared by all parties. The frustration at the lack of progress is also a point that the Committee’s report makes only too clearly. I fully recognise the Committee’s view that the status quo is simply not sustainable.

We all want to see progress made in resuming power sharing in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said recently, we need the Government to come forward with a clear path to rebuild trust between the parties and restore power sharing. That should involve the enlisting of an independent chair to manage the talks. Only then, and with the implementation of the Stormont House institutions, can we make the progress that we all so badly want to see, and ensure that those affected by the violence of the troubles get the answers and the truth that they deserve.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I remind the House of my interest as a member of the Army Reserve, although Northern Ireland is one of the few places where I have not seen operational service. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for his Committee’s thoughtful report on a sensitive and complex issue, and for securing this debate. I am also grateful for the incredibly powerful contributions made this afternoon. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) focused on people. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) has been such a champion in this area. I am particularly grateful to him for his concern about my health. I have not been laid low with man flu, but I tell him gently that if I were, as a fine Royal Engineer I probably would not seek the sympathy of the House; I would just man up and get on with it.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) gave a really passionate speech. The attention he got from the Chamber was well-deserved. He highlighted many of the challenges that we all face. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) gave such a passionate speech about his experiences and the pressures placed on our security forces. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who had to go and speak in another debate. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) gave a passionate plea on behalf of her constituent Dennis Hutchings. If she would like a meeting with me, we can discuss the matter in more detail. That is the best way that we can move that forward.

Around 250,000 service personnel served in Northern Ireland as part of Operation Banner between 1969 and 2007. Our armed forces played a vital role in providing safety and security, and in bringing about the conditions for peace. As the then Bishop of London, Dr Richard Chartres, put it at a service to mark the end of Operation Banner, “force cannot in the end resolve social conflict but it can offer a vital breathing space in which the normal processes of democratic debate and decision making can re-assert themselves. Military intervention can hold the forces of chaos at bay while people learn again how communities with different histories and aspirations can live together and do business with one another. Operation Banner kept open that vital pass”.

I pay tribute to all those who served, especially the more than 1,000 security personnel who sadly lost their lives in doing so, as well as all those who were injured and killed. In total more than 3,500 people were killed during the troubles, with terrorists responsible for 90% of those deaths. The arrangements for investigating those deaths have, over the years, been subject to increasing criticism. There is broad agreement in Northern Ireland that the current systems and structures are not delivering enough for victims, survivors or wider society.

The closure of the Historical Enquiries Team in December 2014 has left more than 1,000 cases outstanding, the vast majority of which are terrorist killings. The Northern Ireland courts risk being overwhelmed by the demands placed on them by historical inquests; there are 50 inquests currently open into almost 100 troubles-related deaths. Where criminal investigations are taking place, they are on a largely ad hoc basis, feeding the concern felt by some that there is an imbalance in the mechanisms in place, which results in a disproportionate focus on those deaths that in some way involve the state. The Government are clear about the problems with the status quo.

After 11 weeks of intensive talks, the Stormont House agreement in December 2014 reached a broad political agreement to establish four institutions to address what is sometimes described in Northern Ireland as the legacy of the past. We continue to seek the implementation of the legacy institutions set out in the Stormont House agreement as the best way to address Northern Ireland’s past in a way that is fair, balanced and proportionate.

The key institution relevant to today’s debate is the proposed Historical Investigations Unit. The HIU would be an independent body responsible for completing outstanding investigations into troubles-related deaths. It would be required to act in a manner that is fair, impartial, proportionate, effective and efficient, and designed to secure the independence of the HIU and the confidence of the public. The HIU would be required to work through its case load in chronological order and to complete its work within five years.

It is clear that action is needed on so-called legacy inquests. For example, in 2013 only two legacy inquests were completed and both have subsequently had their conclusions appealed, one successfully. None was completed in 2014. Better progress has been made since, and the Government support the work of the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland in putting together a reform plan for the legacy inquests for the Northern Ireland Executive. I hope that a new Executive can be formed soon, so that they can reach a view on how this element of the package of legacy reform can be taken forward.

The Government are committed to the Stormont House agreement and believe that the next phase is to consult publicly on the details of how the new institutions could work in practice. A public consultation will provide everyone who has an interest with the opportunity to see the proposals and contribute to the discussion on
the issues. The consultation will include a draft Bill, which I am sure all hon. Members here will want to scrutinise in detail.

The consultation will also do something else. The Defence Committee’s important report, and indeed today’s debate, demonstrate that some people believe that the time has come for Northern Ireland to consider an alternative approach to dealing with the legacy of the past—an approach other than the pursuit of further criminal investigations. The Committee recommended “the enactment of a statute of limitations, covering all Troubles-related incidents, up to the signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, which involved former members of the Armed Forces. This should be coupled with the continuation and development of a truth recovery mechanism which would provide the best possible prospect of bereaved families finding out the facts, once no-one needed to fear being prosecuted.”

A cross-party letter to the Prime Minister signed by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, who is the Committee’s Chairman, along with the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, went further. The letter drew on expert evidence that a statute of limitations would fall foul of international law if it applied only to servants of the state, and recognised changes that the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 made to sentencing for offences related to the troubles. In the light of that, the letter argued that the time had come for a statute of limitations that covered all, including paramilitaries. I know that many, both inside and outside this place, agree with that position, while others, as we have heard, will not.

As there are a range of views, and recognising the view of the Committee, the Government have decided to include within the legacy consultation a question on alternative ways of addressing the legacy of the past, such as a statute of limitations or amnesty. While the Government are clear that in their view the best way forward is to proceed with the Stormont House agreement institutions, in the spirit of meaningful consultation, all views will be considered carefully to inform the next steps.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East asked whether the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act applies to members of the security forces as well as paramilitaries. Yes, it does, provided the eligibility criteria set out in the Act are met. In practice, no former members of the security forces have been convicted of relevant offences since the passing of the Act, so it has not yet been used in this way.

The hon. Member for Belfast East mentioned that two members of the security forces were in prison at the time of the Good Friday agreement and did not benefit from early release under the scheme. The soldiers in question were released under licence by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who had been considering their case before the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act became law. That case does not demonstrate that members of the security forces are debarred from making use of the provisions of the Act.

Going back to the consultation, while all views are important, I am particularly keen that armed forces veterans be given an opportunity to have their say, so I will ensure that the consultation, once published—I hope that will be soon—is distributed to veterans, including through our network of excellent regimental secretaries.

Finding a better way to address Northern Ireland legacy matters is a priority for the UK Government. The Defence Committee’s report is an important contribution to the debate on how best to do that. Now is the time, through the forthcoming consultation, for everyone with an interest in addressing Northern Ireland’s past to have their say.

3.1 pm

Dr Julian Lewis: It only remains for me to express my gratitude to everyone who has taken part in the debate. I hope that any onlookers will realise and accept that we are dealing with the most difficult of issues, and are trying to do everything that decent people with good intentions can do to arrive at a fair conclusion.

I am grateful to those who have spoken today. I am grateful to colleagues such as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who have been highly active in this field in the past but could not be here today, for writing in support. I am grateful to the Minister, not least for making crystal clear that the sentencing Act does indeed apply equally to the military and to terrorists going on trial.

That said, it remains absolutely unacceptable that service personnel will have to go through the sort of ordeal that Dennis Hutchings is going through. It seems to me that there are only two ways to prevent that: getting rid of the international law that requires such matters to be investigated in the way that it does, and having a statute of limitations. The international law, namely the Human Rights Act, says that if we have a statute of limitations, it must apply to everyone. I see my good friend the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) dissenting from that proposition, but that is the testimony that we were given by legal experts. If there is a way in which we can do what the report does—that is, support a statute of limitations for service personnel and analogous organisations, such as the police and the security agencies—without incurring a breach of international law, I would like to know what it is, because the evidence that we were given was that we could not.

Gavin Robinson: I realise that it is probably improper for me to start a new debate during a concluding speech, but it depends on whether there has been an article 2-compliant investigation or not. If there has not been, the right hon. Gentleman is right; but where there has been, the option of a statute of limitations is open.

Dr Lewis: As I say, we sought advice, and the advice we got was that a statute of limitations can be brought in, but there has to be—or have been, as the hon. Gentleman says—an investigation. There has not always been such an investigation, so unless or until we can bring in such a statute, or can get out of the provisions of the Human Rights Act—no one seems to want to do that—we face the prospect of people like Dennis Hutchings being forced to go through a process, at a late stage in their life, that most fair-minded people would regard as unacceptable and that is unlikely to lead to a conviction.

I did not expect for one moment that we would solve this problem today, but I hope that we have clarified the
issues, and have focused the Government’s attention on what needs to be done, so that we do not end up with our soldiers having to worry about not only warfare but lawfare.

Question put and agreed to.
Westminster Hall

Monday 29 January 2018

[Mr Charles Walker in the Chair]

Fireworks

4.30 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 201947 relating to fireworks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

I discovered that a past Member of the House of the Lords from my area was the first peer to smoke in the House of Lords. I assure you, Mr Walker, and other Members present that I have no plans to become the first Member of either House of Parliament to light a firework in the course of the debate, not even a sparkler.

The petition is a serious one. It wants to “Change the laws governing the use of fireworks to include a ban on public use”, and states:

“Fireworks cause alarm, distress and anxiety to many people and animals. We call on the Secretary of State to make appropriate provision to secure that the risk of public use is the minimum that is compatible with fireworks being used, as stated in Fireworks Act 2003 sect 2.

Noted in debate of firework petition 109702 statistics are not recorded. We ask government to collect statistics. We ask the Sec. of State to issue a full regulatory impact assessment in accordance with section 2(4) Act; 2004, consider statistics gathered by FireworkAbatement (FAB) as stated in Fireworks Act 2003 sect 3b, ‘as an organisation which appears to the Sec. of State to be representative of interests substantially affected by the proposal’, Shown by this petition and past petitions.”

As of today, 111,717, a very large number of people, have signed the petition. On behalf of the House of Commons Petitions Committee, I thank Julie Doorne, creator of the petition, and all its signatories. I also thank the 5,700-plus members of the public who left a range of thoughtful comments reflecting a diverse range of views on the Committee’s Facebook page.

I like fireworks. I mean, I really like fireworks, and I grew up with little, informal community firework displays on bonfire night. We had rockets, Roman candles, Catherine wheels, snowflakes and traffic lights, as well as those magical sparklers to scribble away with in the night air. There was the big bonfire in which the jacket potatoes were cooked, and there was hot soup, cakes and sweets, and of course a crowd of people.

I appreciate that all that is starting to sound like a cross between Laurie Lee’s “Cider with Rosie” and Dylan Thomas’s “A Child’s Christmas in Wales”, or a child’s bonfire night in this case. Idyllic—a happy community coming together across the age divide to enjoy a joyful time together, with pets firmly kept indoors enjoying tracks from the Bay City Rollers, or whatever else was listened to in the 70s that was enough of a noise to minimise the sound of the bangs outside. After all, it was only on one night of the year.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree with the view of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals that private use should be restricted to certain key dates, such as 5 November, new year’s eve, Diwali and Chinese New Year? Does that make sense to her, because of concern about the fear caused to animals?

Susan Elan Jones: There is a very strong case for that. At the very least, the Government should launch a public consultation on the issue.

In June 2016 a Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), stated that the fireworks industry is worth £180 million and directly employs 250 people, and that thousands of others in the supply chain would be affected by new legislation. So there we have it, a Conservative Minister making the economic case for the status quo, and a Back-Bench Labour MP waxing lyrical about bonfire nights in north Wales.

Should that not be the end of the debate, especially when we consider how important fireworks are in bringing people together and in their use across a whole range of multicultural festivals? Can we not just agree that spontaneous communal gatherings with fireworks are such a nice phenomenon and bring such local joy that the only problem is that we do not have more of them? Should we not just recognise that, with the first documented use of fireworks in this country being way back in 1486, it is simply something that we do at local spontaneous gatherings as well as large organised displays? The answer to that is no—the movers of the petition and others have a very valid case to make, and it is supported by a range of people across society.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I should declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the horse. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is not only the when, to which the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) just referred, but the where? Given the proliferation she is talking about, the proximity of fireworks to horses has cost 15 horses being killed and 60 injured since 2010, and those are just the ones we know about, not to speak of the humans involved, such as when a horse crashes through a fence and into the windscreen of a car. The location of fireworks displays becomes very important, not only the extended period during which fireworks are let off.

Susan Elan Jones: I agree with the right hon. Lady. For those of us who represent rural or semi-rural seats, that is a particular issue.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I noted my hon. Friend’s words, including about spontaneous gatherings. Following on from talk of horses, for five years, my constituent Fiona Holmann owned a horse, Solo, which died on the night of the fireworks. The vet informed her that the horse had twisted his gut in the panic caused by the noise and distress. Given the unnecessary distress and pain to all animals, we should limit the private use of fireworks and, as the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, not just the when but the where.

Susan Elan Jones: My hon. Friend from Wales makes a strong case.
I mentioned earlier the 5,700-plus comments reflecting different views on the Facebook page. I cannot talk about all of them but I will quote one: Facebook user Stephanie Daisy shared a moving video about her daughter, Maisie, who suffered serious injuries after a small home firework display went wrong on 5 November 2016. A stray flare became stuck in her scarf before exploding. She suffered full thickness burns to her head, neck and shoulders, and had five separate operations. In response to the post on Facebook, Stephanie said:

“My thoughts are, and always will be, that fireworks can be devastatingly dangerous even when used safely and as such should only be allowed at organised displays”.

Stephanie is not alone in her views. In fact, many others seem to share them, including veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

For such veterans, fireworks can be an unwelcome trigger for upsetting and frightening memories of conflict. The veterans’ charity, Shoulder to Soldier, runs a campaign to raise awareness of the negative effect that random fireworks can have on veterans who live with PTSD. That can be a particular problem nowadays as we do not only “Remember, remember the fifth of November”, but scores of other days throughout the year, with much random letting off of fireworks.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Would my hon. Friend care to comment on a scenario that happened in my constituency? The home of Mr and Mrs Bagshaw was destroyed after a random firework entered the roof space and caused a fire which devastated their home. I asked if any consideration was being given by Ministers to lowering the explosive content of fireworks available to the general public, but the response was that there was no such plan. Will my hon. Friend comment on that aspect of this debate?

Susan Elan Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point and there are similar examples in other constituencies, although the one he refers to is especially serious.

People who wear hearing aids have concerns, too. According to The Independent, the petition organisers claim that random fireworks can be a nuisance to those who wear hearing aids. Individuals with those devices can turn the volume down or remove the hearing aid when they hear fireworks, the noise they produce can cause significant pain and discomfort to hearing aid users.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very fine argument. I was approached by a constituent who went to an organised firework event and she and her husband were subjected to an event and she and her husband were subjected to an event that was no such plan. Will my hon. Friend comment on a scenario that happened in my constituency? The home of Mr and Mrs Bagshaw was destroyed after a random firework entered the roof space and caused a fire which devastated their home. I asked if any consideration was being given by Ministers to lowering the explosive content of fireworks available to the general public, but the response was that there was no such plan. Will my hon. Friend comment on that aspect of this debate?

Susan Elan Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point and there are similar examples in other constituencies, although the one he refers to is especially serious.

People who wear hearing aids have concerns, too. According to The Independent, the petition organisers claim that random fireworks can be a nuisance to those who wear hearing aids. Individuals with those devices can turn the volume down or remove the hearing aid when they hear fireworks, the noise they produce can cause significant pain and discomfort to hearing aid users.

Susan Elan Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend. The petitioners refer to the lack of proper statistics as an issue.

Unorganised, spontaneous firework displays are worrying for many children and adults with health concerns. Many of those who care for children know that the loud noises generated by random firework displays can distress children who live with autism, hearing difficulties and certain mental health conditions. Some families can—and do—find it difficult to explain to affected children why the displays occur so often and without warning, especially throughout the winter months and not just on bonfire night and new year’s eve, and during the spring and summer, when it seems that any event can be marked with a sudden loud volley of firework sounds. For some people, that can be very disconcerting.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is probably horrified, as I am, that there is a shop in my constituency that is open virtually every day of the year, which advertises Gloucestershire’s cheapest fireworks. I do not know the limitations on that shop’s selling fireworks, but at the moment it appears that anyone can go in and buy fireworks whenever they want to. Does she agree that that needs to be looked into?

Susan Elan Jones: I suspect that trading standards may like to pay them a visit, as that may not be entirely in keeping with current legislation, let alone any future plans that the debate may bring.

There are many concerns about domestic animals. The 2005 report by the RSPCA, “Firework fears and phobias in the domestic dog”, which was based on extensive research, informs us that almost half the owners questioned—49%—reported that their dog was frightened of loud noises. Forty five per cent. of owners reported that their dog showed fearful behaviour when it heard fireworks. It is widely accepted that cats and other domestic animals can be significantly affected by firework noises. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) mentioned the issues concerning horses: reported incidents in 2017 rose by 243% compared with 2016, and 15 horses died and 60 were injured according to reported statistics—clearly not all incidents are reported to the British Horse Society.

Let us not forget farm animals. Farm animals and livestock can also suffer from distress injury. That can mean livestock bolting in distress, which may cause danger to humans and vehicles if the livestock are near a public highway. Fowl have been known to smother each other in their attempts to hide from the noise in their environment. Animals have been known to go into premature labour and lose their offspring. Similar distress to animals from jet engine noises has previously been noted, too.

In 2016, just before a parliamentary debate on fireworks, the National Farmers Union issued the following statement:

“Farmers care deeply about the welfare of their animals, and are rightly concerned about anything that could jeopardise their wellbeing. Fireworks, especially when used at unpredictable times of year, have the possibility to frighten livestock, which can lead to lower production and even stock loss. Poultry especially are at risk of a ‘smother’, where birds huddle together which can result in some birds dying. In addition fireworks can pose a fire risk if hot embers land on barns or in fields of standing crops. This is particularly an issue during the summer when crops are more likely to be dry.”
While the NFU does not have a position on when it is appropriate for fireworks to be let off we would call on everyone using fireworks to consider the safety and wellbeing of their neighbours and neighbours’ animals.”

The statement continues:

“It is important to let farmers know beforehand that you are planning on letting off fireworks so they can take necessary precautions to protect their animals. Fireworks should always be used safely, and pointed away from buildings, standing crops, and fields with animals in them.”

I know that hon. Members representing rural or semi-rural constituencies will join me in agreeing with every word expressed by the NFU in that statement. Many of us will also have heard local horror stories about fireworks. Last autumn in my constituency, a kitchen was destroyed within minutes when a young child set off a firework. After the incident, which could have been much worse, the child’s mother said:

“We were lucky to escape from the property unharmed this morning and my advice to everyone would be never store fireworks in the house.”

Those words are well worth sharing in our debate today.

On a totally different note, there are also those who feel that, at a time when we are constantly reminded to be more vigilant about the ever-present threat of terrorism, loud explosions from fireworks at random times of the year can be unsettling for a lot of people. One example that comes to mind is from November 2017, when an altercation between two men in Oxford Circus tube station caused a mass panic that resulted in several injuries. There are examples every year that show that bonfire night seems to be an opportunity for a special and criminal night of arson and disorder, with its own very real dangers for emergency service personnel. I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is present, will mention that if she speaks in the debate.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that note, in Yorkshire, prior to bonfire night we have mischief night, when young people in particular misuse fireworks, throw them at other people—I have had a firework thrown at me—put them through people’s doors and attack firefighters in west Yorkshire. We need action, not just around bonfire night but mischief night.

Susan Elan Jones: I had not heard of that particular custom but it sounds as if that is the case.

Having said all that, many would argue that fireworks are pretty well regulated across the UK. There are separate, stricter regulations for Northern Ireland, but even for the rest of us, there are a good number of statutes that relate to fireworks—no I will not go into all of them.

The Fireworks (Amendment) Regulations 2004 are designed to tackle the antisocial use of fireworks. Since January 2005, the sale of fireworks to the public has been prohibited except by licensed traders. However, fireworks can be sold by unlicensed traders on Chinese new year and the preceding three days, for bonfire night celebrations between 15 October and 10 November—I assume those buying them at the end are having a late bonfire night—and new year celebrations between 26 and 31 December. A licence costs £500 and is issued by a local authority, subject to strict criteria. The penalty for operating without a licence is an unlimited fine and/or up to six months in jail. Under the 2004 regulations, it is an offence to use fireworks after 11 pm and before 7 am without permission, except on bonfire night, when the cut-off is midnight—it certainly was not in the case of the child in north Wales I mentioned—and on new year’s eve, Chinese new year and Diwali, when the cut-off is 1 am.

Fireworks are categorised from F1 to F4. Category F1 fireworks are “fireworks which present a very low hazard and negligible noise level and which are intended for use in confined areas, including fireworks which are intended for use inside domestic buildings.” Category F4 fireworks are “fireworks which present a high hazard, which are intended for use only by persons with specialist knowledge and whose noise level is not harmful to human health.”

In other words, they are professional fireworks for use in large open spaces.

Regulation 8 of the 2004 regulations prohibits the supply to the public of category F3 fireworks whose noise exceeds 120 dB. According to Age UK, damage to hearing can be caused by noise of 85 dB. The illegal use of fireworks can result in prosecution and a fine of up to £5,000 and/or a prison sentence of up to six months. A £90 on-the-spot fine may also be levied. The penalty for committing an offence of supplying a category F2 or F3 firework to any person under 18, or supplying a category F1 firework to any person under 16, is a fine of up to £5,000 and up to six months’ imprisonment.

In addition, under section 31 of the Pyrotechnic Articles (Safety) Regulations 2015, an “economic operator”—a retailer—must not sell: a Christmas cracker to anyone under 12; F1 category fireworks to anyone under 16, or F2 and F3 category fireworks to anyone under 18. They also must not sell F4 category fireworks to members of the public, as those may be supplied only to a person with specialist knowledge.

Fireworks, including sparklers—those were my favourite—can be bought for private use only between 15 October and 10 November, between 26 and 31 December, and in the three days before Diwali and Chinese new year. Storage of fireworks of less than 2 tonnes requires a licence from the local authority; storage of more than 2 tonnes of fireworks requires a licence from the Health and Safety Executive. Both bodies may inspect storage facilities if they wish. The Explosives Regulations 2014 state that a licence is required to store fireworks except where their quantity is less than 5 kg. That strikes me as pretty extensive.

At the start of the debate, I spoke about my positive childhood experiences of local community bonfire nights, so it is both instinctive and subjective for me to say that I am cautious about a total ban. Others with less positive experiences will of course take a different view.

Chris Williamson: My hon. Friend went through the extensive regulatory safeguards in detail, but they are only as good as their enforcement. We hear every bonfire night, and on other occasions, of examples such as the appalling incident in my constituency where two vile sadists strapped two rockets to a cat and set them on fire. We clearly need better enforcement. I wonder whether she will comment on the fact that cuts to local authorities, to police services and so on make it difficult to enforce the regulations, which should provide safety to the general public.

Susan Elan Jones: That is probably true, and I know what I would quite like to do to some perpetrators, but it is worth noting that some countries have far tougher...
rules for spontaneous local firework displays. Last November, a fascinating piece on the BBC website noted how, in the American state of Delaware, someone can get a shotgun without a licence but it is totally illegal for an individual to buy a firework. It struck me as interesting that the right to bear sparklers is governed by tougher laws than the right to bear arms. Some other states relent on sparklers—I am conscious that my emphasis on sparklers reflects a certain subjectivity—but ban all other fireworks. In all seriousness, that is an interesting comparison.

I give that example because I think we need more objective evidence—and not primarily from other countries. The petitioners refer to the need for proper statistics about firework-related incidents. A related newspaper article states that petitioners found it impossible to get the relevant information through freedom of information requests. I agree with the petitioners that to debate this issue properly and to consider the extent of the problem we need full and accurate data. We do not have that at the moment, and I believe that the Government should provide it.

It is also time that the Government launched a proper, comprehensive consultation on this issue. We cannot discuss all this by anecdote alone. We cannot seriously have a grown-up discussion about what the law should be when all we have to go on is the subjectivity of lawmakers who have happy childhood memories of small informal firework displays and those who, for equally personal reasons, do not. We need evidence, statistics, and a proper debate, and we need the Government to launch a formal consultation on this issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Colleagues, 12 of you want to speak. I have worked out that, if you each speak for eight and a half minutes, we should get everyone in and leave 10 minutes each for the three Front Benchers to make their winding-up speeches. I call Jim Fitzpatrick.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Sorry, I got that wrong. I call Bill Grant. I do apologise, Jim; you will be next.

4.56 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Thank you, Mr Walker; it is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship. I apologise to my colleague the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), whom I know well, and I thank the hon. Member for Chwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for introducing the debate.

I have a background of some 31 years in the Strathclyde fire and rescue service. Way back in 1974—44 years ago—bonfire night was inevitably busier than any other night of the year, and that remains the case. It is indeed important to “Remember, remember, the fifth of November”, because it stretches the resources of all emergency services, not just the fire and rescue service. Colleagues in the ambulance service treat people injured by flying embers or by fireworks, and regrettably, police officers often have to accompany other emergency services workers to ensure their safety from attacks.

We must bear in mind that the greatest costs are the human costs—the costs of burns that may scar or disfigure someone for life, of loss of sight and, as we heard, of the triggering of PTSD, which often happens to members of the armed forces who have served this country well. Albeit that fireworks often provide a colourful spectacle at small private displays and large public events, many humans and animals find them very distressing, particularly given their noise, even if they do not inflict physical injury.

As a member of a pet-owning and pet-loving family, I am acutely aware of the stress that fireworks cause many domestic pets. There are products on the market—CDs and garments with pressure pads, for example—that claim to afford pets relief and desensitise them, but it is impossible to assist livestock in fields. The light and noise from fireworks may spook sheep and cause them to crowd in the corners of fields and risk suffocation, and cattle may bolt from their field and become distressed, or worse. We heard horrific figures about the deaths of horses resulting from the irresponsible use of fireworks, and we must never forget assistance dogs, such as guide dogs, hearing dogs and companion dogs, which may be unnecessarily distracted from their important duties.

Of course, many domestic pets are simply unnecessarily petrified by the noise of fireworks, which is often not simply a bang but a screech or a whine. Their hearing is distinctly different from ours. Given the more frequent use of fireworks, we inflict that experience on man’s best friend more than just one day a year. Those pets, who are much loved, including by many in the Chamber, are simply inconsolable.

I appreciate that quieter fireworks are available on the market, but, according to a recent report commissioned by the City of Edinburgh Council, they lack the propellants that give the height and burst of colour for those viewing at a distance. In other words, they are second-rate fireworks and not particularly acceptable.

There is a raft of UK-wide and Scottish-specific categorisations and legislative controls for fireworks, including on their production, storage, sale and use, ranging from the Explosives Act 1875—slightly before my time—to the Fireworks (Scotland) Regulations 2004 and, more recently, the Pyrotechnic Articles (Safety) Regulations 2010. However, the question, which has been asked before, is whether they are fully understood by those enforcing them, such as trading standards and the police, and by the public, who indiscriminately activate them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I certainly would not comment on what happens in Scotland, but in England one of the big problems, as mentioned earlier, is policing. In the west midlands we have a particular shortage of police and a shortage of trading standards officers, and that—I am trying not to be too political—is because of local government cuts. Over the past 26 years I have listened to debates about fireworks like nobody’s business, but nothing positive happens. This time round we should have a commission to take a good look at it.

Bill Grant: The hon. Gentleman is partly correct. We should have a good look at this issue and get the statistics. I do not know whether there is an association with cuts, because when we were in the land of plenty I do not think the laws were well understood or policed. I do not link cuts to the tragedies that occur.
In my view, such categorisations and controls alone are not sufficient. It is important to minimise potential physical injuries and psychological distress further to both humans and animals.

I will take a wee look at statistics. The website of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents tells us that in 2014-15—this an unbelievable figure—4,506 people visited accident and emergency departments in England having suffered a firework injury. On that one night, 114 were admitted to hospital, of whom 44 were under 18 years of age. That includes 11 admissions involving children under five. For the benefit of fun and gratification from fireworks, should we be doing that to our children? Should we have that risk, or should we mitigate it? I think we should mitigate it.

In Scotland in 2017, 5 November resulted in 330 bonfire incidents, and on 11 occasions crews faced missiles and fireworks not for entertainment but fired towards them. They needed police assistance each time. Is that ignition of fireworks necessary on a bonfire night for the gratification of the public? In addition, 800 calls were received during that night.

I fully acknowledge that the Government have highlighted themselves and through other agencies the dangers of fireworks and taken steps to promote safety advice and guidance. However, even one life-changing incident is too many. For that reason, and because of the distress, injury and deaths caused to animals we heard about earlier, I advocate a ban on the sale of fireworks to individual members of the public. I believe firmly that the sale of fireworks should be restricted to professionals with health and safety training and qualifications who have permission to undertake an organised display for specific commemorative events at pre-arranged dates and times. Fireworks should not be used just at someone’s whim, whenever they want to frighten the life out of a neighbour’s cats and dogs, or when someone in a remote cottage wants to frighten the life out of nearby horses or farm animals.

Some may be fearful about potential job losses in the United Kingdom from such a ban. However, as I understand it few people are employed here in the manufacture of fireworks—no more than double figures—as most fireworks are imported. As an inadvertent consequence of banning the sale of fireworks, we might reduce our trade deficit with some of the countries from whom we import them.

I am not an advocate of state intervention. However, look at the success of seatbelt and crash helmet legislation and the long-term success of the smoking ban. Let us not ban organised events but end the retail sale of fireworks—no more than double figures—as most fireworks are imported. As an inadvertent consequence of banning the sale of fireworks, we might reduce our trade deficit with some of the countries from whom we import them.

I am not an advocate of state intervention. However, look at the success of seatbelt and crash helmet legislation and the long-term success of the smoking ban. Let us not ban organised events but end the retail sale of fireworks—no more than double figures—as most fireworks are imported. As an inadvertent consequence of banning the sale of fireworks, we might reduce our trade deficit with some of the countries from whom we import them.

I am pleased to follow the hon. Gentleman. It demonstrates the privilege of rank that the senior officer from the fire brigade gets priority over a humble firefighter, but hey, that is life and how it has always been in the fire service. He made some telling points, and I will not disagree with him much.

When I was in the fire service in London, for 364 days of the year people—especially kids—would knock on the door, wanting to come into the fire station to see the appliances and fire engines. The one day of the year they did not want to see us was Guy Fawkes day, when the bonfires were up and there were fireworks. This might be a romantic view of the past, but then it was only one day a year—fireworks are now 365 days a year. I do not know when the extension took place, and I guess we saw them at other times, but there is no way that the prolific use of fireworks was as prevalent then as it is now. At one point in my career I might have been worried about being called a member of the nanny state or a killjoy, but I am now pleased to claim membership of the grumpy old person’s club because my constituents are not happy about how fireworks are used in east London. Many will be happy that I am making this contribution.

Illegal fireworks are imported, especially from China, and their power and the noise they generate are different from anything we have had before. Fireworks are also used as weapons against passers-by and members of the public, and especially against the emergency services. I have seen YouTube videos of my constituency where the police turn out to a 999 call and find kids with rocket launchers, firing rockets at police cars. It is totally unacceptable.

The Firework Abatement campaign gives an excellent briefing, covering hospital admissions and the increasing number of A&E attendances. Statistics in its brief include 47 serious eye injuries, with 53% requiring surgery, and eight patients having to have their eyes removed. It also mentions antisocial behaviour right across the piece, such as that I mentioned in my constituency.

I have the highest regard for the Minister, so this is not an attack on him. However, we must question Government policy. We look to him to be our champion in Government and to make the case that the regulations on fireworks are not as strong as they ought to be.

The Government’s response is that we need to “strike a balance”. I understand that, but, at the moment, I do not think we are. Not a day of the year might be firework-free, because, as colleagues have said, they can turn up at any time, and the stress they cause to people and animals is well documented. The hon. Gentleman raised the question of data collection, and it would be useful to identify the nature of the problem.

The Government say that sales are highly regulated and restricted. The campaign says that there are restrictions on supply, storage, possession and misuse, but there are no regulations to prevent use 365 days a year between 7 am and 11 pm. Trading standards is also limited in its ability to keep track. There is an expectation that the chief can be enforced by police, but I think most of us across the House will say, “Good luck with that,” especially in London, where we see 2,000 fewer police officers and 2,500 fewer police community support officers.
[Jim Fitzpatrick]

The pressure on the police service, and last week’s statistics on the increase in violent and knife crime, mean that it has far higher priorities to attend to.

Communities have rights, and there should be a requirement to get a licence for fireworks, according to particular specifications, and especially with reference to noise and certain days of the year. There should be stronger control over sales, time restrictions and inspections, and the ability to audit-trail those who breach the regulations. I, like the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, am totally in favour of public displays; but we have seen that even they can go wrong, with people being injured. However, the more opportunities are available for people to go to a public display, the more chance there is that the events will be safe and therefore attract the public. There should be stronger penalties for misuse; if there were stronger controls the opportunity to abuse the privilege could be restricted.

People are worried about fireworks. We are not giving the subject enough attention and it deserves more attention from the Government, even if that is only in the form of stronger messages to retailers and users. The situation is already out of control in many places and will not improve; if there were stronger controls the opportunity to abuse the privilege could be restricted.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the Petitions Committee and the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) on their roles in securing the debate.

Several constituents have written to me to ask me to participate. Generally I was of the view, beforehand, that the current legislation strikes the right balance, which accords with the Government’s response to the petition. However, in view of the concerns that were put to me, I obtained the views of Suffolk County Council, which is responsible for public safety. The issues that I am going to highlight are the ones that it has brought to my attention, and I want to thank Nigel Howlett, the council’s senior fair trading officer. He leads on fireworks and explosives and is also the east of England trading standards authority’s representative on the fireworks enforcement liaison group.

The sale and use of fireworks is an emotive issue that concerns many people. There are four areas of concern: noise, safety, unsafe storage and sales, which I shall briefly consider in turn. First, as to noise, while there are restrictions on letting off fireworks, the biggest issue is enforcement. It is not a high priority for most police forces, and unless someone is caught in the act, it is probably impossible to identify where and by whom the firework was let off. In tests conducted by the National Trading Standards Board safety at ports and borders team in 2016, 50% of the fireworks tested failed the noise tests. However, those tests are expensive to carry out. They were previously funded by the Health and Safety Executive and Health Service Laboratories, but as no funding was available this year, no tests have been conducted. If there were specific funding for the testing of fireworks, it is possible that some of the noisier ones could be removed from the market.

With safety, the main problem, again, is one of expense, in that the cost of fully testing fireworks can run into several thousand pounds, which makes it impossible for many local authority trading standards departments to carry out tests. With regard to accidents arising from fireworks, while the NHS publishes data on hospital admissions and their nature and cause, it does not appear that there is any other record of accidents in relation to their cause. It is therefore difficult to determine whether accidents are caused by innocent use or misuse.

Every year there are reported incidents of injuries attributed to fireworks, many of them leaving permanent scars or involving the loss of limbs. However, since 2010 the UK has not reported any unsafe fireworks to the European RAPEX rapid alert system for non-food products, while during that time there have been 113 reports from the rest of the EU. It is possible that many of the injuries could be down to misuse—particularly those involving animals, and incidents occurring in public places—and there are videos online clearly showing people misusing fireworks, although it is impossible to know whether they were purchased from licensed premises, or whether they were bought by people under 18, the legal age for purchasing fireworks.

There is also potential for injury from not following the instructions printed on the fireworks. One of those instructions relates to the safe distance that spectators should stand from fireworks. It is natural for people to want to buy the biggest and best fireworks in their budget; yet many of those bigger fireworks will be in the F3 category and subject to a safety distance of 25 metres.

Dr Drew: The hon. Gentleman obviously has better eyesight than mine. The printing is often very small and sometimes in another language. The idea that people could make sense of it is somewhat arbitrary.

Peter Aldous: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which I was not going to raise, but it is pertinent, and it is right to make it, so I thank him.

There do not appear to be figures for the average length of the UK garden, but it has been suggested that the typical British garden is 50 feet long. If that is correct, many modern houses will not have gardens of the required size to ensure the safety of spectators when F3 fireworks are let off. Obviously, the consequences, should anything go wrong with the fireworks, are likely to be greater the closer the spectators are to them.

Trading standards and the fire service can have control over the storage arrangements at sites only if they are aware of those sites, which means only if they are licensed. Recent guidance to those bodies has encouraged them to be more proactive about storage conditions and quantities at licensed premises. In Suffolk the number of small independent retailers storing fireworks has dropped considerably in the past 10 years. It is unclear whether that is because of a lack of demand or an increase in the number of major supermarkets selling fireworks. Also in the county, trading standards continues to find minor issues with storage arrangements, with the occasional more serious problem being found on unannounced inspections. However, there have not been any major storage issues resulting in prosecution since 2010. In general, Suffolk County Council believes that the controls and powers that are in place are appropriate and sufficient to ensure that where unsafe storage issues are found they can be rectified without the need to resort to more formal measures.
In recent years the number of allegations about sales via social media such as Facebook has increased nationally and in Suffolk. Such sites are difficult to control as they are often promoted through private selling groups and thus they are not visible to all users. The sites often require investigators to “friend” the seller or join the group to determine how or where the fireworks are being sold. The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 requires local authorities to obtain approval from magistrates courts before formal intervention can be contemplated, and that makes investigating allegations difficult, especially given the short time constraints of the fireworks season. The control of sale is currently limited to restrictions on age and on period of sale—generally between 5 October and 5 November—and controls on the quantity supplied. In the UK we limit the sale of F2 and F3 fireworks to those aged over 18. In many parts of Europe F2 fireworks can be purchased by anyone over 16.

It is also appropriate to raise an issue that links sales, storage and safety. It concerns the current exemptions for the storage of less than 5 kg net explosive content. I am advised that in some places in the north of England it has been reported that some businesses are trying to get round the need to hold a licence by restricting their onsite storage to less than 5 kg NEC while keeping their remaining stocks hidden. There is concern that some fire authorities would therefore not know of the existence of fireworks on a property, which could put both firefighters and the public at risk. Some in the fire service would like to remove that exemption, but that would need careful consideration, because if it were not implemented properly many other businesses that store less than 5 kg NEC perfectly legitimately could be affected.

Suffolk County Council also makes suggestions on how existing regulations could be improved. First, it touches on insurance. The issue of public liability insurance was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) in a debate on 18 November 2016, when he highlighted the case of a fire at SP Plastics in Stafford in 2014. The business suffered financially due to neither the individual business nor the licensee having appropriate cover in place. While health and safety legislation does not require public liability insurance, it is now recommended that those manufacturing or storing fireworks should hold it. That advice has been added to the Health and Safety Executive website and to the “Guidance to Applicants” section on the licence application form.

Suffolk trading standards receives information from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs on all fireworks imports. That information is then disseminated to the relevant district council and the HSE where the consignment is destined. While in theory that allows the council and HSE to monitor the amount of fireworks being stored at their licensed sites, the information provided by HMRC can be sketchy at times and there is little or no enforcement of the requirements. Even where the information is provided, many authorities have suffered cuts to their budgets that restrict their ability to monitor imports adequately.

I sense that I have probably stretched my time a little. I have more to say, but I will come to my conclusion, which is that the Government should adopt a systematic approach to the collection of the statistics. Having considered the extremely helpful information put together by Nigel Howlett at Suffolk trading standards, I believe that, on balance, there is a case for amending the current regulations, although it is vital that a full consultation and regulatory impact assessment take place before any changes are made. That should include all those businesses in the supply network; we must remember that the vast majority of them are responsible, and it is vital that their views are heard. Thank you for bearing with me, Mr Walker.

**Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his self-discipline. Others had been shorter, so he was not in danger of eating up anyone else’s time.

5.21 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I congratulate the Petitions Committee on bringing this debate before us today.

I have the great privilege of representing the city of Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland, which is second to none when it comes to the organisation of large-scale public fireworks displays. Like the mover of the debate, the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), I am a big fan. I love fireworks, particularly the large displays.

Our biggest display, of course, is not on bonfire night nor indeed at new year, but in August every year at the culmination of the world’s largest arts festival: a fantastic firework display using the backdrop of Edinburgh castle, which is really quite spectacular. The majesty and power of that display, and the excitement and thrill of it, provide entertainment to audiences in excess of 100,000 people each year. I welcome it as a highlight of the cultural calendar, but that display is executed by highly trained pyrotechnic engineers. It is regulated completely from a health and safety point of view, and complete precautions are taken to ensure that the display can be conducted in a safe way that brings no harm to animals or to the many people who enjoy it.

When I then look at the situation governing the private use of fireworks, none of that really applies. Yes, we have the Fireworks Regulations 2004, but let us be honest: if someone is over 18 and they do it before 11 o’clock at night, they can let off as many fireworks as they want for as long as they want, irrespective of the inconvenience it causes to their neighbours or to animals living locally. That is something that we must look at again.

We had a particular problem in my constituency in November last year. I suppose we should wait a few more years and be careful of making predictions, but it seems to me that the problem is increasing. One of the people who signed the petition sent me an email at the time, saying:

“I’m all for organised professional displays. But I don’t think members of the public, with no fire safety training should be in charge of explosives.”

My father was a firefighter and I used to dread him being on shift on fireworks night, due the abuse and assaults our fire crews receive, this included having fireworks aimed at them as they tried to put out, out of control bonfires.”

She also says:

“We have a beautiful, gentle German Shepherd who is terrified of the fireworks. I’ve spent the evening trying to calm him down having had 5 hours of fireworks being set off around us. As I write this email to you the odd firework continues to go off—it’s now 10.45 at night.”

**Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland, which is second to none when it comes to the organisation of large-scale public fireworks displays. Like the mover of the debate, the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), I am a big fan. I love fireworks, particularly the large displays.**
[Tommy Sheppard]

That person lives in Brunstane in my constituency, where there was no particular problem. In the Lochend area of my constituency, there was a big problem, which resulted in a major Police Scotland investigation. In an eyewitness statement, Sam Thomson, one of the residents affected in Lochend, says:

“I saw two groups of young people of various ages standing at either end of the street firing fireworks at each other like they were guns—they were holding the wooden launching sticks, lighting them and pointing them at each other.”

I saw one young child being hit in the head with a firework. Fortunately it didn’t explode—if it had, it could have caused very serious burns.

I saw kids firing fireworks at passing cars and windows in my block broken by stray fireworks. I felt sick with worry—it felt like my home was under attack, in the middle of a warzone.”

We need to respond to people who find themselves in that situation. I have spoken with Police Scotland in my constituency; although it is taking action, it is constantly frustrated by the fact that the regulations are not sufficient.

We have a particular problem in Scotland, because there are two sets of competences on controlling firework use. The Westminster Government have the authority to regulate the sale and possession of fireworks, and the Scottish Government in Holyrood have the responsibility for regulating the use of fireworks. The Fireworks (Scotland) Regulations 2004, which parallel those in Britain, are of a similar nature. They regulate the times at which fireworks can be used, they say that users have to be over 18, and there is a regulation on the strength of the firework, but there is nothing that says, “You need permission to have a firework display in the first place.”

I believe we need to look at going down the route of saying, “If you want to let off fireworks in public, you have to have a licence to do so.” It is unclear to me how we would do that in Scotland without close co-operation, and perhaps an adjustment of the balance of regulation, between the Scottish and UK Governments.

I will give an example. Suppose that the Scottish Government were to say, “Yes, we want to move toward a licensing regime where you can let fireworks off in a public place only if you have a licence.” The police officers I spoke to told me that they saw people over 18 walking around with rucksacks they knew to be full of fireworks, to engage in the activity that has been described, but there was nothing they could do to apprehend them, because no offence was being committed.

Of course, that would still be the case even if the Scottish Government tried to bring in a licence, because the sale and possession of fireworks would be regulated by Westminster. It seems to me that we might need to review that aspect of the devolution settlement to prevent public concern falling through the gaps in the regulatory network as competences overlap.

The time has come to look at going toward a licensing route. I am not saying we must do it now, but we need to investigate it, look at the facts and evidence, and prepare the case carefully. I am also mindful that some people will say, “It’s not the fireworks that are at fault; it is the people misusing them.” It is true that some of the people who have been apprehended for those offences relating to last November are some of the same people who commit other offences against the community, such as riding off-road motorbikes through estates, I accept that that is true, but at the same time we need to look at the regulations, because we should not make these things available for people to use.

We have to be careful that we are not killjoys. If we moved towards a situation where public displays of fireworks were licensed, we are not saying there should not be fireworks or that people should not enjoy them. We are saying, “If you want to enjoy fireworks, do it properly.” That means that we can regulate and check that the people who are organising the display have the required competence and training, that it is being done properly and that public safety and animal welfare are being taken into account.

There is a lot of work to be done, so I very much welcome the debate. The Scottish Government have now said they will review the regulations that they are operating under, which I very much welcome. However, if, as part of that review, it is determined that something in the UK regulations prevents things from being improved by the Scottish Government, will the Minister commit to reviewing the relationship between the two Governments, in terms of the balance of responsibility in this matter, and if necessary to amending the legislation to allow the Scottish Government the competence to move forward in this area? It seems that the more coherence we have on our approach to public policy, the better the result we will be able to get for our communities.

5.30 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I am slightly thrown because I thought you were going to call a Government Member, but I thank you very much.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): There are more Opposition Members than Government Members down to speak, so I am just trying to balance it out before the end.

Angela Smith: I appreciate that. I am not used to such favours. It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate, which was very ably moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones).

This issue has been repeatedly debated in Parliament and has been the basis of more than one petition. Some 158 signatures to this petition were secured in my constituency, which is higher than average. That does not surprise me, because I receive regular correspondence on the topic from constituents, and with very good reason. On 6 November last year, just after bonfire night, the local newspaper, The Star, reported:

“Fireworks thrown at police officers and fire engine attacked as more than 500 incidents”

of irresponsible use of fireworks were reported across South Yorkshire in the space of a few hours.

I have to say that, although the irresponsible use of fireworks and how they are sold are matters of great concern to many people, like many others—I think everybody who has spoken so far—I make it clear that I am not opposed to public fireworks displays. Indeed, I have enjoyed the new year’s eve display across the river near the London Eye, I have enjoyed firework displays in Madeira and I have enjoyed much smaller displays in my constituency, such as at the Waggon & Horses in Langsett, which does a wonderful “Mr Fox” night every year on the night of the hunter’s moon. Let me be clear: I enjoy a good firework display.
However, while displays such as those I described are magnificent spectacles, there are many times when the—particularly private—use of fireworks is not only a nuisance but downright dangerous. The latest figures, which have already been cited but are worth repeating, show that, between bonfire night and new year’s eve in 2017, there were 221 reported incidents of fireworks misuse. Those range from reports to the RSPCA in Wales about distressed and unwell stray dogs on new year’s eve to a report of a large group of teenagers, with some wearing masks, running in front of cars and setting off fireworks. The cars had to swerve away from them or execute emergency stops.

Of more concern, according to the Firework Abatement campaign, is admissions to hospital owing to firework accidents, which have risen year on year over the last few years. That is also of particular concern to me, because I do not think any right to enjoy the private use of fireworks is worth the serious risk of injury and harm to people and animals. We have all seen pictures of children who have been permanently disfigured by the misuse of fireworks, and I think there is a responsibility on the House to consider the balance between regulation and the rights of individuals because of the increasing risk of injury.

In addition, many animal welfare charities have for a number of years been concerned about the effect of the use of fireworks on animals. The British Horse Society has reported year-on-year rises in horses either injured or killed because of fireworks, as was mentioned earlier. The RSPCA has long-standing concerns about the effects of fireworks on dogs, with almost half of all dogs showing signs of distress. Many cats also show distress when fireworks have been used nearby. The Dogs Trust did a very interesting survey of 3,750 pet owners on this matter. The results showed that two thirds of dogs are worried by fireworks, and that 93% of owners alter their routine during firework celebrations to try to minimise the trauma on their pets.

That is all evidence that something needs to be done and that we really need to start taking this seriously. All the organisations I have referenced would like to see changes made to the law to secure further restrictions on the use of fireworks, and I think they have a strong case. As the law stands, regulations derived from the Fireworks Act 2003 dictate that fireworks must not be let off between 11 pm and 7 am, except at Chinese new year, Diwali and new year’s eve, when the period is extended until 1 am, and bonfire night, when it is extended to midnight. That means that fireworks can be legally used by private citizens 365 days a year—every day—between 7 am and 11 pm. That is an incredibly liberal regime.

The Government response to that, and to the petition in particular, is to argue, as they have done for some time, that the best way to deal with the problem is through education. I have to disagree. That policy is weak in the face of the evidence, which, although it is not as robust as one would perhaps like, indicates increasing antisocial use of fireworks, and that more damage to people, animals and property is taking place than ever before.

I am not here to call for a complete ban on the private use of fireworks, much as I would like to. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said he was a fully paid-up member of the grumpy old persons’ club, and I would also like to subscribe as a fully paid-up member. However, as much I would personally like a complete ban on anything other than public displays—I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on this—I recognise that that would probably be a step too far at this stage. What we need are further restrictions, to allow fireworks only on agreed traditional dates, such as 5 November, new year’s eve, Chinese new year and Diwali.

We also need further restrictions on the noise levels allowed. The current regime allows fireworks to make noise up to a 120-dB limit, which is the equivalent of a jet aircraft taking off. That is far too loud and a cause of great concern, particularly to the many animal welfare charities that have contacted us on this. I also take the point made by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), about the need to be more careful about where public displays take place. The Government ought to have more regard to that.

The law as it stands does not protect vulnerable people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South pointed out. The available evidence suggests that private firework use also has an extremely detrimental effect on both domestic and wild animals. It is disappointing that the Government appear unwilling to open up this area of legislation for review, given the year-on-year increase in antisocial use that I described earlier.

As I said earlier, no right to let off fireworks in the back garden, to buy those fireworks or to organise family gatherings in private places, is worth the significant risk of injury to children, animals and adults that we see year on year. Something needs to be done. A change in the law would certainly have public support, with online petitions gaining more than 100,000 signatures each year for the last three years. I therefore ask the Minister—I agree with earlier comments that he is a very reasonable and competent person—to take on board these concerns, to re-evaluate firework use and to consider introducing new restrictions and guidelines on the use of fireworks by private citizens.

5.39 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I start by recognising the role of the FAB—Firework Abatement—campaign in raising awareness and bringing this issue to Parliament again. I also echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) about how it affects not only animals, but people with post-traumatic stress disorder. When people have returned from serving with our armed forces or have been through unimaginable experiences, the sudden and intrusive noises, the smell and a racing heartbeat can cause flashbacks to memories best left forgotten. Many more people are affected who are simply not listened to and to whom we need to recognise.

I am at the debate on behalf of the 189 of my constituents who have signed the e-petition, as well as others who have written to tell me how their animals, especially dogs, are affected by firework explosions, which are intolerable. Notably, my constituents Liz Storey of Stanssted Mountfitchet and Janet Harris of Great Leighs gave moving accounts of how disruptive it can be to live in the vicinity of a place where fireworks are frequently let off. A particular problem is the random displays unrelated to public celebrations. My constituents
talked about horses being sedated and, when left in fields, no fence being able to contain them; Christmas meals at 4.30 pm ruined as explosions go off next door; and dogs requiring frequent medication in advance—work that is undone by random and unexpected fireworks. Dogs become so frightened that it can take months for them to rehabilitate, and even to settle when it begins to grow dark and they think that danger is imminent. In some horrible cases, they go missing, or worse.

The use of fireworks has spread from traditional celebrations to random parties in otherwise quiet neighbourhoods. Fireworks set off between close houses only amplify the noise and damage done. There are reports of accidents and even of our brave emergency responders being attacked by stray bursts. We need to remember that fireworks can cause harm in untrained hands.

At the root of the issue is how we can ensure responsible enforcement. Many in my constituency would like to see fireworks only at public displays. Currently, the police and local authorities do not have the powers that would require. Alternatively, the Italian town of Collecchio passed in 2015 a law that allows only quiet fireworks. “Quiet fireworks” sounds like a contradiction, but we already see them year in, year out, in displays of, for example, comet tails or flying fish, and they are still aesthetically pleasing, so there clearly are steps that can be taken to innovate in the interests of our pets and children.

I should mention that I love fireworks. However, they must be used responsibly. My constituents are asking not for a ban, but just for more controls on private displays, and I think that there are grounds for looking into the legislation.

5.42 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is an honour to be here to voice the concerns of my constituents who have signed the petition asking for a change in the laws governing the use of fireworks to include a ban on public use.

From time to time, we all enjoy fireworks. Just 28 days ago, we saw the most fantastic display lighting up the Houses of Parliament. New year’s eve, bonfire night, Diwali and Chinese new year would not be the same without them, and they are a wonderful part of our cultural heritage. However, fireworks are no longer used or heard just at significant events such as those, but throughout the year. The occasions that I just mentioned span more or less half the year, so the sale of fireworks around those occasions offers the public the opportunity to buy fireworks through the entire dark nights period. That means that around this time of year, although the nights are getting lighter, we can hear fireworks going off from as early as 4 pm to the early hours of the morning.

In addition to the dangers of fireworks in relation to public safety, they have become a real antisocial menace—a menace and a real problem for pet owners; a menace for parents whose young children areoken by loud bangs and whistles; and a menace to the elderly, who can be frightened by the loud bangs. Restrictions on sales are not working, not least because fireworks are readily available to buy on the internet. That is a separate concern, because fireworks obtained in that way may not comply with EU safety regulations and because they may be easily bought by minors—I need not spell out the dangers of that.

The 2004 regulations allow penalties to be levied for antisocial behaviour involving fireworks, but enforcement of the power is very poor. I think that if the existing laws were enforced, that would solve many of the issues, but if the laws are not being enforced, or cannot be, we will have to consider other means of controlling the problem.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has campaigned to stop the sale of fireworks to the general public, as have the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and other collaborative partners interested in public safety. Clearly, the vast majority of people who use fireworks do so responsibly and in accordance with the law; and when distress is caused to animals—domestic pets, wildlife or livestock—that is likely to be because of ignorance and thoughtlessness rather than deliberate misuse.

The most effective way to reduce the suffering of affected animals may be through education instead of legislation. We should let people know about the time limits and the regulations, so that they can be more thoughtful not only about pets but, of course, about people in their environment. However, fireworks are a real source of distress for many people and pet owners. One of my constituents, whose dog shivers under the duvet whenever it hears a firework, told me:

“It’s possible to plan ahead and try and manage the situation for pets on planned evenings, like Bonfire Night. However, when fireworks are let off without warning, it’s a real problem for our dogs, who are terrified.”

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman’s comments, and he has mentioned bonfire night a couple of times. Does he agree that the problem is that bonfire night is not restricted to bonfire night? We now have bonfire fortnight: these things are let off the week before and the week after, so pet owners are placed in an impossible position.

Mohammad Yasin: I agree. The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue, which needs to be tackled. The quotation that I read out also makes the point. Most of us are tolerant and respectful of others, and we all recognise that fireworks can mark a special event. Although many pet owners dread bonfire night, they can plan for it and ensure that their pets are safely in the house, but now, the use of fireworks is frequent and random. It takes only one person setting off a firework at 2 am to wake the whole neighbourhood, and set car alarms off and dogs barking.

I hope that the Minister will look again at enforcement of the 2004 regulations and review them to test whether they are strong enough and whether our police have the capacity to enforce them. If not, perhaps tighter restrictions along the lines recommended by the petition should be considered.

5.48 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) has brought this debate to us today. I feel
that I am speaking as an advocate on behalf of the approximately 8.5 million dogs in the United Kingdom and—not to forget them—the 8 million cats. I understand that there is some contention between the two with regard to their ability to hear. In preparing for the debate, I understood that the dog has 18 muscles in its ear, whereas the cat has 30, so I think the cat wins, in terms of its ability to hear. We should give consideration to that when setting the legislation.

I imagine that last night, Mr Walker, you were lying in bed, soundly asleep—deep in slumber. Imagine that you were disturbed from that sleep by a noise somewhere in your house. You are awake, your heartbeat is slightly elevated and you start to breathe slightly more quietly because you are troubled by that noise. Now imagine you suddenly hear a glass smashing in the kitchen. All of a sudden you become disoriented. You feel slightly panicked. Has somebody broken into your house? You are very concerned. Now imagine, on top of that, you suddenly smell a gas that you are not familiar with. Imagine the sort of state you would be in at that point. I imagine you would be very anxious. That is what we put our cats and dogs through every time they are subjected to fireworks, because they do not have the benefit of knowing, when the firework displays suddenly appear in the Asda's and other shops, that they are likely soon to hear many more loud bangs. They do not have any warning, or understanding, of Diwali or new year's eve, so it comes as a complete surprise to Fido when he is enjoying his bone of an evening and all of a sudden there are crashes and bangs all over the place.

At what sort of level is the noise? The figure of 120 dB has been mentioned. I do not know, Mr Walker, if you know what 120 dB is, but it is approximately the noise level of a chainsaw. You might say, “Hang on a sec, a chainsaw would annoy me, if it went on for a few minutes, but I would probably be okay with intermittent bursts of chainsaw”, and you may well be, but you do not have the hearing of a dog or a cat, which is four times as perceptive as that of a human. They feel the noise with greater force than we do. Imagine there are fireworks in the distance. They are not too troubling for us, but obviously a dog or cat, with its enhanced hearing, will be troubled by firework noise from further afield. As a nation of animal lovers, it is imperative that we consider the hearing not just of the humans inhabiting this great island, but of our dear beloved pets.

I met a Chihuahua called Flo because, in the run-up to bonfire night, I wanted to put a leaflet through doors in my constituency to alert people to be considerate to pet owners. I am advocating on behalf of not just millions of dogs, but specifically Flo, who must weigh about 2 lb, bless her. She is paralysed with fear every new year’s eve and bonfire night, and millions of her fellow dogs and cats across the country feel the same.

I do not ask for a change in the law, but I suggest that the millions of pounds that we hear are made from the sale of fireworks could be targeted, through social media or other appropriate media—I understand, for example, that on Facebook, pet owners can be specifically targeted—to ensure that people are aware of the things they can do to placate and prepare their animals for the onslaught of bonfire night, or bonfire fortnight and the weeks it goes on for, and to educate the general public to be slightly more considerate not just of their neighbours, but of pets as well.
on to younger members of the community. It is not responsible adults who are using them; children are using them, at a range of ages.

One of the local councillors, Jon Molyneux, has been compiling some of the work on this. The police officer present at a meeting at Pollokshields Community Council advised that during firework season, police were attending on average 20 to 30 call-outs per night. They apprehended children as young as six lighting fireworks in the street. The officers were routinely targeted by fireworks being aimed at them and older relatives of children were caught being complicit in concealing the identities of the children and young people involved to the police. This is a very serious set of concerns. Children are being put in positions of danger by people who should know better. That is not being enforced in the law either.

One point that has not been raised so far is the mess that fireworks leave behind for communities to clear up. I see that right across my constituency: the remnants of fireworks lying around for weeks on end after events. I am lucky to have two large organised displays at different times of the year in my constituency: one in George Square, for which the tickets are like gold dust, and the other, a public event on bonfire night, in Glasgow Green. The residents who live around Glasgow Green, where many people go and walk their dogs and enjoy the green at all times of the year, were concerned to find the green littered with sparklers and debris long after bonfire night. A Dr Shields contacted me to say, “as the owner of 2 dogs and someone who works using risk assessment it is currently my view that it is completely unsafe for children, pets or any sports just now due to the many hundreds of used sparklers lying on the ground.”

There is a cost to local government of clearing that up afterwards and making the park safe for everyone to use. That has not been considered much, but when these things are sold, little consideration seems to be given to where they end up. That is something the Government ought to take into consideration as well. If we are going to recycle, and look at plastic and other types of waste, we should perhaps consider what happens to fireworks after use as well and the impact that has.

I echo the comments by many hon. Members that we need to look at this issue seriously, and we need to review the rules and licensing of these items, because it is clear to me that the situation at the moment is not adequate and it is putting young people and other residents, as well as animals, at risk.

5.59 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I congratulate you on your smooth transformation into the Chair, Mr Hanson. It was seamlessly done.

I want to pay tribute to the large number of my constituents who encouraged me to attend today’s debate and made really passionate cases about why this issue matters and why we, as parliamentarians, should be concerned about it. I want to start by stating that I am not hostile to fireworks. Indeed, rather like the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), I have many happy memories of my own father going out bravely into the Teesside air to hammer a Catherine wheel to a tree. Memories such as those are important, and fireworks are a spectacular way of bringing people together in common celebration.

As an economic and social liberal, I did not come into politics to ban things; however, I also appreciate that when used irresponsibly and away from the main festivals, such as bonfire night and new year, fireworks can be a source of harm and distress. What my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) said about Flo is true for so many, and he amusingly and powerfully set out why we should be engaged in this and why we should think considerably about other people and our pets.

I have had lots of constituents setting out their deep concerns about fireworks and the effect that they have on the elderly, young people, military veterans and livestock. Mr Geoff Peirse from Coulby Newham, for example, wrote to me saying that his concern relates to people’s ability to use fireworks in an antisocial and sometimes criminal way. He highlighted the effect that they have on the police, hospitals and fire service. Meanwhile, Jane Dunn from Guisborough told me after Guy Fawkes night that it “has been like a war zone... with fireworks being lit for days. My 86-year-old mum, who remembers hiding under the stairs during WWII air raids, was woken after midnight last night by an extremely loud bang,”

and in her disturbed and confused state, “she thought it was a bomb going off. The gentle fireworks and sparklers we remember from our youth have been overtaken by bombs.”

As we know, controls on the use and sale of fireworks are already in place, and I welcome that; however, some of those controls might be extended without unreasonably diminishing the enjoyment people derive from fireworks. For example, the noise level on fireworks, as we have heard, is 120 dB. I am pleased that limit exists, but 120 dB is still extremely loud. To put it in context, a motorcycle is 100 dB and an emergency vehicle siren is 115 dB—120 dB is something more akin to a clap of thunder. In his reply, will the Minister touch on whether 120 dB really strikes the right balance—a proportionate balance—between enjoyment and relative peace for local people? Firework-related antisocial behaviour also causes my constituents grave concern. Late last year a gang of youths sent fireworks shooting into a number of flats in central Middlesbrough. One of the rockets entered a disabled woman’s living room, filling the room with smoke and scorching her carpet. She said that the noise was so loud that she subsequently had problems with her hearing. That was one of a flurry of incidents across the town, with reports of lit fireworks being thrown at cars, people and even supermarkets in Pallister Park, Grove Hill and Coulby Newham.

I would therefore be grateful if the Minister committed today to reviewing the number of antisocial behaviour incidents linked to the use of fireworks, and set out what measures could, or indeed should, be undertaken to prevent such incidents. That information is not currently collected; instead, it is part of the general statistics classified as antisocial behaviour. We therefore have no reliable data, as we have heard, on the improper use of fireworks and no understanding of where in the country the problem is greatest or at what times of year it peaks. I think that should change.
In that regard, and in summing up, I want to pay particular tribute to my constituent Julie Wright, who came to my surgery in Guisborough earlier this month. It was she who really convinced me to come here today. She is particularly upset about the impact on her pet dog, and says:

“I have every lotion, potion, anxiety wrap, noise CD, cosy den bed known to man, but only tranquillizers will work. When fireworks go off it is a dilemma as to whether to administer them—is this a random firework, is it a full blown display, how long will it last, is it worth doping up my poor animal if it’s going to stop soon? What effect is all this medication having on my dog’s system and his lifespan?”

It is for people like her that I want to see that data collected—to understand the nature and scale of the problem we face, and to inform further debate.

6.3 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is that you have joined us and taken over in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Hanson? I also join hon. Members in thanking my hon. Friend. The Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for opening this important debate with a characteristically insightful and balanced speech on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Much like my hon. Friend. Friend and colleagues across these Benches, I want to stress that I have fond memories of growing up and spending time with my family setting off fireworks in the back garden over the course of bonfire night. So it is with great sadness that the instances of irresponsible, antisocial and at times dangerous misuse of fireworks have brought me here today to call for much tighter regulation around the sale and use of fireworks.

There has been a long-running problem with fireworks being used at all times of the day and night in my constituency and causing tensions within communities, as I will return to later in my speech. However, as predicted by my hon. Friend, my greatest cause for concern is the way in which fireworks were used to attack the emergency services over bonfire weekend. I saw that for myself when I went out with West Yorkshire fire and rescue and West Yorkshire police on Saturday 4 November last year. Both myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who wanted to be here for this debate but is otherwise detained owing to her responsibilities on the Trade Bill, spent time with the emergency services on the frontline in Bradford.

Several crews working out of fire appliances and fire cars as part of the joint fire and police operation across West Yorkshire that night were subject to attacks involving fireworks. The crew of one of the fire appliances based at the station I was attached to had fireworks aimed at them that exploded just inches away from their faces and where they were working. The fire car in which my hon. Friend was shadowing officers and firefighters could tackle the blazes.

In Leeds, gangs barricaded streets in Harehills and Hyde Park, setting fire to bins and anything else they could find. When the emergency services arrived to put out the fires, they were met with fireworks fired at them. Youths were putting fireworks in drain pipes, which they used as rocket launchers to aim and fire at firefighters and police officers. Those incidents were deliberately orchestrated to lure emergency service workers into an area in order to be attacked, with the weapon of choice being fireworks, which made the attacks particularly sinister. In those instances, the police were left with no choice but to wear full protective equipment, including shields and helmets, in order to secure the area so that fire crews could tackle the blazes.

Chief Superintendent Mabs Hussain of West Yorkshire police hit the nail on the head when he was quoted in The Yorkshire Post as saying:

“Over the weekend, we had reports of fireworks being directed at moving vehicles, properties and emergency service crews...Many of the people doing this wouldn’t arm themselves with a knife or a gun, but don’t realise that using a firework as a weapon isn’t mischievous, it is highly dangerous.”

He was exactly right.

While I sincerely hope that the “Protect the Protectors” Bill being championed through Parliament as a private Member’s Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will make a difference by being a tough deterrent against such attacks, I hope that when considering the merits of further restrictions the Minister will reflect on the role of fireworks as a deliberate weapon of choice used by certain individuals specifically to attack emergency service workers at seasonal times of the year.

In Halifax, we have increasingly seen fireworks used as a means of celebrating weddings, making them a year-round occurrence. The geography of the area worsens the problem, as loud explosions echo around the valleys. Last summer, one single explosion at 1 am woke residents up to 4 miles away. I can confirm that, as I was one of those residents woken up 4 miles away from the source of the initial firework. It was not until the following morning, having returned to my office to see many emails in my inbox giving me an indication of the epicentre of the activity, that I realised the noise had travelled so far.

I wish that was an isolated incident; however, I regularly receive emails from tired and frustrated constituents on this issue. Those demonstrate that literally thousands of people are being affected, often in the middle of the night, by the actions of a few individuals, whose purpose for using fireworks is specifically to let everyone know that their fireworks are bigger and louder than everybody else’s.

One constituent contacted me last April to say that fireworks had started just past midnight on a Sunday night and continued non-stop until 2.30 am. The fireworks were not part of a seasonal celebration, and that highlights how, for many people, this is now a year-round problem.

We had anticipated that the Saturday night would be the busiest of the weekend; however, bonfire night on the Sunday evening proved to be worse. There were 18 attacks on fire crews over the bonfire weekend in West Yorkshire alone, with the vast majority involving fireworks. That was twice as many as the year before. So we know that the current rules and regulations simply are not effective, as the situation has deteriorated.

In Leeds, gangs barricaded streets in Harehills and Hyde Park, setting fire to bins and anything else they could find. When the emergency services arrived to put out the fires, they were met with fireworks fired at them. Youths were putting fireworks in drain pipes, which they used as rocket launchers to aim and fire at firefighters and police officers. Those incidents were deliberately orchestrated to lure emergency service workers into an area in order to be attacked, with the weapon of choice being fireworks, which made the attacks particularly sinister. In those instances, the police were left with no choice but to wear full protective equipment, including shields and helmets, in order to secure the area so that fire crews could tackle the blazes.

Chief Superintendent Mabs Hussain of West Yorkshire police hit the nail on the head when he was quoted in The Yorkshire Post as saying:

“Over the weekend, we had reports of fireworks being directed at moving vehicles, properties and emergency service crews...Many of the people doing this wouldn’t arm themselves with a knife or a gun, but don’t realise that using a firework as a weapon isn’t mischievous, it is highly dangerous.”

He was exactly right.

While I sincerely hope that the “Protect the Protectors” Bill being championed through Parliament as a private Member’s Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will make a difference by being a tough deterrent against such attacks, I hope that when considering the merits of further restrictions the Minister will reflect on the role of fireworks as a deliberate weapon of choice used by certain individuals specifically to attack emergency service workers at seasonal times of the year.

In Halifax, we have increasingly seen fireworks used as a means of celebrating weddings, making them a year-round occurrence. The geography of the area worsens the problem, as loud explosions echo around the valleys. Last summer, one single explosion at 1 am woke residents up to 4 miles away. I can confirm that, as I was one of those residents woken up 4 miles away from the source of the initial firework. It was not until the following morning, having returned to my office to see many emails in my inbox giving me an indication of the epicentre of the activity, that I realised the noise had travelled so far.

I wish that was an isolated incident; however, I regularly receive emails from tired and frustrated constituents on this issue. Those demonstrate that literally thousands of people are being affected, often in the middle of the night, by the actions of a few individuals, whose purpose for using fireworks is specifically to let everyone know that their fireworks are bigger and louder than everybody else’s.

One constituent contacted me last April to say that fireworks had started just past midnight on a Sunday night and continued non-stop until 2.30 am. The fireworks were not part of a seasonal celebration, and that highlights how, for many people, this is now a year-round problem.
The constituent was rightly concerned about the impact of the sleepless nights on people's health. During the same incident last year, residents took to Facebook in the early hours to express their frustrations. One resident who lived close to where the fireworks were being set off commented:

"Me and my son were up till 2am, he was so scared, we slept on the living room floor."

I have been trying to find a resolution to this problem and have been in regular contact with the local police and the council's environmental health department. It is clear that because of the nature of fireworks, it is difficult to take enforcement action after the event, when the evidence will literally have gone up in smoke in seconds. So I hope that the Minister will reflect on all the ways in which we can close down the irresponsible and antisocial use of fireworks at the point of sale.

If I may, I will highlight some points in relation to the Government's response to the petition. As we have heard from other hon. Members, the current limit of 120 dB is still quite high. By some estimates, that is comparable to a rock band, a police siren or, as we have heard, a chainsaw or jet engine. The RSPCA believes that the maximum noise level should be reduced to 96 dB, and has raised concerns about the impact of such loud noises on animals. As we have heard, there are reports of horses dying from the shock of sudden explosions, so there are strong animal welfare arguments for reconsidering decibel limits, as others have said, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi).

The Government's proposed solution for tackling the emotional distress caused by fireworks is problematic. The Department says:

"The Government is aware of concerns about the distress noisy fireworks can cause...Therefore, the Government urges those using fireworks to be considerate to their neighbours and give sufficient notice...to those who are vulnerable."

The list includes “older people, children, those with mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder”.

I am glad that Ministers acknowledge that those with PTSD, for example, can be disturbed by fireworks, but if they really think that people setting off explosions at 1 am that carry for four miles will be diligent enough to notify an entire constituency in advance, I am afraid that I do not share their optimism.

I started this speech by reliving my own fond memories of fireworks as a child; we all remember the odd mix of horror and excitement on realising that a firework had exploded in the middle of the night in residential areas, it is about anxiety that fireworks far too often cause to too many people and animals, and the disruption that they can cause to communities when purchased and used irresponsibly by individuals.

I found myself agreeing with the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), which I particularly wanted to mention because it is such a rare event that I felt it should be put on record. He gave us the perspective of a senior fire officer, which is certainly worth listening to. I agree with him wholeheartedly, so I shall hang on to that for future reference.

Every year from October to January, I receive complaints, as I am sure we all do, from constituents whose neighbourhoods are disrupted and plagued by the irresponsible use of fireworks at all hours of the dark evenings. Under cover of darkness, too many people set out to cause mischief, thinking that it is funny to set off fireworks near housing where children or whole families are shocked from their slumbers, pets are scared half to death and elderly people are driven into a state of fear and alarm. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) also pointed out the effect on horses.

People who want to set off fireworks do not care a jot about the time restrictions mentioned by some Members in this debate. They do not care whether it is legal to set off a firework at that time of day or night, and it seems that such irresponsible people do not care a jot about safety. I have been contacted by constituents in a state of great distress after a particularly alarming and noisy night of fireworks, which can take place for no apparent reason other than that it is October, November or December and people have fireworks left over or they are still available for sale.

On such occasions, constituents tell me that the onslaught of fireworks has had a profound effect not just on their quality of life but on their pets, which undergo trembling fits and become withdrawn and very frightened. It cannot really be prepared for, as it comes out of nowhere whenever someone has fireworks and thinks that they will have a bit of fun. Some people think it is great to set them off in the middle of the night up closes or in the shared entranceways to flats.

The situation in Scotland is nothing short of bizarre. The use of fireworks is a devolved matter, but the sale of fireworks is reserved, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) explained. It does
not take a genius to work out that unless we tackle the sale of fireworks and who can get their hands on them, we have lost any meaningful influence over who uses them. As the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) pointed out, it is extremely difficult to police.

I know that on a local level, environmental health and perhaps even antisocial behaviour teams can and do work hard to tackle the misuse of fireworks in our communities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) pointed out, but that seems to be dealing with the consequences of the wide availability of fireworks, when what we need is to tackle the fear, alarm, distress, fire risks and safety hazards that fireworks cause. We need to tackle the real issue of the sale of fireworks to individuals; we need to tackle the problem at source.

As I have mentioned, the time restrictions for fireworks are regulated by law. They cannot be set off between 11 pm and 7 am, with a few exceptions for special occasions such as the new year and so on. However, that does not go far enough. A particular type of individual who wishes to buy fireworks to cause fear and alarm, and to have a bit of fun because they find it entertaining to cause destruction to their neighbourhood or use them as weapons of choice, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central and the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) pointed out, will set off those fireworks whenever and wherever they choose.

Restrictions on when fireworks can be set off afford no comfort to communities plagued by them. The fact is that the regulations cannot be enforced, as has been said repeatedly in this debate. Once they are on sale to any individual over 18, all control is lost over irresponsible behaviour, which is sadly all too common in some of our neighbourhoods. The hon. Member for Clwyd South suggested a consultation on where to go in terms of the sale of and restrictions on fireworks. That is a good idea, but any consultation on the issue cannot be used as an excuse to kick it into the long grass. It needs action.

I know that fireworks cannot currently be sold to anyone under 18, but so what? We know that children are able to get hold of them, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central pointed out. We also know that often, those using fireworks irresponsibly are perfectly entitled to buy them under the law as it currently is. The irresponsible use of fireworks is not confined to those who get hold of them illegally. That is why we need to be done to protect communities, the elderly, pets and a range of people in our communities, as we have heard today from a host of elected representatives who have been contacted repeatedly over the years by constituents whose lives are made a misery for several months of the year.

The current situation is not working and is not sustainable for the health, wellbeing and safety of our neighbourhoods. We can all look back nostalgically, as many Members have done in this debate, to bonfire nights when we were growing up, but that cuts absolutely no ice with communities that currently and regularly must tolerate the awfulness of misuse of fireworks for several months of the year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East pointed out, the problem appears to be growing. The only sensible solution is to tackle it at source: fireworks should be sold only for licensed, organised public displays that are well advertised in advance and that take place within a publicised time span. That would allow people who wish to enjoy fireworks to do so safely and, importantly, it would also allow local residents to plan ahead and make arrangements to protect their pets.

The Dogs Trust says that where public displays are organised, 93% of pet owners—a high figure—alter their plans during the display time to minimise their pet’s trauma, which protects pets’ welfare. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who spoke about helping pet owners to prepare for the use of fireworks in their neighbourhoods, but that is not often possible because fireworks go off randomly with no warning.

I agree with the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) that if we ban the sale of fireworks to all and sundry over 18 years old, organised public firework displays—a much safer option for all our communities—will become the accepted norm. There is a consensus across the Chamber that it is time to ban the free sale of fireworks except for public licensed displays. That would mean that we could still enjoy fireworks in our communities at new year and at celebrations such as weddings, but that they would be out of the hands of those who, by accident or design, put the fear of God into our communities, shake our children and whole families awake in their beds, alarm older people, cause real suffering to our pets and even cause injury.

We need to get the balance right. No one is asking for fireworks to be banned altogether, but I urge the Minister to consider banning them from being sold freely so that we can all be sure that they will be used sensibly, safely and responsibly.

6.22 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) on her eloquent and balanced introduction to this important debate.

We, too, should approach the debate in a balanced way. I sympathise with the backers of the campaign in that I recognise the stress and anxiety that fireworks can cause to vulnerable people, including children and people with certain mental health issues, and to pets and livestock. There is a particular issue for animals because of the unannounced nature of fireworks, which can leave animals vulnerable. Dogs often stop eating or self-harm to avoid the perceived threat of the noise.

I also recognise that most fireworks are used responsibly and provide great enjoyment for many people. Fireworks at special festive events such as Diwali, Chinese new year and new year’s eve are seen as a crucial part of cultural celebrations.

As other hon. Members have noted, the legislation is 13 years old. It is important to have this debate and see if the legislation is up to date and fit for purpose. Strict rules about the quality, quantity and sale of fireworks are relevant to this debate, such as the Fireworks Regulations 2004 as amended by the Fireworks (Amendment) Regulations 2004, which were designed to tackle the anti-social use of fireworks.

Since January 2005, the sale of fireworks to the public has been prohibited, except by licensed traders. However, fireworks can be sold by unlicensed traders for Chinese new year and on the preceding three days,
for Diwali and on the preceding three days, for bonfire night celebrations between 15 October and 10 November, and for new year celebrations between 26 and 31 December. That period around bonfire night is rather long. Will the Minister consult on that and whether it should be reduced?

Under the 2004 regulations, it is an offence to use fireworks after 11 pm and before 7 am without permission, except on permitted fireworks nights when the times are extended. The regulations allow fireworks to be used by a person employed by a local authority to put on a display that the local authority has permitted, or for a national public celebration.

Other relevant legislation includes the Explosives Regulations 2014, which relate to the storage of fireworks; the Pyrotechnic Articles (Safety) Regulations 2015, which deal with the safety of fireworks as a consumer product; the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which makes it an offence to cause suffering to animals; the Environmental Protection Act 1990, which gives local authorities the power to investigate a complaint about excessive noise and to take necessary action; and the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, which tackles noise coming from homes or gardens between 11 pm and 7 am.

On the whole, I am satisfied that there is a significant amount of regulation around fireworks, and that for the large part, people buy and use fireworks responsibly. However, I wish to press the Minister on a couple of issues. First, local trading standards bodies tend to enforce the laws surrounding fireworks, but deep Government cuts to local authority budgets have reduced their staffing by up to 56% since 2009, according to National Audit Office figures published in 2016. In this case, and in other areas of consumer protection, it is difficult to imagine that their reduced resource capacity is not having a direct effect on their ability to properly enforce the laws already in place. I ask the Minister how his Department can ensure that trading standards bodies are sufficiently resourced.

Secondly, much of the law, particularly around the quality of fireworks, derives from European directives. Much of the consumer protection framework comes from the EU and we rely on EU bodies for many enforcement mechanisms, including, crucially, cross-border consumer protections. Following the UK’s exit from the EU, what enforcement mechanisms will be in place to ensure that UK consumers can be confident that they are buying safe goods?

Although we do not support a change in the law at this time, I agree that the Government should gather statistics on the sale and use of fireworks, and on complaints made about their public use, so that we can better understand whether more needs to be done to restrict fireworks in future. The statistics are not centrally gathered, but it is important to ensure that we have that data about the use of fireworks so that we are better informed. It would also be useful for people working in trading standards, the police, and enforcement. Does the Minister recognise the importance of centrally monitoring that data?

We know one set of statistics, however. In 2016-17, hospital admissions due to the discharge of fireworks were at their highest since 2006, with 184 recorded instances. Since we do not have the data on the sale of fireworks, we cannot make a direct assumption, but there may be a link between firework sales and the reduction in enforcement capability.

One way to mitigate the disturbance of fireworks is through communication, which could encourage people who wish to use fireworks to make their neighbours aware well in advance to give them time to prepare for any disturbance. Equally, fireworks exceeding 120 dB should not be sold to consumers. Many consumers may not know that low-noise fireworks are available, and perhaps there should be greater encouragement of the use of such fireworks.

Animal charities such as Blue Cross already produce information on animals and fireworks, with advice on the best ways of reducing stress for animals when fireworks are set off. The RSPCA and the Kennel Club also do a great deal of work to communicate how best to reduce the impact of fireworks on animals.

Has the Minister considered bringing together concerned groups and charities for a public awareness campaign to raise awareness about the danger of fireworks and ways of dealing with them, in particular at times of steep use such as on new year’s eve or during other festivals? Greater communication is important to allow those who enjoy fireworks to do so responsibly. It would also give greater assurance to those who are concerned about the impact of fireworks on the vulnerable.

6.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. This is my first opportunity to respond to a Westminster Hall debate, so I trust that you will be gentle with me.

I pay warm tribute to the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), not only for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, but for her interesting and well-rounded perspective. I commend her for her thoughtful and at times humorous speech. I also pay tribute to all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate—I think I counted 25 in the Chamber. We have heard a huge number of interesting and well-informed speeches. That is not a rarity, but it shows the great level of interest in the issues, and the work that hon. Members have put into understanding them on behalf of their constituents. As Minister responsible for consumer protection, I understand the effort that has gone in, and I put great weight on the speeches that have been made.

We have heard today not only from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—a former firefighter who has been decorated with the Fire Brigade Long Service and Good Conduct Medal and who now serves as secretary of the all-party fire safety rescue group—but from my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), a firefighter with 31 years’ service who ended his career as deputy commander of Strathclyde fire and rescue service. As my dad would have said, you can’t teach your granny to suck eggs. It is not the first time that I have sat in a debate thinking, “There are people here who know a lot more about this than I do,” but that is guaranteed to be true today.

I thank the huge number of people who have signed the petition and made the debate possible, particularly the Firework Abatement campaign. A lot of people get...
petitions together and try to raise issues, but it is clear that Firework Abatement has done a lot of groundwork to understand the issue. It speaks not only for the more than 111,000 signatories of the petition, but for many of our constituents. With my three weeks’ experience as a Minister, I can tell the House that a huge number of my letters have been about fireworks, so it is clearly an issue that concerns constituents. This is our second petitions debate on it in recent years; the first, in June 2016, focused more specifically on the impact on pets and animals, which I shall address later.

Hon. Members have made some compelling speeches. No one could fail to be moved by the tragic stories we have heard. The hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) described somebody seeing their house destroyed as a result of fireworks. We have heard some really distressing and disturbing anecdotes about animals, including pets, horses, cows and other livestock, suffering not just distress but death from the misuse of fireworks. Of course, we also heard about Flo from my right hon. Friend—not sorry, my hon. Friend, but it is just a matter of time—the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). He made the case for pets in his constituency with his usual passion and aplomb, and I am sure that many pet lovers will be pleased that he is raising their concerns in this place.

I recognise the effects that fireworks can have—the pleasure that they give to many of our constituents, but also their negative impact on many people, including those who are vulnerable or have pets or livestock. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) said a number of times that many fireworks are used responsibly. That is true: there are many examples of law-abiding people who use their fireworks safely, responsibly and in a caring and considerate manner towards their neighbours. However, as we have heard, there are others who do not use them in that way, and they are the people with whom we are concerned.

It is for the Government to ensure that we have a system that allows for the enjoyment of fireworks but protects those who might be harmed or inconvenienced, including the young, the elderly and those with mental health issues. As a former trustee of a service charity for veterans in the criminal justice system, I understand the impact that post-traumatic stress can have on veterans. Fireworks also have an effect on wildlife and livestock, as we have heard.

The Government’s aim is to ensure that people who enjoy fireworks can do so safely, but that we minimise the risks, noise and distress that can be an unwelcome by-product of their use. Even in this debate, in which the same concerns have been raised consistently in almost every speech, there has been a difference of opinion about how we should tackle the issue. Some advocate an outright ban, some want a consultation and some want tighter legislation. It is for the Government to consider all those arguments in the round, form an opinion and ensure that the legislation meets those challenges.

I will not go into great detail on the laws that govern the sale and regulation of fireworks, because other hon. Members have already outlined them. The controls on supply, sale and use reflect the level of risk posed by the four different categories of firework. Those controls include a curfew on their use; restrictions on when they can go on general sale; restrictions on their sale to minors; and noise limits and penalties for their misuse. The controls restrict the general availability of fireworks for public sale to certain times of the year, such as bonfire night, new year, Diwali and Chinese new year. Outside those traditional periods, retailers who wish to sell fireworks must obtain a licence from their local licensing authority. It is worth noting that local authorities have the power to restrict such licences if they so wish. A local authority can refuse to issue a licence for the sale of fireworks outside seasonal celebrations, so hon. Members who have concerns about such sales may wish to raise them with their local authority.

Another way in which the current system seeks to lessen the distressing impact on vulnerable groups is by controlling the times at which fireworks can be used. As we have heard, there is a strict curfew of 11 pm, with exceptions for bonfire night, new year and Diwali.

My hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) raised Collecchio, the Italian town that has banned noisy fireworks. In the UK, there is already a limit on the noise levels of fireworks that can be bought for general sale. That is, as has been said, 120 dB. However, I think there is a disagreement in this House about whether 120 dB is a jumbo jet, a chainsaw, a rock band starting up or a number of other very noisy things. Also, quieter fireworks are increasingly being developed by manufacturers, and they are increasingly available from retailers, so that consumers can have more choice and a better chance of acquiring lower-noise fireworks, to help them to avoid disturbing their neighbours.

Earlier, we touched on the issue of education, which is important, both for fireworks users and for pet or livestock owners. They are not the outright solution but there are things that pet owners can do to reduce the very real distress their pets can experience. There is excellent advice provided by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Kennel Club, intended to help owners to reduce their pets’ stress, and it can be found on those organisations’ websites.

There are a number of controls on the use and misuse of fireworks. Antisocial behaviour, such as the throwing of fireworks, is covered by the Explosives Act 1875, which prohibits fireworks from being thrown in or on to public places. Some hon. Members asked whether the powers that I am drawing attention to actually work. Earlier this year, a man in Kirkwall was sentenced to six months in prison after admitting setting off fireworks in a culpable and reckless manner in the town centre. So these powers are available and they are used.

There are a number of agencies that have responsibility for enforcing those rules, including the police, trading standards, and the Health and Safety Executive. Of course, any injury caused by fireworks can be a tragedy, but thankfully the number of people admitted to hospital because of fireworks is quite stable. I think that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough said that fireworks accidents are on the rise, but my statistics show that the number of people admitted to hospital with firework injuries remains at a stable and relatively low level. NHS statistics show that the total number of people admitted to hospital because of firework injuries remained below 200 a year from 2007-08 to 2016-17. Of course, that is still too many injuries, and we want to do more to bring that number down, but the figures are relatively stable. The number of accident and emergency attendances in England in 2016-17 due to
“firework injury” was 5,340. Again, that has remained pretty stable as a proportion of all A&E attendances between 2013-14 and 2016-17.

The safety of UK consumers is our highest priority, and we recognise the particular impact that fireworks can have. We believe that, at the moment, we have a balance between people’s concerns about fireworks, and the legitimate interests of those who wish to enjoy celebrating with fireworks and of those employed in the firework industry. However, we recognise that more can and must be done.

I will share with hon. Members here today the news that one of the first things I did when I became the Minister with responsibility for consumer protection was to announce on 21 January the creation of the Office for Product Safety and Standards. This is a new body that will receive some £12 million a year in central Government funding to ensure that we have access to information nationally and to support local authorities in their work. The new office will work with key stakeholders and enforcing authorities to review the guidance materials available on the safe and responsible use of fireworks. It will also provide an intelligence-handling function to improve the information we have. It will also examine the individual safety of particular fireworks and of other products on sale.

There was some suggestion about cuts in relation to trading standards bodies. I will just draw the attention of the House to the fact that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy gives some £15 million a year to local authorities to support the work they do through trading standards, but in addition we will have this new £12 million-a-year body to provide extra resource to local authorities.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. I hope that he will forgive me if I was perhaps a little disappointed when, after 13 minutes of his speech, I thought that he was announcing no change, but then he came out with the reminder that he has set up this new body. Will he facilitate a meeting between interested parliamentary colleagues and the senior officials now staffing this new body, so that we can have a face-to-face discussion with them about the concerns that exist across the country about fireworks?

Andrew Griffiths: I absolutely commit to doing that. As I said, the new body was announced just a few days ago. We have to recruit people to staff it properly and move it forward, but I would be very happy to make that commitment and to attend that meeting as well.

A number of colleagues raised the issue of collecting data on the misuse of fireworks. Clearly, this new body will look at evidence-based policy making, so it will look at the evidence, chase down and identify where the risks are, and—where necessary—come forward with suggestions and advice to Government.

Patricia Gibson: Can the Minister assure me and many other Members in the Chamber today that this new body will consider the fact that, as long as fireworks are pretty freely available to anybody over the age of 18, and despite the powers and the enforcing authorities that he has said will take action against the irresponsible misuse of fireworks, prosecutions will be extremely difficult, because of the nature of the crime? As we have heard today, quite literally the evidence goes up in smoke, people scatter and there is no evidence left to prosecute anybody. Is that something that the new body he is talking about will examine?

Andrew Griffiths: I am delighted to say to the hon. Lady that the new body will have the power to make recommendations to Government, so if it believes there are issues in relation to the sale and regulation of a particular item—be that a tumble dryer or a firework—it will have that power to make recommendations about those issues to Government, and it will be for Ministers to respond to such recommendations.

I will just add something in relation to the collection of information concerning antisocial behaviour. Of course, collection of such data would be a decision for the Home Office to make. I am sure that Ministers within the Home Office will look at this debate; I will make sure that the concerns that right hon. and hon. Members have expressed today are drawn to their attention. Clearly, however, it is a decision for the Home Office as to which data it chooses to collect or not collect.

In closing, I again thank everybody who has taken part in this debate today. Clearly, the safety of our constituents remains at the forefront of all our minds, and as the Minister with responsibility for consumer protection, I am absolutely clear that we have to do all we can to protect our constituents, who are the people we are here to represent. I look forward to working with colleagues on this issue in the future, and I thank you, Mr Hanson, for your time.
Marriage in Government Policy

9.30 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move, that this House has considered marriage and Government policy.

I am pleased to have secured this debate and grateful for the opportunity to speak to this important subject. I am also pleased to see a number of Members here; I hope that is a sign of support for the promotion of the importance of marriage in Government policy. I welcome the Minister and wish him well in his new role.

In a week’s time, we will celebrate the 21st national Marriage Week. It will be 20 years ago this summer that I married my wife Tamsin Thomas. She tells the tale that when she met me, she was Christmas shopping and I was standing on a street corner with a bottle of methylated spirits. That is true, but it does not exactly explain the situation.

I would be wrong if I said that we had been happily married for 20 years—that it had been idyllic and that there had been no challenges. There have been considerable challenges; when she moved into my home, I found her moving the cutlery in the cutlery drawer frustrating enough. But I recognise that over those 20 years I have had a wife who has raised my children and been a tremendous support to me. I have been no help at all: I had a wife who has raised my children and been a support in the work that we do. I recognise the challenge of having strong and healthy marriages and couple relationships in which we raise our children.

It is now seven years since a Government Minister took the opportunity to set out the Government’s approach to promoting marriage in a speech during Marriage Week. When we last debated this issue in 2017, the Minister’s predecessor but one tried to reassure Members that “the Department intends to continue to work very hard to ensure that marriage gets the support it needs to continue being a strong bedrock for the families and the children for whom we want to secure the best possible outcomes in the future.”—[Official Report, 1 February 2017; Vol. 620, c. 389WH.]

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman will come to this in his speech, but my constituents raise with me on repeated occasions at my Friday surgeries the difficulties that the Home Office places on their marriages. They cannot see their spouses because they live abroad and cannot get into the country. Does he agree that by not allowing people to live out their marriages, the Home Office is undermining people’s relationships?

Derek Thomas: I intend to demonstrate that the Government need to look clearly, across Government policy and Departments, at their role in promoting and protecting marriages and families. I will not be particularly interested in the issue that the hon. Lady mentioned in her intervention, but I am sure that there will be an opportunity to tackle that subject as we go on.

The Minister said that the Department intended to continue to work very hard to support marriage, but some weeks later it omitted the word altogether in its plans to support the poorest families in our country. Many Members will join me in making what I think is a simple request: for the Minister to ensure that no serious policy document is published by his Department without some reference to improving the stability of families through marriage. I hope the Minister might make that commitment today.

Research shows that unmarried parents are six times more likely to break up before their first child’s fifth birthday. By the time a British teenager is studying for their GCSEs, they are three times more likely to live with both their birth parents if those parents are married. Three in five children born to unmarried parents experience family breakdown before they reach their teenage years. In fact, by the time children take their GCSEs, nearly all parents—93%—who stay together are married. Put simply, family stability is found in marriage. Why do we continue to ignore that? We know that family breakdown causes poverty.

More alarming still is the gap in marriage between those families living in poverty and their middle-class neighbours. Marriage is disappearing from our poorest communities as it is disappearing from Government policy. Almost 90% of middle earners get married, compared with only a quarter of couples on low incomes. If we had that sort of gap between rich and poor in health, education or probably any other policy area, there would be immediate outcry followed by determined action. On that basis, and remembering the maxim “what gets measured gets done”, I suggest that the Department looks into the marriage gap, publish official figures for rates of marriage by family income, and make that a departmental metric for measuring stability in families.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I warmly welcome the Minister to his place; we all look forward to his response. Was my hon. Friend as struck as I was by the Centre for Social Justice and the Family Stability Network’s research showing that nearly 80% of young people aged 14 to 17 aspire to a lasting relationship and find that as important to them as a long-term career?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that comment. It is encouraging to know that there is still a commitment by the public, including among young people, and a natural, in-built desire to have a long and lasting stable relationship.

In recent years, the Government’s evidence on what causes poverty now and in the future has identified family instability as a root cause. Children in families that break apart are two and a half times as likely to experience long-term poverty and have almost double the risk of living in relative poverty than couple families.
I know the Government would wish to tell a positive story about their efforts to encourage work as the best route out of poverty. Despite significant progress, lone parents still have double the unemployment and more than three times the underemployment than couple families. Last year, the Department for Work and Pensions published data that showed that the children of parents who have separated are eight times more likely to live in a workless family than those whose parents have stayed together.

None of what I have said is ever meant to stigmatise lone parents, who face some of the most serious challenges, but it should make the Minister, his Department and Government across the board consider how we can reduce those figures by supporting families to stay together. Those statistics alone should alarm us. The break-up of families more than doubles the chances of experiencing poverty—two and half times the poverty risk and eight times the risk of worklessness. Not all couples are married, but we should reflect on where stability is found because the statistics are compelling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) mentioned that the Government have no reason to shy away from this subject. There is public support for marriage. There is some good news to be found in public attitudes and there is new evidence that the Government should not be afraid to talk about marriage. Last year, the Centre for Social Justice published opinion research that showed that almost half the public feel that marriage has become less important over the last few decades and agree that that is a bad thing, including 47% of adults in social grades C2, D and E, where breakdown is most acute. When people were prompted to consider the role of Government in supporting marriage, more than seven out of 10 agreed that marriage is important and that Government should support married couples, including more than two thirds of adults in social grades C2, D and E. We should all remember that the public support a Government talking about marriage.

I was privileged to be able to put my name to the strengthening families manifesto launched last year. The manifesto sets out some entirely sensible recommendations designed to strengthen the family unit and address many of the difficulties that I have briefly touched on. Among many sensible suggestions, the manifesto calls on Government to appoint a Cabinet-level Minister to ensure that family policies are prioritised and co-ordinated. It simply asks that in each Department there is a senior Minister responsible for delivering policies to strengthen families and for carrying out family impact assessments—something the Conservative Government had previously committed to.

Since arriving in this place, I have often heard that the Government aspire to Britain’s being a world leader on a whole raft of subjects that include innovation and research. The sad truth is that we seem to be a world leader on family breakdown, with half of all young people no longer living with both parents by the time they sit their GCSEs. There are obvious reasons why the Government would want to address this very important issue.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I am sympathetic to many of his points, but he raises a broader point about cohabiting couples and the benefits of a solid family base for supporting children and young people. What additional measures does he suggest should be put in place to support people who do not want to get married to live together and raise a family?

Derek Thomas: I believe that measures to support marriage, whether through taxation or by supporting and encouraging people who are considering marrying or moving in together, would actually support all people who are living together in families like those my hon. Friend describes.

I do not believe that promoting marriage or putting in place measures to support married couples would discriminate against any other type of family unit; it would help to strengthen them and give them access to support. I recognise—I hinted at this earlier—that moving into a family home together is a challenge for people and that unexpected difficulties often arise, so it is right that we should do what we can to help.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that promoting and supporting marriage is not about saying that every other choice is bad, but it is worth recognising that marriage and cohabitation are fundamentally different relationships. Too often they are elided together as though there is just a marginal difference. There is not: there are fundamental reasons why people choose to cohabit, which are hugely due to their level of commitment. A good example of that is that when a child is born to a married couple, the likelihood of that couple breaking up falls dramatically, but when a child is born to a cohabiting couple, the likelihood of that couple breaking up accelerates dramatically. That shows there is a fundamental difference between the two, so it is important to look at them separately.

Derek Thomas: As I said, by the time they do their GCSEs, 93% of teenagers whose parents are still together have married parents, so I support what my right hon. Friend says.

There are obvious reasons why the Government should want to address this important issue. We all want our children and young people to have the very best life chances, we want our communities and schools to thrive, and we want our working age population to enjoy fulfilled lives. As the Prime Minister said, we want a country that works for everyone. That said, no Government can solve such a complex and sensitive problem single-handedly; so the Government urgently need to provide a lead and play their part alongside local partners—councils, charities and businesses—to prioritise strengthening families, which are the bedrock of a healthy society.

In conclusion, will the Minister’s Department renew its commitment in this area? If it does, we will need to consider policies to support marriage, and I am aware of many colleagues—many of whom are in the Chamber—and policy organisations, such as the Centre for Social Justice, who would help in that endeavour. I invite the Minister to convene a ministerial working group on marriage in the coming weeks, to coincide with the 21st national Marriage Week, to thrash out a way forward and some sensible policy recommendations.
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way during his concluding remarks. It is really important for us, especially as Conservatives, to think about how we can support individuals. Marriage can be good, but a lot of marriages fail.

We need to be careful that Government policy does not hold up a paradigm of perfection for what marriage could be when, for many people, it does not necessarily work out. Of course we want stability, but as Conservatives we should support individuals to lead strong and fulfilled lives. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that Government policy should focus on supporting individuals rather than on enforcing a paradigm.

Derek Thomas: I would, of course, expect any Government—particularly a Conservative Government—to support individuals to have fulfilled lives, but no one enters a marriage expecting it to fall apart. The Government have a role in supporting people and giving them the best possible chance to make marriage work, for the various reasons I have outlined.

I would welcome action from the Minister, whom I welcome again to his new role. I hope that marriage is a happy and rewarding subject for him and is at the forefront of his mind as he begins his work at the Department.

9.44 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I apologise in advance that I will not be able to stay for the whole debate; I am a member of the Select Committee on Health, which is sitting at the moment, and I need to attend that, too.

We need to tread gently in this area. Marriage is often an issue of great cultural controversy, but it does not need to be. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said, we represent every single one of our constituents, whatever their family situation, but that does not mean that we should not strongly support healthy, respectful and mutually encouraging marriages. We can do both those things without creating unnecessary cultural controversy.

Of course I recognise that some marriages need to end. My parents sadly divorced, and—my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said something similar—my wife would say that I have often been very much less than a perfect husband. However, I am strongly of the view that the Government have a role to play in supporting people and in giving them the best possible chance to make marriage work.

I would welcome action from the Minister, whom I welcome again to his new role. I hope that marriage is a happy and rewarding subject for him and is at the forefront of his mind as he begins his work at the Department.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate. I was happy to go to the Backbench Business Committee and support him in his request, and I am...
happy to see the culmination of that request. I am well known as a supporter of marriage, especially in Government policy. I have been happily married for 30-plus years—believe it or not, 30-odd years ago I had thick, curly black hair. Then, I needed a brush; now I just need a chamois.

The fact of the matter is that I have supported married life over a long period. I am totally committed to it and I want to see Government policy on it. Since I came to the House in 2010, I and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is in her place—she will not mind me saying this, because it is true—have shared in many issues of common concern, and this is one of them. In the past, she has worked consciously in the Conservative party, as I have done in the Democratic Unionist party, to try to formulate Government policy. By working together across parties—not just in the confidence and supply agreement that we have now, but long before that—we have had some success with the marriage allowance. We were instrumental in making that Government policy. I want to put that on the record early on.

I and my party worked extremely hard to bring in marriage tax allowance transfers as a recognition of the stabilising effect that marriage provides to our community. The public policy benefits of marriage are significant. The hon. Member for St Ives outlined some of them, and I will add these facts and figures: three quarters of break downs of families with children under five come from the separation of non-married parents; children are 60% more likely to have contact with separated fathers if the parents were married; the prevalence of mental health issues among children of cohabiting parents is more than 75% greater than among children of married parents; and children from broken homes are nine times more likely to become young offenders—they account for 70% of all young offenders.

Those are some key figures. However, I want to be clear: in no way whatsoever am I attempting to say that the only unit that works is the married family unit. I see this in my office every week, and just now my staff will be dealing with many people who are single parents. I see hundreds of wonderful women who singlehandedly run their homes, and their children are well adjusted and thriving. I increasingly see single men taking on the two-parent role and doing a great job. As the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, society is changing, and we have got to look at that. The intervention from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) reaffirmed that. We must adjust our focus and way of thinking to how things are today.

I understand as much as the next person that marriage is hard and relationships are hard. Sometimes, no matter how much one person may try, it simply will not work. In our relationship, my wife has been understanding. The hon. Member for St Ives referred to time away, and most of my life has been away from home. My wife reared the children and now has the role of rearing the grandchildren as well. Simply, people have to try hard, otherwise it will not work.

I have also seen too many women widowed in the troubles. I relate very much to that, back home in Northern Ireland, where women have to be both mother and father to their child in the midst of tremendous grief and ensure that their child has not simply a house to live in, but a home to grow in. The role of those tasked with the responsibility of looking after children is so important. I make no judgment on anyone’s ability to provide a great home for their child being intrinsically linked with marriage, but statistics show why I believe that marriage is key and why it should be key in any Government policy. I wish the Minister well in his new role.

One massive issue to recognise is that the commitment of marriage is a driver for stability, quite apart from wealth. Crucially, even the poorest 20% of married couples are more stable than all but the richest 20% of cohabiting couples. In that context, it is entirely appropriate that our tax system now recognises marriage. That is something we pushed for and the Government recognised in the previous Parliament. It is good to have that.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is making a good point about income and marriage. The Government seem to recognise that in the tax system, but not in the immigration system. I have a constituent who had tried to bring his wife here since 2007. Gladly, she has now arrived, but he was short by £7 over the whole year in his salary and the Government refused to operate any discretion to allow her to come from Iran.

Jim Shannon: I agree; I have faced many similar cases in my constituency office. I look to the Immigration Minister and her Department to be fair and allow for some flexibility in the process. To be just a few pounds short is frustrating. We have a system to work within, but we make our cases on behalf of our constituents and their wives and spouses in other parts of Europe, the United States, Africa and even further afield in the far east. The difficulties are around financial contributions, so we need a flexible Government and flexible policy. That is not this Minister’s responsibility, but it is another’s.

As I have said before, the case for change is compounded by the fact that the Government spend more money on supporting marriage through the much more generous married couples allowance than they do through the new marriage allowance. The married couples allowance applies to married couples in which one or both spouses were born before 6 April 1935, while the new marriage allowance applies to one-earner married couples on basic income tax. While £245 million was spent on the married couples allowance, just £210 million was spent on the marriage allowance during 2015-16. The former can reduce a tax bill by between £326 and £844.50 a year, but the latter does so by only up to £230 a year. That is a help, but it does not fulfill the aim. It is important to have those facts and figures on the record in Hansard so that we can see where the differences are and where we need change. I hope that others agree.

It is absolutely right that we recognise the public policy benefits of marriage for adult wellbeing at all ages. However, given the special benefits in relation to child development, it seems strange that we should afford the marriages of couples in their 80s and 90s, whose children left home long ago, greater recognition than those in which the public policy benefits could reach both adults and children.

We need a system that addresses families and children rather than those who are long past that stage. In that context, the Government should introduce a fully
transferable allowance and pay for it by reducing its scope to married couples with young children. That would do away with the problem of low take-up by ensuring that the allowance is really meaningful for those who are eligible. At the very least, the marriage allowance for those with pre-school children should be increased so that no marriage of a couple in their 80s or 90s is recognised more—and not, indeed, by £844.50—than that of a couple with young children. Rather than just spending the same sum on a reduced pool of married couples, we need some change in the system.

I briefly referred in the Chamber, during the Budget debate, to the ComRes polling from last November; this is for those who follow ComRes and perhaps fill in their forms whenever they come. The poll demonstrated that increasing the marriage allowance is much more popular, with 58% support, than bringing in yet further increases in the personal allowance, which got 21% support. If we are looking for something that is more acceptable to the general public—we need to be conscious and cognisant of that—here is a simple system.

The cost of the further projected increases in the personal allowance to £12,500 is £4 billion, the majority of which will go, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has demonstrated, to those in the top half of the income distribution. By contrast, any increase in the marriage allowance would disproportionately benefit those in the bottom half of the income distribution.

If we take away housing benefit from couples who get married, and reduce working tax credit for families who marry and move in together, we make it less appealing for people to make that final commitment. We have outlined the social benefits of marriage, and the Government should feed something into that and make it more attractive for people who love each other and are in a committed relationship to marry. That is what my heart as well as my voice says, and what would benefit families and communities throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister seriously to consider the issue of the marriage allowance and how to achieve what we set out to do in putting that in place. Many in the House, including many of those present for the debate, think the same.

10 am

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. I have worked with him over a long time, and having run the Department I have a fair idea of the challenges that lie ahead of him. I am going to add to them. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on obtaining the debate, particularly this week, of all weeks.

Under the previous Prime Minister I was nominated to construct the family test against which everything was going to be measured. When I finally left—of my own volition, by the way—at no stage had I managed to get agreement from any of the key players about what it would consist of. While there was a principle, which was that the Prime Minister wanted a test that all decisions would be set against, the reality was that the Treasury in particular was not keen on any of it. I urge the Minister to press for a definition of the family test, by which all the effects of policy decisions could be looked at to see whether they would damage the family or make things more difficult. That would make logical sense.

I want to be brief, as I just want to make a start on a couple of issues, beginning by asking what the debate is all about. The trouble is that it all tips around and gets amazingly worried about the word. We think: “If I mention marriage, does that automatically mean worrying about whether marriages break up or other people do not choose to get married, and so on?” I know of nothing else in the purview of government where such a fear reigns in quite that way. We do not talk about business policy on the basis that some businesses will fail. We do not immediately say, “We must not talk about business or try to set policy to help businesses survive.” We do those things, because it is logical. Of course, in society as in economic life there will always be things that do not work out, but that does not mean people should set their life around what does not work out. If we all did that, frankly we would look a lot like North Korea. The point is we do not do it, so let us now make policy around what works and what is clear.

Marriage, frankly—this is not an arrogant statement—is probably the most fundamental institution that society has ever managed to construct to make society better, give children a better chance and improve the incomes and wellbeing of those within the process, as has been said. That is not to say that when, sadly, a marriage breaks up we should not do our level best to help people, and try to find them a better way and support them. That is critical. However, it means there is a need to recognise a couple of features. I am chairman of the Centre for Social Justice, which has been making this argument for some time, and we did a poll. What we found was the thing that always most intrigues me: when young people between about 18 and 28 were asked without reference to marriage what one thing they aspired to more than anything else, more than 70% aspired to be married, with stable families and a happy life. They did not aspire to be brilliantly successful at business; that was not their No. 1 aspiration. They did not aspire to have a fast car or a smart house. Their aspirations never being met by the reality. What, then, given that young people start with that aspiration, are we doing to make it less likely that they will achieve it?

If that happened with respect to any other process, in school or in society, and we said “That is not a problem,” then of course we would be causing damage, but in this case we walk away from the issue. My arguments about policies on marriage are not to do with favouring marriage. I do not think it needs to be favoured in any way. People’s basic instinct and sense of direction will take them towards the thing that benefits them and their families most. I am certain that that is the nature of the situation. The question we really need to ask is what we do that stops people who have that aspiration getting to where they aspire to be.

I have a couple of points to make about that, beginning with the OECD’s view of what it costs for two people to live together, in comparison to the cost of living for one person. It makes a base calculation and comes up with a figure. It is not the same as two people together—the calculation includes how savings can be made within a couple. We understand and accept that. The UK, peculiarly—this emanates from the Treasury and every other Department—somehow takes the view that we
Mr Duncan Smith: I have been told by a number of my colleagues, “No one gets married for money.” Only someone from a reasonably well-off middle-class background will endlessly take that view. People in a low-income family where every pound really matters will calculate how best to manage their affairs. If one situation makes them better off, there is enormous pressure to decide on that as their direction of travel. I should love us to look carefully at why the UK persists in making it financially more difficult for people to come together to marry, and to stay together. Those are really big issues, and the figures are there.

Alison Thewliss: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, because universal credit is set up so that there will be a single recipient in a household, many women are subject to financial control, which makes it far more difficult for those who face domestic violence to leave a relationship, because they cannot afford to?

Mr Duncan Smith: Not really. I do not accept that at all. Universal credit operates by looking at the household, which makes it more likely that couples are supported to stay together. The hon. Lady knows that the vast majority of married people—and, by the way, even cohabiting people—have joint accounts. The figure is way over 80%, and I think it is close to 90%. For those in an exceptional position, it is clear that the money will follow the person with the duty of care. Those rules are written into universal credit, so I simply do not agree with the hon. Lady. I think that universal credit will help enormously to get rid of what I and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) referred to as the couple penalty.

The cost of weddings is another issue that we need to consider. There is an idea that people cannot get married now unless they have a fantastic celebrity wedding. The average cost of a wedding is now more than £20,000, whereas what people actually need is a marriage licence. There should be pre-wedding education to tell people: “You do not need to make such a big fuss about it. What you want to do is get married.” One big reason for so many marriages breaking up—probably more than anything else—is debt. If people start married life in debt because of making such a big issue of it, that puts enormous pressure on couples.

Andrew Selous: A pastor in my constituency told me something that struck me, which was that up to the early 1980s many couples who married were happy to live in rented accommodation, perhaps with other people’s crockery and cutlery. They did not need everything to be perfect, but later on that changed and people felt they needed all new white goods, and so on. That may have been a disincentive to marriage. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that picture?

Mr Duncan Smith: I think that with the whole Hello! culture around the idea that people have to have a perfect fairy-tale wedding, no one is preparing them for the fact that once they are married, they will make compromises and face huge difficulties and stresses, and it is about how they cope with those. That would be far better than telling them some fantastic fairy tale: “Nothing will ever be a problem, and you’ll live happily ever after.” No relationship I have ever seen has ever been like that. The question is how to manage it, and preparing people properly for that is an enormously important feature of what we do.

The other area I will talk about is counselling. Earlier on, when I was in Government, we drove through more money to help support marriage guidance and counselling. The one thing we know, and some of them will say this, is that with the proper counselling and support probably close to half the families that are heading for break-up can change, re-stabilise and stay together. That is a critical point. We are now investing £30 million in that, yet the price of the after-effects of break-up is numbered at closer to £50 billion.

Even though I have argued for more money to go in, and I thank the Government for putting more money in, it seems like a pretty mealy-mouthed concept that we invest so little money, when that money really reaps a dividend in stabilising families and helping them stay together. If it were anything else in life, we would consider it a major benefit that that amount of money returned such a phenomenal cost saving. That cost of £50 billion would fall quite dramatically. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned the stability on divorce; one of the reasons for that is that we started investing in marriage guidance and counselling. Imagine what we could do if we spent even more money on getting people immediately into counselling. That would have a huge effect, and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to view that straight away.

The last point is marriage prep. I stand with all those who say that the key thing is to educate people to understand what it really means to start out on arguably the most important agreement they will ever make. People get terribly fussed about being members of things like golf clubs, where there are all sorts of peculiar and stupid rules around what they can and cannot wear, and everyone is very strict about it. If we mention that there are things people can and cannot do in marriage, however, everyone immediately says, “This is not something we need to lecture people about. We should not talk about it.” The answer is that the most important thing we will ever do is to form that relationship and ultimately, if we are lucky, to bring up children, and we want to make it as stable as possible.

If any Government sit there and worry about what people will say when they say they support marriage, because some will break up and there will be problems, we will never get anywhere. We now need to make the case for stability and strength, and help those who are unable to make that process.
life. They have done so in response to the publication in September of “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) referred to. I congratulate him on securing this timely debate in the run-up to Marriage Week this year. The manifesto contained 18 policies, which are the fruit of many years’ work; many colleagues here today have spent several years speaking and working on the issue. After its publication in September, it garnered the support of more than 60 Back-Bench Conservative MPs.

The new Minister, whom I welcome to his place, need not worry if he has not seen the manifesto, because I will give him a copy at the end of the debate. After its publication, a number of Ministers spoke in support of it. Both the Leader of the House and the Health Secretary stated their interest in how the policies in that paper might feed into Government policy. The Prime Minister told the House in October that the Government are “looking into what more we can do to ensure that we see those stable families”.—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 846.]

She recognised the wide range of benefits that committed family relationships can bring, as we have heard today, such as improving wellbeing, reducing poverty and reducing Government spending.

On the wider beneficial aspects of marriage, the former Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), said in this House that it was “exceptionally important” to include marriage in relationships education because: “At the heart of this is the fact that we are trying to help young people to understand how commitments and relationships are very much at the core of a balanced life that enables people to be successful more generally.”—[Official Report, 6 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1189.]

As I have said, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives on securing the debate. It is so timely, because marriage has a key role in helping people to promote the stable relationships that support life chances for them and their children, their children’s educational attainment and future employment, boosting mental health and reducing the risk of addiction in later life. It can help combat loneliness in old age, help reduce the pressure on GP visits due to depression and reduce absenteeism at work. It can positively influence so many areas of life and, of course, beneficially influence the public purse.

I want to put it on record, as I always do in these debates, that there are difficult cases in which it is better for a child not to be in the same home as one of their parents. I always say that there are many single parents who work valiantly, and successfully, to ensure that their children flourish and have a positive future to look forward to, but we have to remember that the statistics speak for themselves. The Marriage Foundation, as we have heard, has recorded that 76% of married couples are still together when their child has their GCSE exams, but only 51% of unmarried couples are still together.

I am particularly concerned about the statistics showing that only 24% of those in lower income groups marry, compared with 87% of those in higher income groups. Marriage is such an important issue that we cannot afford to ignore it in public policy. I believe that, because family breakdown affects the poorest most, it is a social justice issue. In fact, it is one of those burning injustices that the Prime Minister spoke of so movingly on the steps of Downing Street when she took office. We need to ensure that children who could be born into a family that is not functional will not have to be born into a generation of children who aspire to marriage, as we have heard, but let down the poorest of those children. That is why it is such an important issue of social justice.

Children from low-income households with an active father are 25% more likely to escape the poverty they grow up in. I will look at a number of policies, touching on some of those in “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”. Research from the Social Trends Institute into families with children under 12 showed that Britain has the highest level of family instability in the entire developed world. We languish at the bottom of that table and successive surveys have shown that children in this country are among the unhappiest.

I have several points to make about policy, as I say. Will the Minister restate the Government’s commitment to the family impact assessment or family test, which was introduced by the last Prime Minister, David Cameron, to ensure that the Government never have a blind spot in this area? I recently tabled a number of parliamentary questions, asking what every Department of State is doing to ensure that this is appropriately applied. Will the Minister look at those responses, because they are extremely disappointing? The family test is not being applied in the comprehensive way that I believe the former Prime Minister intended.

New research from the Marriage Foundation confirms that family breakdown, which ultimately affects nearly half of all teenagers, is a clear cause of many children’s and teenagers’ emotional and behavioural problems. That should not really be news to us, but I encourage the Government to properly address family breakdown as part of its comprehensive review of mental health strategy. We need to ensure that we are not just helping the young people—the children themselves.

**Dr Poulter:** My hon. Friend is making a very good speech, and I agree with many of the points that she has made. I would caution about statistics and the difference between causation and association. She is pointing out an association between mental health and some of the points that she is raising, but actually young people’s mental health is far more complex than that and there are many confounding factors that may call into question that association. I caution that marriage should not be put at the centre of mental health policy for young children.

**Fiona Bruce:** I disagree. I am a patron of a mental health charity that specialises in counselling young people in my constituency called Visyon. It now counsels children as young as four with mental health problems. It is overloaded—inundated—with counselling requests. Not long ago, I asked the chief executive officer, “How many of the children and young people you help to counsel have problems as a result of dysfunctional family relationships at home?”, and he looked at me and said, “Fiona, virtually all of them.” That is why it is so important, when we are counselling young people, that wherever possible we look at how we can also support their parents in their relationship. It is also why I am such a supporter of the “Emotionally healthy
schools” programme, which is being pioneered by Middlewich High School in my constituency. When children in that school have problems, the headteacher, wherever possible, will ask the parents to come into the school, will meet them and will help them to ensure that the children’s home relationships are as healthy as possible to ensure that they have the best chance of flourishing, both educationally and in the future. We need more counsellors to be trained, to ensure that they are not just counselling young people but, wherever possible, working with their families to combat the epidemic of mental health problems in this country among young people.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend, but the same argument about causation and association is applied directly to marriage itself. The argument is made that were all the cohabiting couples to marry, the statistics for break-up would not change. How do we refute that argument?

**Fiona Bruce**: Let us have a look at that, because my right hon. Friend, as always, raises a very pertinent point. From the outside, couples living together look the same whether they are cohabiting or married. Two people might be in love; they live together; they have a baby. What is the difference? I believe that the difference is commitment and, indeed, public commitment. The public promise made during the marriage ceremony sends a powerful message to the parties and to their friends and family round about, which can engender support from those friends and family when rocky patches occur. The message is, “We are committing ourselves to each other through thick and thin,” and that, after all, is the determination when people marry. A dialogue often precedes it that does not happen when people cohabit.

When people cohabit, there has often been what is called sliding rather than deciding to have a relationship; it happens without that preceding dialogue and mutual understanding of what it entails. That is why I so support the proposal that there be more pre-marriage counselling. In fact, I would go further and say that we should promote—this has been suggested by a number of groups and organisations—high-quality marriage preparation. That should be available to anyone who goes into a registry office and wants to get married. And we should waive marriage registration fees for couples who take part in an accredited marriage preparation course.

All that is what makes the difference between cohabitation and marriage. I am talking about giving young people the extra ability to work out whether they really want to be together and to stay together. There are statistics—yes, they are from the United States—showing that many couples going through marriage preparation courses decide not to marry, and that is a success in itself. They have made that decision in a contemplative and considered way.

Our problem today is actually not divorce but the trend away from marriage, although I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is no longer in his place, say that the reduction in the number of people marrying has stalled. That is very helpful, but we need to combat the widespread assumption that cohabitation is living together as if married, because unless couples decide and do not slide, unless moving in together is part of a clear plan for the future, it is not. Unless they have discussed their approaches towards having children, finances and working when a family comes along, it is not the same.

Before closing, I will touch on one or two other policies, mentioned in the “Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which I hope the Minister will consider. First, as we have heard, the Government have to ensure that the concepts of commitment, respect and safety are at the heart of the newly developed curriculum for relationships and sex education from an early age. That should include talking about marriage. I realise that that will need to be done exceptionally sensitively, but the Government need to make good on the comments of the former Secretary of State for Education that it is exceptionally important that marriage and its benefits be emphasised if we really care about the life chances and wellbeing of the children who will be the next generation of adults. We must not be embarrassed to mention that sensitively in schools. The next generation will not thank us for failing to teach them what a committed relationship means. If we do not do so, they will pay the price, and as I have said, the poorest will pay the highest price of all.

Secondly, I reiterate the importance of the Government continuing to look at removing the financial disincentives for those on low incomes to marry. This is in the manifesto. We want the Government to enable those who are on universal credit and entitled to the marriage allowance to receive the tax break automatically as part of their claim, and to ensure that it does not taper away. Will the Government also look at increasing the marriage tax allowance to a more significant level, which I believe would in turn boost uptake? In all the areas to which I have referred, it is possible for the Government to make small but impactful, positive changes to support marriage and family stability and therefore life chances.

This should not be a party political matter; it is too important. I welcome the contributions that we have heard today and particularly that from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), of the Democratic Unionist party, but I want to place this point on the record. I did not do so in last year’s debate in the run-up to Marriage Week, but I will do so now. As I believe was also the case last year, there is not one Labour Member in the Chamber today, other than the requisite Opposition spokesman, and this issue, which is about a burning injustice, deserves better than that.

10.28 am

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend, and fellow Cornishman, the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this very important debate. I wholeheartedly agree with virtually everything that has been said by hon. Members who have contributed; I shall just add a few points of my own.

As we have heard, virtually every indicator demonstrates clearly that marriage is a good thing. It is good for the people who are married and for the children who are
raised in a family that is based on a married couple, and it has very significant benefits for wider society and our economy. By virtually every measure—whether we are talking about health, personal well-being, educational outcomes or economic measures—marriage is a good and positive thing, and that seems to be clear to everyone. So I am sometimes more than slightly baffled about why the Government often appear so shy about saying that. The Government are not shy about saying that other things are good for us. They often tell us that we should all take more exercise. They are not shy about telling us that we should eat a healthy diet, and they often tell us how much alcohol is safe to drink. They are even taking measures these days to reduce the amount of sugar that we have.

It seems strange that, on something so fundamentally important that has such huge benefits, the Government are so shy to speak up—to say what a great thing marriage is for everyone concerned. If there is one message that I would like to put to the Government via the Minister, who I am delighted to see in his place today, it is that they should not be bashful in saying what a great thing marriage is.

As other hon. Members have said, we all accept that not everyone chooses to be married and that marriage is not always a positive thing for some people. We absolutely accept and respect that, but it should not mean that we shy away from saying what a positive thing marriage is. It does feel at times as though marriage has become the M-word in Government policy that is missing. I add my voice to those who have called on the Minister to play his part in his new role and ensure that marriage and the benefits of it are highlighted in Government policy, statements and documents, so that there is an unequivocal message from Government that we believe marriage is good.

The Government should take confidence from the fact that there is clear data showing that the popularity of marriage is increasing. Some 80% of under 18-year-olds surveyed said that they desired to be married and saw it as an important part of their life, on a par with having a successful career. The Government should be confident in speaking up for marriage. It is popular, and because of that we should also ensure that marriage and its benefits are promoted to young people through our education policy. Just as we give them career advice and help them in choosing their careers, right at that young age we should get the benefits of marriage across to them and help them to understand that.

I am aware that there is not much time left, but I want to make one further point: it is about civil partnerships, which have not really been covered by any other contributions. I am aware that a private Member’s Bill calling for civil partnerships to be extended to all people will come before the House shortly. When I saw that that private Member’s Bill was coming, I seriously considered how we should address this issue. It is clear to me that civil partnerships were a stepping stone towards same-sex marriage. We are where we are on that, but it seems to me that the current position, where there is one option for formalising a couple’s relationship that is open to some but not to everyone, is unsustainable.

One way of addressing the situation would be to extend civil partnerships to all. I have come to a different view. I actually think that civil partnerships are now unnecessary. Marriage is open to all, including same-sex couples, and we should give a clear message that we believe marriage is the best option. We should not confuse the matter by seeking to provide an alternative. We simply do not need the distraction of finding new ways of doing what has been around for thousands of years.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is making some very positive points about marriage. Given that there is now a record number—about 33.9%—of single people in the United Kingdom, should we not be encouraging any form of partnership, including heterosexual civil partnerships, to encourage people to go into stable relationships with each other? That seems to be what gives the greatest benefit to the individuals and any children involved. When it comes to Government policy we should be providing equality in law for everyone who wants to engage in meaningful relationships. As Conservatives, we would hopefully help to promote that rather than promoting one choice over another.

Steve Double: Some people will make that argument, and I absolutely respect it. Having considered the matter, however, I have come to a different view: that providing a competitor to marriage would dilute and undermine the positive place that marriage has in our society. That is my concern: that extending civil partnerships to heterosexual couples would provide competition for marriage. There should be a clear, positive, single message that marriage is a good thing to encourage in our society. That is my position, having thought about it. I respect my hon. Friend’s view, but it is not the view that I have come to. Civil partnerships are now unnecessary in our country. Stopping them and putting the focus on marriage would be the right step to take.

I have been married for 32 years this year. Lots of people say that I do not look old enough to have been married that long, but hopefully I am a demonstration that marriage is a good thing. I am very grateful to the very long-suffering Mrs Double, who has done more than her fair share to make sure that our marriage has stuck together and been successful over that time.

Like all of us who have been married, I know that, like anything in life worth having, it is sometimes through hard work, blood, sweat and tears that marriages are successful. I believe that it is important that the Government do all they can to help, support and encourage married couples to make a success of their marriages, that we remove all the barriers and disincentives in Government policy to marriage and to couples staying together, and that we give a very clear message and are not at all bashful in saying what a good and positive thing marriage is for everyone involved.
people of my generation are marrying on average 10 years later than their parents. On top of that, marriage rates are on the increase among over-65s, having increased by half between 2009 and 2014, which also says a lot about people living longer. So in my opinion, while marriage trends are changing and adapting to people’s wishes and needs, the institution of marriage does not appear to be under threat.

However, I am somewhat astounded, if no less grateful to the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), that equal marriage was finally mentioned one hour into the debate, although much of his attention focused on civil partnerships. I find it astounding that the Government did not take this opportunity to recognise all forms of marriage, and instead focused on nuclear and “2.4” families. I am sure that the Minister will address that in his response, but I just expected more from the Floor of the House.

While I welcome recent changes that allow same-sex couples across Scotland, England and Wales to marry, it is a great disappointment that that is still not possible in Northern Ireland. I hope that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) shares that concern. This is a great freedom for many couples who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, and as we approach LGBT History Month it has never been more important for the Government to put on record their support for same-sex marriage, recognising that everyone should be equal in the law and under the protections therein.

Giving same-sex couples the right to marry allows them to validate their relationship in a way that was previously denied. It is a move forward, closer to a more equal society, and allows those people to choose whether to get married, just like their peers. For many others, it is just as relevant not to marry. We have talked about cohabitation and suggested that it is not on an equal par with marriage, but I suspect that many families would disagree. I do not think that it is this House’s place to determine the sanctity of anyone’s relationship, whether they are cohabiting, married or otherwise. It is a choice, and we should simply enable that choice to be made by all individuals equally.

On many occasions, long-term cohabiting couples have just as successful relationships. So while I recognise the comments of the hon. Member for St Ives and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on the statistics—which, yes, are alarming—I would echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who cautioned us about the correlation of statistics in relation to marriage and mental health. The simple fact is that there are many successful families and they come in many shapes and forms, and marriage is not the sole indicator. While the hon. Member for St Ives outlined those statistics and suggested that children are more successful where there is marriage, I would caution that it is neither our role nor responsibility to lecture those who do not choose to marry.

As the term “marriage equality” suggests, the sanctity of marriage should be available to all, but we should also respect those who choose not to marry.

Dr Poulter: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Crawley: No, I will continue.

Finally, many people’s marriages and relationships end. When they do, it is Government’s responsibility to create policy to support and protect those people, not to penalise them, especially not vulnerable parents with children to raise. If tackling child poverty is this Government’s aim, using this debate to lecture others on the sanctity of marriage is not the best use of time, especially when there are other aspects of Government policy that do not support families as they should.

I therefore take this opportunity to focus once more on Government policy, which is, of course, part of the subject of this debate, and to call on the Government to address the charges for the Child Maintenance Service. Where a relationship breaks down, many parents do not choose to live separately or rely on the Child Maintenance Service, so it is unfair and unacceptable to penalise parents or levy charges on one or both parents trying to support their children despite the breakdown of a marriage or relationship. Many parents rely on the Child Maintenance Service. The levy imposed is unfair and penalises children, who need the service most.

Marriage is and always should be a choice available to everyone. I hope that the House will recognise that.

10.41 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate, and I welcome his inclusion of the importance of protecting families and his focus on providing stability for children. However, I take exception to his claim that family instability is the root cause of poverty, when we know that this Government’s cuts to social security are creating problems for families.

Social security support for low-income families has been cut severely. Most working-age benefits, including child benefit, have been frozen until 2020, and universal credit has been shown to be failing those on low incomes, causing debt and rent arrears. When universal credit was introduced in 2011, the coalition claimed that it would lift 350,000 children out of poverty. By 2013, that estimate had been reduced to 150,000, and by 2016 the Government refused to offer any re-evaluation at all. Can the Minister tell us how many children he believes universal credit will lift out of poverty?

Child Poverty Action Group published an analysis last November estimating that cuts to universal credit would push 1 million more children into poverty by 2020, along with an extra 900,000 adults. When we consider the situation for disabled children, we see that four in 10 are living in poverty, yet the basic level of support for disabled children in universal credit is less than half that available in tax credits.

We have had some interesting contributions; it has been good to hear people talk about how much they have enjoyed their own marriages. I welcome the call from the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) to tread gently, as marriage is often an issue of cultural sensitivity, and the comments of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke of the hundreds of wonderful women he has met who are bringing up families alone. It is important to recognise that many people choose to bring up children on their own, and some people find themselves in that situation due to relationship breakdown or bereavement.
Since 2010, successive Governments have sought to reduce the role of the state wherever possible, especially in social security, yet when it comes to whether or not two people should marry—surely the most private of decisions—the coalition Government sought to influence behaviour in relation to that decision by introducing the marriage allowance in April 2015. Details of how the new transferable allowance would work, given in a note published alongside the 2014 Budget, stated:

“Couples where both partners are basic-rate taxpayers will in almost all cases see no gain or loss...Couples will benefit as a unit, but the majority (84 per cent) of individual gainers will be male.”

One must question the introduction of an allowance that the Government knew would disproportionately benefit men; I would be interested to hear the Minister’s rationale for it.

Take-up of the marriage allowance has been poor. Up to October, 2.4 million couples had claimed it, out of an estimated 4 million who were eligible. According to Government figures, the cost in 2015-16 is expected to be £385 million when backdated claims are ultimately included, and £425 million in 2016-17. It prompts the question whether that is really the best use of taxpayers’ money at a time when child poverty is soaring and the Government are cutting support for disabled people under universal credit and the employment and support allowance work-related activity group.

On pension equality, the question is whether some marriages are more equal than others in the Government’s eyes. The Government have spent a great deal of time and, no doubt, a sizable sum of taxpayers’ money opposing pension equality for same-sex couples. When the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 was debated in Parliament, the Opposition called on the Government to close a loophole in the law meaning that married same-sex couples and civil partners were treated differently when it comes to pension entitlement in the event of one partner’s death.

In July, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of equality in a landmark case brought by John Walker, a gay man who found that after 20 years of service to his company, it would provide £1,000 a year in pension to his surviving husband, whereas if he were married to a woman, she would receive £47,500 a year. Indeed, were he to divorce his male partner and then marry a woman, she would still receive the larger amount. When do the Government intend to respond to the Supreme Court ruling? Will the Minister ensure that the ruling will not be affected by the UK leaving the EU, as it was based in EU law, and will he assure us that the Government will end the disparities in public sector pension schemes?

The Government’s claim that they want to support marriage is also at odds with how cuts in social security, yet when it comes to whether or not two people should marry—surely the most private of decisions—the coalition Government sought to influence behaviour in relation to that decision by introducing the marriage allowance in April 2015. Details of how the new transferable allowance would work, given in a note published alongside the 2014 Budget, stated:

The Government have recently announced that they intend to create a new cliff edge for eligibility for free school meals, so that families with household earnings of more than £7,400 a year will no longer qualify. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that allowing all children whose parents claim universal credit to receive free school meals would cost £600 million a year. The chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority warned in the autumn of the scale of the problem of household debt, and a recent study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that one in four of Britain’s poorest households are falling behind with debt payments or spending more than a quarter of their monthly income on repayments.

Relate has highlighted how debt problems can easily lead to conflict and relationship breakdown, whether or not partners are married. That can have a serious impact on children, as research suggests that conflict, rather than family structure, has a negative impact on children’s development. The household benefit cap is forcing families to move away from sources of support such as family and friends. People on a low income may not be able to afford to travel back to see them frequently, either. More than 500 Sure Start centres closed since 2010. They are another important support for more vulnerable parents in particular. If the Government value family, marriage and stability, why are they closing them? Again, I am keen to hear the Minister’s rationale.

Since last April, parents have been required to start looking for work as soon as their youngest child reaches the age of three, rather than five as was previously the case. A new report published by Save the Children last week found that many mothers would like to return to work or increase their hours, but find childcare simply unaffordable and Government help with the costs complex and difficult to access. Under tax credits, childcare costs are paid in advance, whereas under universal credit they will have to be paid up front and then claimed back, which is always likely to be problematic for parents on low incomes.

Of course, parents in many families are not married, and there are many lone-parent families. Government must recognise and value all family types. The alternative is to risk stigmatising families to no good purpose. Lone-parent families are particularly affected by access to childcare, and have been hit hard by cuts to social security since 2010. An independent study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission of the long-term impact of tax and welfare changes between 2010 and 2017 found that lone parents were set to lose an average of about 15% of their net income. That is almost £1 in every £6.

Lone-parent families make up one in four families with children, and have done for more than a decade. They are part of the mainstream of UK family life, and social policy needs to take that into account. Where a separated or divorced couple shares care of the children, the parent who is not the main carer cannot claim for an extra room for those children under the rules of the bedroom tax, for example. That can cause extreme difficulty for a family who must cope with the break-up of a relationship, and can cause parents, often fathers, to struggle to spend quality time with their children. A Labour Government would scrap the bedroom tax altogether. Will the Minister reconsider the rules of the bedroom tax as they currently affect separated couples to ensure that children do not suffer?
Where relationships unfortunately break down, changes to the child maintenance system have clearly not succeeded in supporting care for children or enabling parents to reach agreements themselves.

In 2012, the Government introduced a new system for child maintenance that aimed to nudge couples to reach agreement without the need for Government intervention. However, it does that by charging both parents—including the parent with care of the child or children, known as the “receiving parent”—if they fail to reach agreement independently.

The Department published a survey in December 2016 that found that around a third of receiving parents who paid the Child Maintenance Service application fee reported that it was difficult to afford. Of parents who did not have a maintenance arrangement at three months, 29% said that the £20 application fee was a factor. Of receiving parents with a direct payment arrangement, 42% cited a desire to avoid collect-and-pay charges as a reason for choosing direct pay and half said that the charges were a factor in their decision.

Will the Government take action to widen access—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Lady to wind up, so that the Minister has a chance to respond.

Margaret Greenwood: I will.

In conclusion, a stable, loving family is undoubtedly what we would want for all children, but there are many types of family in the 21st century. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) once said:

“Families come in all shapes and sizes. We don’t favour one way of family life over another. We want to support and back up all families...Government dictating family structures doesn’t work.”

She is right. This is a question of respect.

The Government should commit to stable families by putting an end to austerity, by giving our schools, police and health services the funding they need, by banning zero-hours contracts, by ensuring that refuges are available for people fleeing domestic violence and by ensuring that the social security system is there for people in their time of need.

10.51 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to begin my Front-Bench career under your beady eye, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate and pay tribute to the work that he has done over the years on this issue, which is deeply important to him. I also thank hon. Members for a sensitive and thoughtful debate.

The Government are committed to supporting families, and it is right to draw attention to an issue that affects a wide range of Departments as well as mine. This debate was called in connection with Marriage Week, which takes place between 5 and 14 February. That provides a good opportunity to celebrate the commitment and connectedness that a stable relationship brings to a family.

The Government’s view is that families are fundamental in shaping individuals and that they have an overwhelmingly positive effect on wider society. Growing up in families where parents are collaborative and communicate well gives children the environment they need to develop into happy and successful adults. The vital institution of marriage is a strong symbol of wider society’s desire to celebrate commitment between partners.

The institution of marriage can be the basis of a successful family life and many people make this important commitment every year. Marriage can lay the foundations for parenthood and is emblematic of the love and security that parents need to raise a child. The Government will continue to champion and encourage stable families that provide nurturing environments for children. That is why we are focused on helping families and children, to enhance the educational and employment opportunities available to the young and to reinforce the benefits that parental collaboration will undoubtedly have.

Although the Government support the positive impact that the stability of marriage can bring to family life, this debate is also an opportunity to celebrate the fact that relationships that provide the foundation for a stable and supportive family life across the United Kingdom come in different shapes and sizes. The Government recognise that a supportive family can take many different forms. Marriage plays an important role in our society, but we are committed to supporting different, and equally important, types of families, too.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How many different forms? Is a family any collection of people who happen to share a fridge?

Kit Malthouse: No, but it is clear that the key issue for a family unit is long-term commitment to each other, whether that is a religious, legal or emotional commitment.

It is an unfortunate fact of life that marriages, like other relationships, can and do break down, but the Government have been clear that even when a family has separated, both parents still have a positive role to play in the lives of their children. Evidence shows that parental collaboration has a direct and positive impact on children’s outcomes. They tend to have better health and emotional wellbeing and higher academic attainment if they grow up with parents who have a good relationship and manage conflict well. That is why we are committed to supporting healthy relationships between parents, whether married or cohabiting, together or separated, in the best interests of children.

We have already made good progress. Between April 2015 and March 2017, we invested £17.5 million in relationship support services, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) pointed out. More than 48,000 couples have participated in counselling and more than 17,000 practitioners have been trained to help families in difficulty. We could not have achieved that without our delivery partners in the Relationship Alliance—part of a broad range of stakeholders who contribute valuable insight and expertise.

In the light of the strength of the evidence about the damaging impact of parental conflict on children, my Department is working with local areas to implement a new reducing parental conflict programme, which will increase access to face-to-face, evidence-based interventions.
to reduce parental conflict. As announced in “Improving lives: Helping Workless Families”, our new programme will focus on vulnerable families, including those who are workless, because they are three times more likely to experience relationship distress.

Given the time remaining, I will turn to the four broad themes raised by hon. Members. First, several hon. Members mentioned the suspicion that there was an element of cultural cringe at the mere mention of marriage. I reassure them that that will not be the case from my point of view. The Department is working hard to embed the family test across Government, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, and to offer advice to other Departments that are instituting it. It has been developed with our partners in the Relationship Alliance, and we will continue to push that forward.

On the relationships and sex education consultation that is coming out later this year, I understand that that will or should mention the importance of commitment, with a specific mention of marriage as an element of that.

Secondly, the Government’s support for stability in relationships will be an enormous departmental focus for us, not least because of the connection between relationship instability and worklessness. In last year’s Budget, we announced that we would spend an extra £39 million on that programme over the next few years. I welcome hon. Members’ contributions to its development. We are also developing a quality of relationship tracker—a relationship distress indicator—against which we will hopefully be able to measure performance.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives and others mentioned a ministerial working group. I would be more than happy to address that with ministerial colleagues. I think the Cabinet Office is the most effective Department for looking across Government at where we can put something together. I will write to my opposite number there to look at that.

Finally, several hon. Members raised the issue of financial support for marriage and whether it is enough, whether it is targeted properly and whether it should be exclusive to marriage or for commitment more widely. Although it would be dangerous to stray into Treasury matters at this early stage of my career, I am happy to write to Treasury Ministers to point out that although uptake of the marriage allowance has been successful to some extent—something like 2.6 million families now take part—hon. Members present feel that more could be done.

My door will always be open to hon. Members who are behind the strengthening families manifesto. Before becoming a Minister, I had a useful meeting with the all-party group about our crossover of interests around children’s interests, on which we are all focused.

In the preparation for my marriage, I was given a piece of advice. The chap who was preparing us said, “Kit, you have to remember that the day you get married is the day that courtship really starts.” That lesson has stuck with me for the rest of my life.

10.59 am

Derek Thomas: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part, and I thank the Minister for his open and positive response. I look forward to further discussions in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Marriage and Government policy.
Mr Hawkins was discharged from the care of Tameside Hospital on 28 June 2006 to undergo surgery to repair a ruptured left Achilles tendon. Rupturing an Achilles tendon can happen, however, because it would have meant the hospital missing its five-day Government target for a patient to receive treatment or surgery after attending accident and emergency. Records indicate that the surgery was instead carried out by Dr Manikanti, assisted by Mr Kumar. Mr Hawkins states that the change of surgeon was made without his knowledge or consent. Subsequently, both clinicians have left the hospital and the country, and the names and titles of those who carried out the surgery have been disputed.

Mr Hawkins states that the surgeon made a critical clinical error. He believes that the surgeon misunderstood the positioning of the two diagonal sutures forming part of the modified Kessler suture. They were brought to the surface and closed, which permanently fixed the repaired Achilles tendon to the rear of his leg. On 7 July 2006, nine days after the surgery, the plaster cast was removed, revealing an open wound between the two sutures. Steri-strips were applied in an attempt to close the wound, but the duty consultant wrote in his records that the wound had healed very well after surgery. Mr Hawkins states that despite being aware of the error, the hospital failed to correct it by releasing the repaired tendon from the rear of his leg as soon as was medically possible. This allowed serious adhesion and tethering to form as the sutures disintegrated.

On 12 January 2007, Mr Hawkins was readmitted to Tameside General Hospital, where he was placed on a trolley in the accident and emergency department. The duty consultant wrote in his records that the non-localised bleeding was a simple and sensible solution would have been to postpone the surgery until the next day, allowing him to remain under the care of the same surgeon. He believes that that did not happen, however, because it would have meant the hospital missing its five-day Government target for a patient to receive treatment or surgery after attending accident and emergency. Records indicate that the surgery was carried out in the afternoon under the care of an orthopaedic consultant surgeon, Mr Ebizzie, but then postponed to the evening. My constituent believes that the most simple and sensible solution would have been to postpone it until the next day, allowing him to remain under the care of the same surgeon. He believes that that did not happen, however, because it would have meant the hospital missing its five-day Government target for a patient to receive treatment or surgery after attending accident and emergency. Records indicate that the surgery was instead carried out by Dr Manikanti, assisted by Mr Kumar. Mr Hawkins states that the change of surgeon was made without his knowledge or consent. Subsequently, both clinicians have left the hospital and the country, and the names and titles of those who carried out the surgery have been disputed.

Mr Hawkins states that the surgeon made a critical clinical error. He believes that the surgeon misunderstood the positioning of the two diagonal sutures forming part of the modified Kessler suture. They were brought to the surface and closed, which permanently fixed the repaired Achilles tendon to the rear of his leg. On 7 July 2006, nine days after the surgery, the plaster cast was removed, revealing an open wound between the two sutures. Steri-strips were applied in an attempt to close the wound, but the duty consultant wrote in his records that the wound had healed very well after surgery. Mr Hawkins states that despite being aware of the error, the hospital failed to correct it by releasing the repaired tendon from the rear of his leg as soon as was medically possible. This allowed serious adhesion and tethering to form as the sutures disintegrated.

On 12 January 2007, Mr Hawkins was discharged from the care of Tameside Hospital. Throughout the previous months, the repaired Achilles tendon had been continually swollen because of the aggravation of the fixation. Mr Hawkins raised concerns, which were ignored. Weekly and monthly appointments at the hospital were required thereafter. Mr Hawkins believes that he was discharged by the hospital without being clinically prepared and regardless of his condition. He feels that that was done to conform to Government targets.

Mr Hawkins immediately made a complaint through the hospital trust’s internal complaints procedures. He believes that on receipt of his letter of complaint, the trust should have called him in for an examination and a scan. It should have admitted that a serious problem had occurred and carried out a further operation to release the Achilles tendon from the rear of his leg. In Mr Hawkins’s mind, the matter would then have been resolved. However, the trust decided to take a different route: it instantly instructed Hempsons solicitors.

Although, obviously, Mr Hawkins is concerned about the clinical errors that have caused lasting damage, he is rather more appalled by the actions of a variety of organisations afterwards. He believes that those actions were deliberately designed to cover up the fact that a clinical mistake had been made, caused primarily by the replacement of a consultant surgeon with a junior doctor.

In 2008, Mr Hawkins instructed a solicitor, who requested disclosure of all full medical records. The trust passed his request on to Hempsons. However, in the immediate period after his request he received only a very selective number of his own medical files from Hempsons. Mr Hawkins’s solicitor failed to ensure that all full medical evidence was disclosed within statutory time limits and failed to apply for a court controlled disclosure, while knowing that the records he had listed were missing. Mr Hawkins’s solicitor instructed a clinical litigation medical expert, who produced a case-closing report that failed the objectivity test and was therefore invalid. The trust and Hempsons initially failed to disclose relevant medical records, doing so only after continued and considerable pressure from Mr Hawkins.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is a strong advocate for his constituent and makes a compelling case about the difficulties that his constituent has faced. Does he agree that the case flags up a wider problem? He mentioned solicitors being involved at a very early stage in the process. The current system for dealing with medical negligence in hospitals pushes defensive medicine and defensive approaches from hospitals. That fundamentally needs to change, because it is not good for doctors and it is not good for patients. Does he think that no-fault compensation may be a good way forward?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As Mr Hawkins himself acknowledges, if the hospital trust had taken his complaint down a different route by accepting that it had made a clinical error and deciding to fix it right, I would not be standing in Westminster Hall today raising his case.

Mr Hawkins continued with his complaint. In 2013, the trust eventually conceded and his remaining medical records were fully disclosed. On analysis of the records, it was plain to see that there were omissions and that pre-action protocol time limits had been exceeded. In response, Hempsons sought the opinion of a medical litigation expert. A report was produced, but it was based on the selected medical records that I mentioned
earlier, as well as on the falsified information. Mr Hawkins believes that that report would fail any objectivity test and is therefore invalid.

Mr Hawkins had involved the Information Commissioner’s Office on two occasions: in 2009 and in 2013. In both instances, it judged that the Data Protection Act 1998 had been breached by the trust’s failure to disclose relevant medical records on several occasions. After much time and effort from Mr Hawkins, on 11 December 2013 the new management team at the trust finally admitted to maladministration and awarded remuneration for it. In a move that Mr Hawkins believes was an attempt to close his complaint and prevent the case from going back to the Information Commissioner, or to the court for disclosure, the new management team disclosed that it would no longer discuss actions taken by the old management team. Mr Hawkins also believes that the Limitation Act 1980 was breached from 2008 and that rules 31 and 35 of the Civil Procedure Rules 1998 were breached in compiling medical reports, because the medical experts failed in their duty to the court to be objective.

The delays in disclosure of information meant that Mr Hawkins’s complaint to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman was ruled out of time. My constituent believes that that makes a mockery of the trust’s failure to disclose his medical records within statutory time limits, which he believes the ombudsman ignored while upholding the strict time criteria regarding his making a complaint to the ombudsman.

Mr Hawkins appealed the decision on several occasions when the evidence was retrieved through the Information Commissioner. However, he was unsuccessful in overturning their original view that a letter from the trust indicated that the complaint was closed in 2007, which he utterly refutes. Hempsons later apologised and admitted that that letter did not clearly state that the local complaints procedure was closed. However, the ombudsman still refused to investigate the complaint and, in doing so, Mr Hawkins feels that the ombudsman has assisted the trust to conceal the cause and effects of a clinical error.

In 2013, Mr Hawkins wrote to the NHS Litigation Authority, as the trust was not reporting clinical mistakes. Initially, the NHS Litigation Authority would not get involved and requested my involvement, as Mr Hawkins’s Member of Parliament, which I duly offered. Two replies were received that indicated that the NHS Litigation Authority was involved in the case, despite previous assertions and written evidence that it was not involved. Mr Hawkins was notified in writing that the trust, on receipt of his letter of complaint, had instructed Hempsons in January 2007, with the NHS Litigation Authority directly instructing Hempsons and the trust from November 2007 to February 2009.

Hempsons was aware of a breach of the Limitation Act 1980 and the Data Protection Act 1998 when it disclosed to Mr Hawkins his missing medical records in October 2009. This means that the trust and Hempsons had illegally avoided disclosing all full medical records within statutory time limits and successfully passed the three-year limit for litigation. Mr Hawkins believes that that indicates that the NHS Litigation Authority was aware that rules had been broken, yet failed to take retrospective action based on the strength of the evidence that he had disclosed to it in 2013.

The actions taken by the trust, assisted by Hempsons and the NHS Litigation Authority from January 2007 to December 2013, clearly indicate that the trust was covering up a clinical incident and its cause. With so much time having passed since my constituent first exited the operating theatre in the summer of 2006, I hope that today the Minister of State will be able to afford Mr Hawkins guidance and support in this matter, and finally bring to some closure what has been a dreadful episode for my constituent.

11.13 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I begin by commending the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) for securing this debate. Although he opened it by saying that it is perhaps unusual for a member of the shadow Cabinet to secure a debate such as this one, it is absolutely right that he is doing so on behalf of his constituent and bringing these matters before the House. I am very sorry to hear about Mr Hawkins’s experiences, which have clearly caused him distress.

As you are well aware, Mr Rosindell, the NHS complaints process operates independently of Government, to prevent political bias in the handling of individual complaints. However, a number of points arise from the hon. Gentleman’s remarks, in respect of his contention that Mr Hawkins was let down by a number of individuals and organisations within the NHS. Specifically, it is alleged by Mr Hawkins that the hospital failed him by prioritising then Government targets, which delayed his operation; that the clinician failed him through clinical error; that the duty surgeon failed him by falsely reporting that his wound had healed; that the hospital failed him by not correcting the alleged mistake and by instructing lawyers; that Hempsons solicitors failed to disclose full records; that his own solicitors failed him by not obtaining his records; that his own clinical medical expert failed him; that the hospital failed him, regarding his report; that the ombudsman failed him; and that the NHS Litigation Authority failed him.

Although the Department of Health does not comment on individual cases, and it is not for me to adjudicate whether all of those claims by Mr Hawkins are valid, it is worth noting that a very wide range of both individuals and organisations are alleged by Mr Hawkins either to have conspired against him or, indeed, to have failed him in this matter.

It is also worth placing on the record that NHS Resolution, which was formerly the NHS Litigation Authority, informs me that in January 2016 it first became aware of an independent medical report commissioned by Thompsons; Mr Hawkins’s own solicitors, which had not been previously disclosed to NHS Resolution in the course of Mr Hawkins making his claim. That medical report concluded that there was nothing to suggest that the operation in question had been performed anything but competently. Although I very much recognise that the hon. Gentleman’s constituent is of a different view, and he is perfectly entitled to be of a different view, it is worth placing on the record that his own medical expert, who reviewed this case, did not feel that the operation had been performed in the way that Mr Hawkins has claimed.
[Stephen Barclay]

I note that Mr Hawkins referred this matter to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, which is independent of both the NHS and Government, but the ombudsman ruled that the claim was out of time. Ombudsman decisions are final and there is no automatic right for them to be reviewed. However, the law provides for the ombudsman to consider whether to review a decision if it was demonstrated that the ombudsman made their decision based on inaccurate facts, or that there was new and relevant information that was not previously available, or that they had overlooked or misunderstood parts of the complaint or relevant information.

If a complainant believes that there has been maladministration in the handling of their complaint, they can apply to the courts for a judicial review. However, that must be done within three months of the conclusion of the complaints process.

Andrew Gwynne: The Minister hits the nail on the head there, and it is where the system has let Mr Hawkins down; Mr Hawkins will have been listening very attentively to the case that I set out. Mr Hawkins was denied that ability to apply for a judicial review because of the way that the hospital itself had delayed the process by not informing him that the case had been formally closed, so that by the time he was advised that the case was closed, the time limit by which he was able to take a legal route had passed.

Stephen Barclay: I very much recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. Obviously, I do not want to get drawn into the specifics of this individual case, for the reasons that I have already set out, but within this case and within the claim made by Mr Hawkins a number of factors have been outlined, and I recognise that the hon. Gentleman’s point is one limb of the claim that Mr Hawkins has made.

What brings the various issues together is a question that I think applies to all of us, from all parties in the House: in the future, how do we collectively avoid cases such as Mr Hawkins’s case, and how do we improve the complaints process? That is an area where the Government have been particularly active, not least following “Hard Truths”, the report into Mid Staffordshire and the issues that arose there. The Department of Health has established the complaints improvement board to take forward a series of projects to improve the complaints process. So I hope that—irrespective of the specifics that we are discussing today—as part of the “closure” that the hon. Gentleman referred to, the improvements in the complaints process in the future will be a source of some comfort to Mr Hawkins.

As part of that process, the complaints improvement partnership was established by the Department and system partners, including NHS England, NHS Improvement, the Care Quality Commission, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, and NHS Resolution. That partnership is currently examining options for delivering a more effective complaints management system, and better use of all forms of feedback to improve NHS services. That includes expanding the role of the “freedom to speak up” guardians, to give them powers to initiate whistleblower complaints processes where possible. My predecessor, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), particularly championed that when he was a Minister, and he did a huge amount to progress it.

The complaints improvement partnership also engages with non-executive directors to explore options for them to have responsibility for monitoring the progress of complaints and serious incidents within trusts, and with Healthwatch England, to empower local healthwatch organisations. As constituency Members, I think we all work with and see the value of that body. Working with the ombudsman, the partnership also promotes best practice in the handling of complaints by providing information, advice and training. In addition, NHS Resolution has recently launched a service to increase the use of mediation in the NHS, to resolve issues at an earlier stage without the need for protracted litigation. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) has previously championed reducing the impact of lawyers when disputes arise.

It is important that patients receive the safest care possible from the NHS and that when things go wrong clinicians are open and honest, and able to learn from their mistakes. It is equally important that patients and their families are listened to and their concerns taken seriously and addressed.

Andrew Gwynne: That brings us back to the point made by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). When Mr Hawkins complained that his Achilles tendon had adhered to the back of his foot again, it surely would have been better for Tameside General Hospital’s old management—the hospital has come a long way since it was in special measures—to investigate and put it right at that point, rather than immediately going down the legal route.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the events took place more than 11 years ago and that it is, therefore, not for me to comment on what the trust knew at that time or their actions accordingly. I think we all, across the House, recognise that resolving issues without recourse to litigation is preferable, where possible, to lawyers being involved at an early stage—and I say that as a former lawyer. That is why the Government seek to improve how complaints are handled, including improving the regulation. The Care Quality Commission now rigorously inspects all trusts and primary and adult care providers, and a duty of candour—a new protection for whistleblowers—encourages staff to speak up for safety and hence fosters greater transparency. There is also the development of a culture of learning, through patient safety collaboratives and the national Sign up to Safety campaign, and last April the healthcare safety investigation branch became a fully operational and independent branch of NHS Improvement, to investigate serious incidents in the NHS with a strong focus on system-wide learning.

Dr Poulter: I do not wish to distract from the main purpose of the debate, but my hon. Friend makes an important point about a culture of openness and transparency in dealing with complaints. How does he feel that the recent High Court judgment about a doctor being struck off by the General Medical Council might play into doctors’ and other healthcare professionals’ willingness to engage with such a culture? Might it be
inhibitory, in that they would be concerned about the impact on their future careers of being open and willing to own up to mistakes?

**Stephen Barclay:** As a former Minister, my hon. Friend knows that there are conventions regarding Ministers of the Crown commenting on court judgments. The Secretary of State has already made clear his position on that matter, and this debate on a specific constituency issue is not the forum for moving beyond that scope.

It is important for us all that we improve the handling of complaints. In a system as large as the NHS, we all recognise that, with the best will in the world, things will go wrong and mistakes will be made. The latest Care Quality Commission annual “State of Care” report, published in October 2017, recognises that the vast majority of patients get good care and that many parts of the NHS have improved thanks to the hard work of the staff. The key issue that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish has rightly brought before us today is how we learn from things going wrong and how, when a patient thinks something has gone wrong, the issues are aired and resolved.

I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate, notwithstanding his elevated position in the shadow Cabinet, and for ensuring that his constituent’s issues have been aired before the House. The Government are committed to building a learning culture within the NHS that listens to patients and relatives and learns from mistakes, so that patients do not suffer avoidable harm. The Secretary of State deserves great credit for his championing of patient safety as a specific issue within his portfolio. We are also working to improve the complaints handling system so that it is more responsive and joined-up between organisations. I hope that the improvements that are in place will help Mr Hawkins to get some closure on the matters we have debated today.

11.25 am

**Andrew Gwynne:** I thank the Minister for his kind words and his outlining of how things are changing to give patients better systems through which confidently to seek redress when things go badly wrong. Unfortunately, though, that does not fix the problem for my constituent, Mr Hawkins. He is not looking for a solution. He has exhausted every avenue, as the Minister has set out, and has been badly let down and failed at every stage by a variety of public and private bodies.

My aim today was to set out Mr Hawkins’s case so that Ministers could learn from it in taking forward improvements to the NHS complaints procedures, to ensure that hospital trusts do not play the system to avoid being held properly to account by the ombudsman and other statutory bodies such as the Information Commissioner. My aim was also for Mr Hawkins to feel that the world knew what had happened to him, and to receive assurances that the Government are fully aware of and understand the pain, hurt and concern caused to him for more than a decade, and are intent on putting that right.

**Question put and agreed to.**

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
give special consideration to people on the autism spectrum. Those environments can be very hostile because of the nature of that challenge.

Kevin Brennan: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he is doing on that commission and the work he has done around health. One of the complexities with such a debate on autism relates to the Department that should be answering. I do not think I am giving away any state secrets by saying that I received a phone call from the Government asking, “Which Department do you think should reply to your debate?” I do not blame the Government for that—having been a Minister, I understand how Government works—but one of the key problems is the difficulty in ensuring that services are joined up across the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice, the Attorney General’s Office, the Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education. All those things play into each other. Even though today’s debate is specifically about the criminal justice system, it is inevitable that other issues play into it.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman think it might be worth the Government considering, with Cabinet Office oversight, the creation of something like the covenant and veterans board? That would ensure that every Department had someone absolutely focused on the issue. Autism affects every Department and how we make reforms. Such a board could drive the agenda much more comprehensively through the system.

Kevin Brennan: I think that is an excellent suggestion. In my experience in government, to get Departments working together and to make progress we have to bring Ministers together, not just officials. Those Ministers have to understand and be passionately committed to making the change. It is possible to make significant change simply by ensuring that Ministers are brought together. When I was a Minister, I attempted a joint project with another Minister, and the only way we could get it done was by ensuring that we met regularly. We told our officials, “You will do this, even though it is not currently in the Department’s culture. We are both telling you to do it, and you will work together to do it.” The hon. Lady’s suggestion is excellent, and I hope that the Minister will take it on board. Even if he cannot commit to doing it this afternoon, I hope he will commit to taking it away and discussing it with his colleagues.

Mr Sheerman: Is it not the case that all the institutions have to provide training on people on the autism spectrum? I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman heard reference in the debate last week to Alex Henry, who is an autistic young man. A boy who was with him stabbed someone, and Alex Henry is now in prison for 19 years. He was an easily led young man on the autism spectrum. When adults on the autistic spectrum come under suspicion of criminal behaviour, safeguarding becomes crucial. I want to refer to the case of a constituent of mine, who wishes to remain anonymous for obvious reasons. The safeguards in the criminal justice system did not protect him as they should have under current policy and practice. Owing to his understandable desire not to be named publicly, I will not go too far into the detailed circumstances that led to the arrest of my constituent on two different occasions. I know that Ministers are aware of the details of the case through previous meetings and correspondence. Suffice it to say that his stimming was misinterpreted while travelling in crowded conditions on public transport, and that is what led to his arrest.

My constituent declared his autism before he was arrested, which should have triggered a different pathway from a normal arrest, but he was not diverted or safeguarded at the point of contact as he should have been. On the first occasion, no appropriate adult was called, his parents were not contacted as they should have been, and he was not assessed as fit for interview. A caution was issued against him, which was later quashed due to those lapses in procedure. Unfortunately, he was arrested again three years later, and his vulnerability and protected characteristics were not properly recognised by the police or the health professional who assessed him. In other words, the reasonable adjustments that are required by law were not made during detention or subsequently, and that case was dropped without charge.

In January 2009, Lord Bradley, who is of course a former Member of this House and pays very close attention to these kinds of proceedings, published his review of people with mental health problems or learning disabilities in the criminal justice system. His report set out a policy of liaison and diversion for people with
the Minister made of the effects of the continuing cuts to police budgets on the training that is offered to police officers and staff working with adults on the autism spectrum, and what will he do following the debate to ensure that safeguarding policies are properly put into action across the board?

The National Autistic Society has a free resource aimed at police officers and staff, which offers a guide to working with people on the autism spectrum. I hope that the Minister will be able to join me in publicly encouraging police services in Wales to use that resource, which is appropriate for Scotland and Northern Ireland as well, and to seriously consider its guidance.

As I said, the allegations against my constituent resulted in a caution that was quashed and in the second instance they were dropped. However, to his great distress, those erroneous allegations remain on police databases. At the time of his arrest, my constituent was living and working across the border in England, not in Cardiff, but the discovery that the allegations against him were kept on police databases, despite the police having acknowledged that they were inaccurate, caused him very severe psychiatric harm, as was confirmed by two separate psychiatric reports. As a result, my constituent ended up giving up his job, flat and independence to return home and live with his parents in Cardiff. We cannot want to see such an outcome for an adult with autism who has established independence and a productive role in society in the workplace. It shows the life-changing effects that a lack of safeguarding can end up having.

The allegations remain on police records. The chief executive of the relevant NHS trust invited both the police and the Independent Police Complaints Commission to send representatives to two meetings to discuss how they could help to protect my constituent from further psychiatric harm. I am sad to say that they did not attend either meeting. Even though extensive and complex complaints have been made to the relevant agencies, those made to the police and the Independent Police Complaints Commission remain unresolved. My constituent and his family have grave concerns about the governance and compliance with required standards demonstrated in the handling of these kinds of issues.

There is no evidence that the police service involved recognised my constituent’s continuing vulnerability, or put in place plans to respond appropriately and safely in the event of further contact with him. In my view, therefore, they neglected to protect him from future risk of harm. Before the first incident, and subsequently, he was studying for a degree and travelling daily on public transport. Before the second incident, he was working full time, but his experiences and, in particular, the failure to remove or amend the allegations resulted, as was predicted by the senior medical consultants who assessed him, in serious impairment of his health and development, with a significant increase in his anxiety and impact on his functioning. As a result, he lost his employment, moved back home and is no longer able to travel independently on public transport.

In pursuing his case, my constituent and his parents have unearthed many worrying inconsistencies. For example, he was originally told by the police that the case against him was not pursued on public interest grounds, whereas the Solicitor General later confirmed that it had been dropped through a lack of evidence. Those are very different reasons not to prosecute.

My contention is that if Lord Bradley’s recommendations had been properly followed when my constituent was arrested in 2011 and 2014, the trauma that he and his family suffered could have been avoided. My constituents are not the only ones who have had such misunderstandings with the police. The National Autistic Society has said: “our charity still hears regularly from autistic people and families who say that responding police did not understand autism and did not respond appropriately. This causes unnecessary distress to the individual and to police attending.”

Mr Sheerman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Brennan: I will in one second. In driving home my point—before my hon. Friend helps me to do so—I want to ask the Minister to go back and look at Lord Bradley’s proposals and ensure that they are being fully implemented across the system. I will now, with great pleasure, give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend is making such a good speech, which has stimulated me to remind him that the court system very often derides professional opinion about the facts of autism. Professor Baron-Cohen of the University of Cambridge is probably the best-known expert on autism in the country. In the recent case of Lauri Love, who is in danger of being sent to the United States where he will almost certainly be in danger of committing suicide, the professor’s evidence was dismissed out of hand. In fact, he was attacked as an expert when his evidence would not be taken seriously in an instance of the world’s experts in this area, and the idea that his evidence could have been voided. My constituents say that responding police did not understand autism and did not respond appropriately. This causes unnecessary distress to the individual and to police attending.”

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend describes a very distressing phenomenon. Professor Baron-Cohen is one of the world’s experts in this area, and the idea that his evidence would not be taken seriously in an instance such as the one that he describes is obviously highly concerning. I hope that the Minister will consider that, and whether legislation might be required to ensure that the Lord Bradley’s recommendations are followed across the system.

The issues that I am raising today were borne out in a study by the University of Bath, published in 2016. A survey of almost 400 police officers found that only 42% of officers—so a minority of officers—were satisfied with how they had worked with individuals on the autism spectrum. Some 37% of officers had received specific training on how to work with individuals on the autism spectrum, but many found that even that training was not tailored to their specific roles within the police force. In addition, organisation and time constraints were cited as specific barriers, so what assessment has
Hon. Members will recall the Commons debate on 30 November last year on mental health and suicide in the autism community, in which reference was made to recent research findings that autistic people are nine times more likely to kill themselves than the average population. For people on the autistic spectrum, contact with the criminal justice system can often come at moments of heightened anxiety. As such, it is crucial that all parties are fully informed and trained to find a solution that does not cause undue distress or, in the case of my constituent, severe psychiatric harm.

I urge the Minister to listen to today’s debate and the suggestions from hon. Members. I urge him to speak with his colleagues in the Government to find a way to work in a more joined-up fashion in a ministerial-led initiative, to make sure that what happened to my constituent does not happen to him again, or to others, and to ensure that this country has a reputation across the world for the highest standards in dealing with the issues faced by adults with autism.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on bringing this important issue to Parliament’s attention. I also take the opportunity to congratulate the UK Government and the National Autistic Society on their work in establishing the first autism-accredited prison in the world at Her Majesty’s young offenders institution Feltham, which I understand some hon. Members here today have had the opportunity to visit. I am very proud that the United Kingdom is leading the world on this issue. Facilities such as those at Feltham will be important in rehabilitating offenders, but, more importantly, I hope they will ensure that young people with autism do not have to endure overly distressing sentences that will cause damage to their mental and perhaps even physical health.

I would welcome any moves by the Ministry of Justice and the relevant devolved Governments to increase the number of autism-accredited prisons across the entirety of the United Kingdom. Given that prisoners are more likely than the general population to be autistic, it seems clear to me that we must do all we can to improve autism awareness and support in our prison estate.

Autistic people are more likely to be victims or witnesses of crimes than they are to be perpetrators. I welcome the National Autistic Society’s guidelines to help professionals in such situations, and I hope it will continue to support the hard-working men and women in our police force, prisons and courts systems.

Hon. Members may be aware that the Scottish Government have just finished a consultation on refreshing the Scottish strategy for autism, which will look to address issues across many areas of autism and focus, at least in part, on the criminal justice system. A freedom of information request highlighted by the great research team in the House of Commons showed that, in the National Autistic Society’s opinion, the way the Scottish criminal system looks after autistic people is far from satisfactory—it said that the Scottish criminal justice system is “failing autistic people”. I look forward to reading the findings of the consultation and I hope the Scottish Government will act to ensure that that failure does not continue.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating Police Scotland and Jackton police training school in my constituency? I had the good fortune to visit that facility on Friday last week to hear that mental health training, including autism awareness, has been rolled out to all officers right across Police Scotland.

**John Lamont**: The hon. Lady highlights an important point. The discussions I have had with my local police force clearly demonstrate that the police and other emergency workers have a much greater understanding of how to deal with the people with autism whom they come across during their work.

It is estimated that there are 58,000 people living with an autism spectrum condition in Scotland. It is vital that they receive fair and inclusive treatment by the criminal justice system, not only when they are suspected of a crime, but when they have witnessed or been a victim of crime. People with autism have an equal part to play in a fair and just society, and it is our job to ensure that they are treated appropriately.

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing this important debate.

Adults with autism experience the criminal justice system in a unique way, which is reflective of the unique and complex way they experience the world and the social, physical and psychological symptoms of their condition, which exist on a broad spectrum. Recent studies have shown that we are all somewhere on that spectrum.

Adults with autism and their individual needs are often not immediately identified on their first contact with the criminal justice system. That has significant consequences for autistic people, both as offenders and victims. The Autism Act 2009 was the first condition-specific legislation of its type in England, and I am proud to say that it was brought in under a Labour Government. The coalition Government’s 2014 “Think Autism” strategy set out two key priorities relating to criminal justice as identified by those with autism and their carers. Those priorities are, in their own words:

“I want the everyday services that I come into contact with to know how to make reasonable adjustments to include me and accept me as I am. I want the staff who work in them to be aware and accepting of autism”

and

“If I break the law, I want the criminal justice system to think about autism and to know how to work well with other services.”

I cannot emphasise enough that adults with autism are much more likely to be victims of crime—seven times more likely—than to be offenders. The National Autistic Society tells of horrific crimes perpetrated against adults with autism, including one autistic man who, aged 21, was harassed, raped and murdered, in part because of his condition. His mother said that “he was vulnerable and became a target because of his condition, but we weren’t given any help.”
Some 49% of adults with autism in a 2014 survey said they had been abused by someone they thought of as a friend. Autism brings with it an inherent vulnerability to bullying and social exclusion, and we must urgently work to entrench awareness of and respect for it within our society, starting in our schools.

Statistics published by the Office for National Statistics between 2013 and 2016 showed that autistic people were four times more likely to experience disability hate crime than were those with disabilities that affected their mobility or vision. In other words, there is no empathy for autism. Will the Minister commit to looking at the rise in disability hate crime—it rose 53% between 2015-16 and 2016-17—and exploring how we can tackle this national shame?

Intrinsic to the condition is, generally speaking, a desire to know the letter of the law—very much so—but, as in the community as a whole, some adults with autism do commit crime. It is widely accepted that, in the case of autistic people, a significant proportion of crime committed is caused by circumstances that provoke discomfort, fear, or misunderstanding.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), the Minister with responsibility for care and support at the time of the “Think Autism” strategy’s publication, said in December last year that we should invest more in keeping people with mental health conditions, learning disabilities and autism out of our prisons altogether. I absolutely agree.

The National Autistic Society also agrees with that assessment, and it stated that “for many autistic people, prison has meant that the system has already failed”.

This is not always possible, but will the Minister commit to exploring the equivalent of autism accreditation for the criminal justice system in its entirety, from the point of exposure to exit? That means looking at what reasonable adjustments can be made throughout the system from the moment the police are called—including the quick-fire questions at interview—and people’s appearance in court, detention in prison and rehabilitation.

The most prevalent problem appears to be in policing, which is most people’s first point of contact with the criminal justice system. A 2016 study showed that seven out of 10 adults with autism were dissatisfied by their experience with the police and reported discrimination, a lack of clarity and a feeling that their needs were not met. The “Think Autism” strategy tasks the College of Policing with developing autism awareness training for new recruits. I welcome that move, but responding police across the board must be trained so they understand that when they identify someone who may have autism, they must respect that person’s needs.

Wailing sirens, loud noises, being touched and being shouted at are experiences that, combined, lead to sensory overload for most adults with autism. In those circumstances, the behaviour of people with autism, such as stimming, can easily be misinterpreted as aggression. Ensuring that the police are uniformly educated about autism is without doubt the key to preventing excessive distress and unnecessary violence. Will the Minister commit to taking steps to ensure that all police, no matter their length of service, have the autism understanding that they need.

People with autism may also be seen as unreliable witnesses, because stress may alter their behaviour in the courtroom, and the often literal nature of their responses may not be conducive to effective self-advocacy or to providing an account of events that happened to others. Since 1999, it has been legally possible, at the court’s discretion, to identify people as vulnerable and to adapt proceedings accordingly, but I understand that that is done infrequently and does not reflect the number of vulnerable people who pass through our courts.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on raising that matter. This is not just about prison officers, the court service and the prison service; it is about recognising issues early in the process. If we do that, we can address the issues further down the line, and if people with autism are distressed by what they are going through, we can put their minds at rest.

Ms Rimmer: I accept that point. It should start with policing and go right through the system with the individual.

I welcome the recent progress that has enabled witnesses on the autistic spectrum to request a registered intermediary to help judges and lawyers to phrase their questions more appropriately. Will the Minister consider enforcing the universal implementation of those measures to make our courts more accessible for vulnerable people? Much more can be done to educate legal experts about the complexities of autism to reduce the possibility of miscarriages of justice and to avoid putting autistic witnesses under undue stress.

Social attitudes research shows that some jurors still hold stigmatising beliefs about autistic individuals, which could negatively impact their decisions regarding such people at trial. Given that only 16% of autistic people and their families believe that the wider community understand their disability, it is likely that that is a systemic issue in criminal justice.

I want to focus on the “Think Autism” objective of effective joint working. In the Government’s 2016 progress report on “Think Autism”, only 11% of local authorities gave themselves a green rating for their work on autism with the criminal justice system. That rating was based on the inclusion of people with autism in developing local criminal justice diversion schemes, involvement in the autism partnership board and evidence of joint working. I am deeply concerned about those figures. I understand that the Government are reviewing the strategy next year, and I will be pleased to hear about any progress.

The all-party group on autism hosted a meeting on criminal justice in 2014 with the then prisons Minister, from which the pioneering autism accreditation scheme arose. The first prison to be autism accredited was Her Majesty’s prison and young offenders institution Feltham in 2016. The standards for accreditation apply to prisons’ education, health and mental health services, and they cover autism understanding, training for staff, adjustments to the prison building—such as reducing the stimulation of posters and notices—challenges to prison routines and individual risk assessments. They were developed by the National Autistic Society, which is now working with other prisons in the country to help them to achieve accreditation.
I was pleased to hear that, as of April 2017, accreditation programme pilots have been trialled in the probation service. That is undoubtedly progress. It will lead not only to the implementation of the practical steps needed to become accredited, but to an accompanying cultural change that will generate a greater awareness of autistic people’s needs and improve the perception of autistic people. That will lead to a greater understanding and acceptance of who they are.

In the meantime, adequate autism-specific training must be made available for all prison staff and police. Much more research needs to be carried out in this field. Awareness needs to be raised across the board about the fact that adults with autism experience things differently and, crucially, that those differences are not experienced uniformly.

It is clear that inroads are being made, but the progress is not quick enough for the adults with autism who have been let down by our criminal justice system. I urge the Minister to bring about change. Prison is an inhuman setting, but for adults with autism it is far more severe, and their route to prison often leads to severe distress. We need to bring about a societal change in attitudes, through awareness-raising and a concerted effort by the justice system. I believe that that is the key to generating a lasting improvement in autistic adults’ experience of criminal justice.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is making some pertinent points. Following the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, the Northern Ireland Assembly has been taking great strides in implementing an autism strategy, including the production of a guide for criminal justice professionals and the piloting of a registered intermediary scheme. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the good practice—the Minister is listening—that we have in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales could be used for the benefit of all in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? The Minister should look to the Northern Ireland Assembly and its autism strategy as one example of how we could all do things better.

Jamie Stone: I have no problem with that intervention whatever.

On the school that I visited in Caithness, the care lavished on the pupil was inspirational. The teachers looked after him properly in a splendid example of best practice.

I am slipping out of the habit, or no longer getting away with saying, “As a new Member”, because I have been here for seven months and it is wearing a bit thin. I realise that. The fact that a Member can go to, listen to and learn things from debates is a great strength of this House the issues that their constituents with autism face within the criminal justice system.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir Edward.

I came to the subject of autism rather late in life; I will share with hon. Members the tale of my visit to a remote primary school in Caithness a number of years ago. There was a boy, probably aged about 12, who was deeply engrossed in making an Airfix Halifax bomber. Anxious to impress him, I said, “That bomber’s a Halifax. It has Merlin engines”—the subtext was, “Aren’t I clever to know that?” The boy looked at me and said, “Yes, it’s a Merlin XX with Stanley Hooker superchargers and a brake horsepower of 1,240.” As my jaw sagged, the teacher murmured in my ear—you know what I am going to say, Sir Edward—“Asperger’s.”

Even though I was then in my 40s, that was the first time I had come across the condition. Part of the reason why I am here for this debate is that this is a learning process. I am sure hon. Members will recall the book—published in 2004, I think—called “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time”. Medical professionals and experts in autism might say that it is not an accurate depiction of autism, but as a view from the inside of the person, it was very instructive to all of us, and I was glad that it became a big seller.

The debate is about awareness of the issue. I did not know what “stimming” meant until I got into the subject, but I now know. I can remember being irritated by somebody on a bus doing exactly that. When I look back I feel ashamed because I should have understood. The Marcus Potter story was scary, although it turned out right in the end. It shows how close we are sometimes to things going wrong, but the judge did a very good thing.
unnecessary attention, but in general autism is a hidden disability and it may not be immediately obvious to other people that the person has a disability. Dealing with the criminal justice system in any capacity is therefore much harder for a person with autism.

I will sum up some of the contributions made today.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West has outlined the difficulties autistic people face within the criminal justice system. He has highlighted the need for better training and support for those working within the system. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) identified the issue of hate crime, particularly as it applies to those on the autism spectrum.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) identified failures in the system, particularly in the handling of cases where autism is not immediately apparent. These failures can lead to unnecessary attention, but in general autism is a hidden disability and it may not be immediately obvious to other people that the person has a disability. Dealing with the criminal justice system in any capacity is therefore much harder for a person with autism.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the way she is responding to the debate. What she just said has triggered a thought, and I want to quote a comment made by someone in the professional standards department of the police service about the complaint by my constituent. It begins:

“I’ve read this several times and they just don’t get it do they” and notes that my constituents “continue to maintain” that their son “should have been ‘diverted’ prior to arrest. What utter rubbish!” If that is the continuing attitude in the police, does my hon. Friend agree that we have a long way to go to get things right?

Carolyn Harris: We certainly do have a long way to go, and what my hon. Friends have said emphasises what we all know: we need to look at autism as a special consideration.

For many autistic people, prison means the system has failed. Work must be done with probation services and police forces to create a specification for autism accreditation in those settings. That will help to prevent autistic adults from entering the criminal justice system in the first place and it will certainly help with rehabilitation. More training and support must be given to initial responders to crime, including those working with witnesses and victims. Initial contact with the police will often come at a time of heightened anxiety, so it is important that the police know how to approach such a situation and how not to allow it to escalate.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing this important debate.

Let us be clear. Autistic people are discriminated against in society as a whole, but especially in the criminal justice system. They can face discrimination when their autism is not readily apparent, or no help is offered. Where it is apparent, they are often treated differently or suspiciously. Autistic people without a learning disability are nine times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the population. That figure is considerably high and shows the lack of understanding and awareness of the needs of people with autism.

On occasions when an autistic person comes to the attention of the police and other services, it is normally because their social and communication difficulties are misunderstood or they have not been given appropriate support. Autistic people can become extremely distressed in situations that they do not understand or when they are surrounded by noise and confusion. In such circumstances, their actions and behaviour can easily be misinterpreted and subsequent actions may escalate a situation.

The criminal justice system needs to reform and adapt in order to meet its fundamental human rights obligations to treat people fairly and equitably. The National Autistic Society developed its autism accreditation scheme for prison settings. Accreditation covers autism understanding training for prison staff such as guards, but is also more widely helping to make the prison environment more autism friendly. Accreditation should be extended to all prisons, all detention centres, all courts and all police stations, as well as to the probation service. The duty must be on the prisons and courts and their individual officers to ensure the fair treatment of those in contact with the criminal justice system. Individual officers could also be accredited. There should be a requirement for at least one key individual in central functions to be accredited: for example, duty sergeants or clerks of the court.

Accreditation recognises good practice, which helps ensure that people on the autistic spectrum get the extra support needed to adjust to life in prison, and extra support while they serve a sentence, or as they prepare for leaving prison. Without that support, autistic people may develop additional needs such as mental health problems or risky behaviour, and rehabilitation will be harder. Greater awareness and support will benefit autistic people as well as prison staff, police officers and managers in that area of work. Expert opinion is clear that autism sufferers need special and sensitive treatment, especially in a stressful criminal justice environment.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the way she is responding to the debate. What she just said has triggered a thought, and I want to quote a comment made by someone in the professional standards department of the police service about the complaint by my constituent. It begins:

“I’ve read this several times and they just don’t get it do they” and notes that my constituents “continue to maintain” that their son “should have been ‘diverted’ prior to arrest. What utter rubbish!” If that is the continuing attitude in the police, does my hon. Friend agree that we have a long way to go to get things right?

Carolyn Harris: We certainly do have a long way to go, and what my hon. Friends have said emphasises what we all know: we need to look at autism as a special consideration.

For many autistic people, prison means the system has failed. Work must be done with probation services and police forces to create a specification for autism accreditation in those settings. That will help to prevent autistic adults from entering the criminal justice system in the first place and it will certainly help with rehabilitation. More training and support must be given to initial responders to crime, including those working with witnesses and victims. Initial contact with the police will often come at a time of heightened anxiety, so it is important that the police know how to approach such a situation and how not to allow it to escalate.
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that training for police officers in that situation would help them to prevent reoffending or revictimisation? I think that our colleagues in the police situeations would help them to prevent reoffending or revictimisation. I think that our colleagues in the police share the aim of reducing those things.

Carolyn Harris: It is certainly my experience, from talking to police officers, that they would appreciate training so that they could better understand the condition, and how to deal with autistic offenders. That understanding is vital for the criminal justice system. If we are to regard people with autism in a fair and equal way we must look at how we provide for their needs. I am sure that the Minister has listened to the wise words spoken by many colleagues today, and that he will offer us some hope that the Government will consider the issue and treat it with some urgency.

3.23 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Edward. I offer my sincere congratulations to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan)—not just on securing the debate but on how he presented the subject. I had the great pleasure of shadowing him when he adorned the last Labour Government as Minister for the Third Sector, and the sincerity and thoughtfulness of his approach to this sensitive subject today is entirely characteristic of him. I also congratulate other hon. Members who contributed to the debate.

I am entirely with the relatively new hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone): I have sat through enough rubbish debates in this place to know a good one. The good debates are the ones we leave having learned something. I shall be frank: the subject on which I am asked to speak today is not one of which I have a deeply rooted, strong understanding. I shall leave the Chamber better informed. A good debate should also be a catalyst for action by Ministers, and further probing. Ministers are trained to try to exude an aura of all-knowingness, which the hon. Member for Cardiff West knows to be a total fallacy.

I shall try to reassure the hon. Gentleman, and other hon. Members who spoke, that there is recognition of one big central point. Since I became an MP in 2005, this country, society and Parliament have made undeniable progress in our understanding and awareness—the central word—of autism, autistic people’s needs, and the consequences of what the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) described as an often hostile environment. Despite that progress, however, the clear message from the debate, through individual anecdotes and voices from all parts of the United Kingdom, is that there is still insufficient awareness and understanding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) made clear his view that there is still much to be done in Scotland, as there is elsewhere, but we have heard from all parts of the UK in the debate, which creates a powerful message. The fact that there is insufficient awareness and understanding can sometimes lead to unreasonable judgments and decisions, which in turn can lead to trauma. That can mean extremely traumatic experiences for not just the individual involved but their family. The hon. Member for Cardiff West respected the desire for anonymity in the case he raised, but the debate springs from his experience of trying to serve a constituent, so I begin with the acknowledgement, with which I think everyone agrees, that there is clearly some way to go.

The hon. Gentleman, drawing on his experience as a Minister, clearly understood that there are a number of Ministers who could have represented the Government in the debate. It was his fate to get the Home Office, so inevitably what I shall say will focus primarily on the first point of contact in the criminal justice system. However, I give him and other hon. Members an undertaking that, based on what I have heard, I will speak directly to the new Prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), to test his understanding and his appetite to follow up on specific requests—not least the desire to encourage other prisons to follow the example of the one in the constituency of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, and to continue down the path of accreditation.

We need to recognise that autism is believed to affect about 1% of the population, which makes it highly likely that police officers will encounter people with autism in the course of their duties. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specifics of the case that the hon. Member for Cardiff West raised, but it is quite clear from his account, and the fact that charges were dropped, that mistakes were made in that process, and that the experience has had a profound effect on the individual and the family. I am sure that the House would want to associate itself with the regret expressed for that outcome.

However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge as a general point that police officers are often called on to make decisions in difficult circumstances. They have a difficult job and often have to act swiftly to protect individuals or the public more generally. He knows that: we all do. They also have a duty to investigate alleged offences, especially where there are alleged victims. Given the nature of autism, brilliantly articulated in the debate, it is also possible that at times the actions of some individuals with the condition may be mistaken for unco-operative or even aggressive behaviour. Again, I do not infer that that was necessarily the case in the specific instance that the hon. Gentleman referred to, but it is clearly a risk, and it happens.

Mr Sheerman: We are all on a learning curve today. Back in the mists of time, I was Roy Hattersley’s deputy as a shadow Police and Prisons Minister, so we all have our learning curve. Does the Minister agree that the real change that has happened recently, for all sorts of reasons, has been a great improvement in the joining up of children’s services, running across all services? As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West said, we have got much better when it comes to children. It is with adults that we seem to have difficulty.

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point. We have made considerable progress and the hon. Member for Cardiff West was at pains to point out at the beginning of his remarks that he wanted to focus on adults, because clearly that is where some stubborn and significant problems continue to reside in terms of awareness, understanding, decisions, judgments and treatment. We cannot be complacent. I hope that I can
reassure the House that we will take all possible steps to improve the general understanding and responses appropriate within the criminal justice agencies.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West pressed me on training, and I will speak a little to that. He is no doubt aware that the Government have published a national strategy on autism—I think he referred to the “Think Autism” strategy; that was refreshed in January 2016. It sets out a programme of work across Government sectors to improve preventive action and support to those living with autism, to assist them to lead fulfilling and independent lives wherever possible. It included recommendations for further improvements in the services and support available across the health, education employment and criminal justice sectors.

The hon. Gentleman cited cuts to the police, but the budget of the College of Policing has not been cut, because of our strong commitment to the training and development of police officers. As part of the strategy, the college has committed to developing a new module of the authorised professional practice for the police service. That was included in the revised guidance on mental health and vulnerability, published in October 2016.

The guidance is the primary reference source for police on legal obligations and the appropriate response to incidents involving people with mental ill health, autism, learning disabilities and other vulnerabilities. It provides indicators for police staff about when there may be health or mental health issues underlying apparent behaviour. That can and should lead to better and more appropriate decision making. Guidance is backed by training modules for all staff who may come into contact with vulnerable people. In addition, the National Autistic Society—I join others in congratulating it, the APPG and the Westminster Commission on Autism on their work—has published a national guide for police officers and staff, which has been distributed to all forces. In many areas there is close liaison between police forces and local autism support groups.

I give this undertaking to the hon. Member for Cardiff West. The College of Policing, which is the agency we rely on for the development of police standards and training, is under the new leadership of Mike Cunningham. I undertake to write to Mike following this debate to set out some of the concerns expressed here and to seek reassurance from the college that those are understood and absorbed and that it attributes sufficient weight and importance to this issue.

Mr Hurd: I agree with the hon. Lady. My experience of talking to police officers—this is the universal theme—is that they want to do the job properly. They do a very difficult job and need the tools to help them in that job.

Our fundamental challenge is the one expressed in this debate: that levels of awareness and understanding are too low. Our responsibility is to help police officers do what is natural to them—to do their job properly and safeguard the vulnerable where they can, but to play their part in executing swift justice as well. Clearly, the process of education, understanding and awareness building has to continue and does not end. I undertake to seek reassurances from the new leadership of the college that they understand that.

The police and other agencies continue to explore innovative solutions to help support those in the community with autism with daily interactions or official contact. In some areas, autism alert cards are available to be carried by those who are autistic. Locally developed systems may include additional information about the person and contact details of family members or other carers. In other areas, similar results are achieved through autism apps held on mobile telephones. Apps can include information such as carer details and the user’s coping mechanisms, as well as useful links to external support sites. So technology can be our friend, but there is no substitute for the training and guidance we talked about.

I will say a word about police detention, because that has been a difficult and emotive subject. If the police encounter a person who appears to be mentally disordered and in immediate need of care and control, it is open to them to exercise powers under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 to take such a person to a place of safety for a mental health assessment. Use of such powers might be appropriate in the case of a person with autism, depending on individual circumstances, and might be preferred over an arrest, again depending on precise circumstances. New legislative provisions, however, provide that police officers should consult a mental health professional before exercising such powers, where that is practicable. That is intended to ensure that the most appropriate decisions are made in each case, in particular where the person may already be in contact with local health or social support services.

If an offence is alleged to have been committed, however, or the person needs to be dealt with through the criminal justice system, notwithstanding any underlying health factors, an arrest may be necessary and appropriate. Under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, codes set out the safeguards that need to be in place for any individual in custody, with particular provisions in respect of the most vulnerable.

Forces are expected to have available easy-read documents using simple language and pictures to show what will happen while those people are in custody. The hon. Member for Cardiff West talked about the need for appropriate adults in situations where such provision might not have been in place. We are clear that an appropriate adult is required to be present in cases involving children or vulnerable adults, including those with autism, during procedures such as being given information on rights, detention reviews, interviews and taking of any evidence. He rightly pressed me about the Government’s response to Lord Bradley’s report—I
assure the hon. Gentleman that we have taken the report very seriously, and there is a programme of action on the various recommendations.

The hon. Gentleman may be aware that liaison and diversion schemes now operate in police stations and courts across some 80% of England. Work continues on how best to ensure that appropriate adults are available when required. A working group of the PACE strategy board has been developing an approach to improving provision throughout the country. That involved partnership work between police and crime commissioners and local authorities. The work is expected to be completed and published soon.

Mr Sheerman: We are coming to a very sensitive part of the Minister’s speech. I am sure he will turn to the international dimension. Has he any update for us on the Lauri Love case? Many of us in Parliament are fighting to save that young man from being taken to the United States, to a hostile environment, where he might well commit suicide.

Mr Hurd: The short answer is no. I am not in a position to give an update to the House on that, but of course I completely understand its sensitivity. An announcement will be made in due course.

I was trying to give reassurance to the hon. Member for Cardiff West, who prompted this debate, about measures taken to ensure greater provision of appropriate adults. I was saying that liaison and diversion schemes operate in police stations and courts in about 80% of England. Such schemes help to assess individual vulnerabilities and any underlying mental health, autism or learning disabilities issues. They can further assist with referring the person to an appropriate health or welfare assessment if necessary, as well as helping to inform the most appropriate charging decision or sentencing outcome.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that the family in his constituency case were frustrated with the complaints procedure. Let me say something briefly about that. If individuals are unhappy about their treatment by the police, there are avenues of complaint. Individuals may complain directly to the relevant police force, or they may be invisible vulnerabilities, such as autism, but doubtless much more can be done. The Government have demonstrated their commitment to improving protections for the wellbeing of the potentially vulnerable, including in the criminal justice system.

I made various undertakings in the debate, which I will honour despite whatever advice I receive after the debate. I congratulate everyone who has contributed; debates such as this will ensure that the issue remains high on the agenda. I have seen it rise since I have been in Parliament, but it is only through the persistence of the APPG, Members and various criticisms from the National Autistic Society that this point continues to be pressed, meaning that more Members come out of these debates with increased awareness of the importance of the issue.

3.43 pm

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to have a brief opportunity to respond. I thank everyone who has participated in the debate. More than one Member pointed out that it has been a learning curve for everyone present; I include myself among them. It is a subject on which we all can learn more and we would benefit from learning more about autism. In particular, I thank all colleagues who contributed with a speech or an intervention.

I hope that as many as possible attend tomorrow’s debate brought by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on another aspect of autism, which reinforces the point that I made at the outset: this is a subject that permeates across different parts of Government. That highlights the need for Ministers to do what the Minister has promised—to work with each other and perhaps to consider some of the suggestions made in the debate in a more formal way, in order to tackle the issue of autism across all Government Departments. If he chooses to do that along with his colleagues, he will certainly have my support and I am sure that of my hon. Friends as well.

I thank the Minister for his response. He referred to the brief period when I was radiant with lawful power all those years ago, and when he was my shadow—I am
now a shadow of my former self. During his remarks at the end of the debate, I saw his officials’ ears prickle up when he said that he was going to carry out what he had promised to do, whatever advice he received. I say to his officials that he is a free-range, organic Minister, rather than a battery-farmed one. He is never satisfied to just read out his brief from his civil servants, but will listen and try to act. Having had praise lavished on him, he now has to fulfil all the things he promised to do in the debate: to follow up with other Ministers, to ensure that he gets the College of Policing on the case, and to take on board my point about the British Transport police and the IOPC. I am glad that he will engage with the new leadership at the IOPC.

I absolutely concur with the Minister about some of the great work that our police officers do in very difficult circumstances, but there are occasions when, either through lack of training or in some cases through poor practice, things go wrong. We are here to hold them to account while acknowledging the incredible work they do under the most difficult circumstances.

I thank the Minister for the sincerity with which he has responded to the debate and his promises that he will take things further and learn more about all this. Finally, I thank all the people with autism and their families across the country for their tremendous forbearance under very difficult circumstances, but there are occasions when, either through lack of training or in some cases through poor practice, things go wrong. We are here to hold them to account while acknowledging the incredible work they do under the most difficult circumstances.

I thank the Minister for the sincerity with which he has responded to the debate and his promises that he will take things further and learn more about all this. Finally, I thank all the people with autism and their families across the country for their tremendous forbearance under very difficult circumstances, and for how they cope with what can be a very difficult situation in their lives. I hope that the debate will genuinely help to move things forward and to make a difference.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered the treatment of adults with autism by the criminal justice system.

3.47 pm

**Sitting suspended.**
there are similar numbers in the youth programme. It is vital to highlight the importance of youth and sport in Erasmus Plus. What are the policy views of DCMS about how that programme should look? Additionally, how will our current domestic programmes intertwine and co-operate with a future Erasmus programme? How will the International Citizen Service and National Citizen Service work in harmony with any future European programmes? How will UK Sport’s international development through excellence and leadership in sport programme continue to work with the sport section of Erasmus Plus?

The sport part of the programme is a good example. More than 10,000 people have taken part in the youth and sport section alone in the past year, while the IDEALS programme has an average uptake of 46 young people. Those are different programmes, but the scale of Erasmus’s youth and sport section outweighs any of our domestic programmes. That is why it is so important that our involvement continues. The current programme runs from 2014 to 2020, so it is in its final half. We await the independent mid-term evaluation report, which was completed in August 2017 and is sitting on desks in the Commission in Brussels. We all want to see what the official report—rather than the drafts—will say.

I have spoken at length to several national agencies and to the evaluation team who wrote the report on EU youth and sport policy. What role is the UK playing to ensure that we lead those discussions? If we are to buy into Erasmus Plus and its successor programmes, we want to ensure that they meet our needs, so we need to roll our sleeves up and get involved in the nitty-gritty of the debate and discussions. If we are to remain in Erasmus, we must ensure that it is in line with our youth policy. That would be much easier to do if we had had the youth strategy that the Government promised before the election. I understand that there will now be a youth chapter in the civil society policy. It is important that we are clear about our policies so that we can influence our European colleagues.

From conversations with colleagues in Ukraine last night, I understand that the Ukrainian authorities tried to opt into only part of the Erasmus programme—interestingly, the youth and sport part, not the university part—but they were rebuffed by the Commission, who said that it is all or nothing; they could not start to take programmes apart. That makes it clear that if we took part, we would be in not just the university section, but the youth and sport section. It is, therefore, even more important that we inform the design of the youth section based on our policies.

What vision do the Minister and the Government have for the content? Erasmus Plus has policy themes based particularly around economic policy, because the current programme was designed in the wake of the economic crash to get young people back into economic activity. Issues of social inclusion and radicalisation have now come to the fore. How will those issues, which I assume the Government will want to tackle, be reflected in a new programme? What are the Government’s priorities?

Additionally, in the latest Commission proposal, it looks as though the European Voluntary Service was Europe and neighbouring countries—in a crude way, I guess it is our equivalent of ICS—will be taken out of Erasmus. The EVS has existed for 20 years, so it is not a new programme, and we have participated in it for all that time. It will be merged into a new European solidarity corps—or, as most of my European colleagues rather unfortunately pronounced, “corpse”—and how that corps complements NCS and ICS will be really important. Do the Government intend to opt into the new European solidarity corps? We have had reassurances about opting into the Erasmus programme, and the European solidarity corps will be a successor, but it will not be part of Erasmus. Do the Government intend to commit to continuing in all successor components of Erasmus Plus, or will we continue only with the core of Erasmus, with everything else still up for question?

Erasmus is the name of the programme we have at the moment, but it was not always thus. Before 2014, there was a separate youth programme, Youth in Action, and before that the EU Youth Programme. There were Comenius, Grundtvig and Leonardo—I could go on with the other European philosophers. Erasmus was chosen in conversations we had with the Commission. I was not in favour of it at the time; in fact, I argued heavily against it when I was in Brussels.

The idea was that everyone knew Erasmus, so we might as well try to make everything Erasmus. In my view, doing so just waters down the other bits of the programme that are not really known about, but that is the direction that the Commission went in. Now it looks as though the Commission is moving towards separating parts of those programmes back out into a solidarity corps, and it would be interesting to know the position of the UK Government and the Minister. Are we supportive of those plans to split out again? How are we having those discussions in Europe?

The higher education sector has a high success rate in achieving Erasmus funding: 90% plus of Erasmus funding is successful in that sector. In the youth sector, it is around the 30%-plus mark. I sat on the European programming committee in a previous life, and the evaluators often state that the youth programmes are just as well written, but they are written by volunteers. It is the same with the sports programme; we are often talking about voluntary sports clubs rather than big, professional HE institutions. How will our influence be brought to bear on the Commission and the discussions in the Council to ensure that the future programmes, and particularly the solidarity corps, are flexible, light-touch programmes to which voluntary groups and small organisations can apply?

One of the outcomes, as I understand it, of the mid-term evaluation is that smaller organisations have been pushed out by the bigger merger. There are other advantages to merging everything into one, and I do not particularly want to get into them all, but it is important to recognise that smaller organisations, which we want to encourage and foster, are at a disadvantage in an integrated programme. I hope that we will welcome the European Commission’s direction.

The only reasons we managed to secure a separate section for youth in the Erasmus programme were the heavy lobbying work from youth organisations, which I helped to co-ordinate, and detailed discussions with Commissioner Vassiliou, who was the commissioner at the time. I wonder whether the Minister has considered, in her discussions with youth organisations, the importance of including the voices of youth and youth organisations in the programme.
Equally, it would be interesting to include the voices of stakeholders such as Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland colleagues. The matter is generally devolved, but we represent the whole UK in the discussions. I am aware that the Belgian authorities take their counterparts with them to Council meetings. The Belgian authorities have no problem with having all their regional Ministers sitting behind them. Are we considering something similar, particularly on these important devolved matters—on sports and youth—to ensure that those voices are included?

I will give some numbers quickly before I finish. I have asked several questions that I hope to hear back on. Erasmus, of course, is a good programme. Some 16,000 higher education students took part last year, and 10,000 youth and sports groups, but only 11% of the money is distributed to youth and sport programmes—1% for sport and 10% for youth. That surely shows the efficiency of the youth and sports programme. The cost per head of a participant in the youth part of the Erasmus programme is €900 or thereabouts. I have mentioned, more than 50% of those on the youth programme come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. It is important that we continue to opt in and have a voice. A stack of case studies is available on the websites of the British Council and the UK national agency about how the programme—particularly EVS—has turned young people’s lives around, and I implore hon. Members to look at them.

When I was chair of Woodcraft Folk, a national voluntary youth organisation, I applied for those grants and saw this at first hand. I remember a young person from County Durham who came to the programme with very anti-immigrant views. By the end of it, after doing exchanges and working with other young people from across Europe, his views were totally transformed because he was able to see the value of humanity in all of us. That is what I hope this Government will do, by continuing to engage in the programme and by giving a strong commitment that we will continue not only in Erasmus, but in the solidarity corps and the European Voluntary Service substitute.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I will start by thanking the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for calling this debate on such an important issue. It is the first time I have had the pleasure of being in a debate with him and seeing him in action and, if I may say so, his enthusiasm is infectious. I will take the opportunity to suggest that we continue the conversation beyond this Chamber. He has raised a number of questions that I fear I will not be able to answer entirely in this debate, but we will certainly write to him afterwards, and it would be helpful to have a continuing conversation within the Department.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman has previously participated, as he suggested in his speech, in Youth Voice and Erasmus activities, and therefore brings personal experience and knowledge to the debate. His story is exactly what the Government’s support of the UK Youth Parliament and investment in our youth and sports programme are striving to achieve. We want to encourage young people to take part from an early age and continue making their voices heard and their impact felt throughout their lives. The Erasmus offer is an important part of that process.

Hon. Members may well be aware of Erasmus, possibly through a similar personal experience of the highly popular university year abroad, but the remit of Erasmus, as we have just heard, goes beyond the traditional university language experiences into youth and sport-related opportunities. The Department for Education is the national authority for the whole Erasmus programme, while the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for policy on wider youth and sport opportunities. It gives me great pleasure to be the Minister responding to the hon. Gentleman’s debate today.

Erasmus is a European funding programme for education, youth, training and sport, funded from the EU core budget to the tune of €15 billion over its seven-year duration through to 2020. Organisations delivering Erasmus offer activities in a number of areas. First, it enables individuals to undertake work experience, job shadowing and volunteering. Secondly, the programme allows organisations to form strategic partnerships with EU organisations, and thirdly, it provides opportunities for individuals to influence policy reform through dialogue with EU decision-makers.

The sport element of Erasmus is administered centrally in Brussels and is much smaller than the youth element—it pains me to say that—but it is nevertheless important, with organisations able to bid for projects to improve grassroots sports provision, tackle cross-border threats such as doping and match-fixing, and increase inclusion and promote sport for all, which is the issue that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) referred to in connection with funding in basketball.

According to the European Commission’s impact report, Erasmus youth projects bring measurable benefits for young people, in terms of self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of purpose. Participants also identify improved access to employment as a result of their experience.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Scottish universities have benefited greatly from the Erasmus Plus scheme; Edinburgh University sends several hundred students a year, Aberdeen University sends 200 and receives 250 and Robert Gordon University concentrates on technology. The programme is not exclusive to EU countries. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the UK will continue to participate in the programme after Brexit?

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the programme is not exclusive to EU countries. As I will go on to point out, we have made a commitment to Erasmus for up to 2020. However, on the key point of the question raised by the hon. Member for Brighton,
Kemptown, which I will answer later, no decisions have yet been taken on post-2020. That is all part of phase 2 of the negotiations.

The UK has a good track record of benefiting from Erasmus funding. From the start of the current programme in 2014 until 2017, there have been successful applicants from 928 youth projects, funded to a total of £41.6 million. Those figures will rise, as they do not include the final round of youth funding for 2017. Roughly 12,000 young people and 4,000 youth workers participate each year, with the latter benefiting from job attachments, training and other professional development activities. In 2016, the UK received grant funding of more than £2 million awarded to 51 organisations for collaborative sport partnerships.

However, Erasmus youth and sport is so much more than those statistics. To bring that to life, I will share some examples of projects funded by the programme. Erasmus funding allowed the UK to participate in structured dialogue activities, which give young people a voice on issues that matter to them, such as combating discrimination and equalising opportunity. The UK already has a powerful track record of Youth Voice activities through the annual Make Your Mark process—the largest ballot of youth views in the UK—and the Youth Parliament, which I think the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown and I both managed to contribute to at the end of last year.

Structured dialogue builds on that theme and encourages young people from across the UK to influence the future direction of EU youth policy through dialogue with EU decision makers. The British Youth Council co-ordinates young ambassadors’ roles in the presidency-run EU youth conference and EU youth strategy. Finally, the UK was awarded a grant from the sport fund by the European Commission for the delivery of the European Week of Sport in the UK in 2017. The programme was co-ordinated by the not-for-profit health body, ukactive, and took place in September. More than 5.2 million young people got active, either at one of the official events or after being inspired by the week—especially on its flagship National Fitness Day on 26 September, which I was proud to participate in myself.

Beyond Erasmus, the Government continue to support young people to realise their potential outside school; Members will be familiar with programmes such as the National Citizen Service and our support for the #iwill campaign to encourage young people to build their skills for life and give back to their communities through social action. The Government are also committed to ensuring that all children and young people, particularly those who are currently least active or from under-represented groups, have the best opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity. I have spoken many times on the sports strategy, published in December 2015, which sets out how important it is for children to make sport and physical activity a habit for life.

I will turn to some of the key issues raised by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown. We have heard questions about the future of UK participation in Erasmus after we exit the European Union. The Government have already stated publicly that the UK is committed to continuing full participation in the Erasmus programme up until we leave the European Union. We have now agreed a fair financial settlement with the EU, enabling us to move to the next stage of negotiations.

The Prime Minister said in Brussels in December that she was pleased to confirm that, under the agreement made on 8 December, the UK would participate in Erasmus until the end of the programme—up until 2020. She also welcomed the opportunity to provide clarity to young people and the youth and education sectors, and to reaffirm the UK’s commitment to the deep and special relationship we want to build with the EU. However, no decisions have yet been made about post-2020 programme participation, since the scope of that programme has not been agreed. Options for that will be discussed as part of phase 2 of the negotiations.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The young people hoping to participate in these programmes are making their plans now and are choosing universities or organisations, depending on how they want to participate. Does the Minister therefore agree that there is some urgency in getting the issue resolved?

Tracey Crouch: I understand that proposals will be published later this year—in May, I think—that will allow us to take the next decisions on that. However, as the programme has yet to be designed, it is difficult to decide what our participation in that will be. We look forward to the Commission publishing its proposals, based on which we can make that decision.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown asked about the European solidarity corps, which is the new European Voluntary Service for young people. It expands the existing EVS to include an occupational element of a job placement or a traineeship. Discussions on the solidarity corps legal base remain ongoing and are expected to conclude later this year. As I am sure he will completely understand, we cannot commit to participating in the scheme until the final version of the regulation has been shared and we have assessed the extent to which it is in line with UK policies. However, we remain supportive of international initiatives for young people—especially those focused on encouraging social action and collaboration between young people from different backgrounds.

I am absolutely delighted to have been given the opportunity to respond to the debate and to reassure the hon. Gentleman about our commitment to wider sporting and social action programmes for young people. We wish to bring the Erasmus programme further to life, and I draw hon. Members’ attention to the Shaping Futures exhibition that will run in the House of Commons exhibition space from 26 February to 1 March. The exhibition will share the impact of the Erasmus programme in the UK and stories from individuals whose lives have been changed by their participation. I urge colleagues to take some time to view the exhibition and find out even more about the programme. I thank all the individuals and organisations that have supported young people to take part in Erasmus for their commitment and dedication to the programme.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.
Town and Village Plans

4.30 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered town and village plans.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for being here and for his support in the past few days as we prepared for the debate, and I thank colleagues for turning up in numbers to intervene and contribute.

I am here today to highlight a problem that we are experiencing in my constituency of Mid Norfolk and that I am aware colleagues are also experiencing. The problem is essentially that the promise of the Localism Act 2011—supported, I think, by all Government Members and probably by the whole House—is, on the ground in Mid Norfolk, being failed by what I suggest is an either accidental or deliberate, but none the less clear, exploitation of the well-intended five-year land supply rules; those were meant to ensure that councils could not put out a plan and then ignore it.

The rules are being exploited, through a legal loophole, by big out-of-town volume house builders, which are enjoying banking permissions that are clearly there in areas where the councils and communities sensibly want to build, in order to take the opportunity to force through developments in areas where one would not sensibly want to build.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my delight and enthusiasm about the recent decision of the High Court to accept the reduction of the five-year housing land supply to a three-year housing land supply, where there is a neighbourhood plan and where sites are allocated?

George Freeman: I absolutely welcome that and will in due course list some of the very good things that the Government have been doing to try to help. I am here today to flag a problem and offer the Minister some suggestions to try to help find a solution.

At its heart, this is about the difference between rural and urban planning; in government, in Parliament, we tend to legislate as if the two are the same. In my patch, Mid Norfolk, we could build many more houses if we were able to get the essence of the localism promise right—build where we want, build how we want, build for local people as well as those moving into the area, and build in a way that supports the grassroots. I am talking about development being seen to be done by and for communities, not to communities by those far away.

There is real frustration in Mid Norfolk; I would be lying if I said that this was not the No. 1 issue in the recent election. In fact, in that election campaign, I promised to come to Parliament, talk to colleagues and Ministers, and see whether we could find a way to deal with it.

If I may, I will briefly set the scene by setting out my very strong support for the Localism Act and for what the Government have been trying to do in promoting a much more bottom-up model of local planning; by signalling where I think the national planning policy framework has helped but is also hindering in relation to the five-year land supply; and by describing some of what is going on in Mid Norfolk at the moment and some ideas about how we might deal with it.

When the Localism Act was introduced, the then coalition Government were stunned by the level of support for it. The Minister, like me, welcomed it strongly, because in essence it says that development is something that should be owned and valued by local communities. Despite the previous Government’s well intended desire to get houses built, we took the view that it was a flawed approach to sit in London and allocate numbers by region, by county, by district, and that numbers allocated from London were unlikely to motivate the towns, villages and communities that we wanted to embrace development. Instead, we said, “No, the better way is to ensure that every area has to put together a local plan.”

There is no number for Mid Norfolk in some filing cabinet in Whitehall, which I am delighted about. My area and colleagues’ areas have to put together their own local plans, taking into account their own population dynamics and economy, and put out a 20-year plan. To prevent councils from simply doing the plan but not actually building, the five-year land supply was introduced to ensure that houses were actually built, in accordance with the plan.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that the value of the local plan is that it also has regard to local infrastructure needs, potentially at village level? The current loopholes that are being exploited see developers coming forward with plans for wholesale, 300 or 400-house developments without that infrastructure, which are against the interests of many of our villages in Suffolk and Norfolk.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes the very point that I will be making. This is about infrastructure and public services. A proper plan is not just about houses, but about the community, its needs, the public services, the infrastructure, the drainage and so on. Like many colleagues, I welcomed the Localism Act. I could understand when the former Chancellor of the Exchequer introduced the national planning policy framework, with its presumption in favour of sustainable development, to shift the balance, particularly at a time when the housing market was on its knees, and to encourage the building of the necessary houses and the development that we needed. The five-year land supply makes logical sense. We do not want a nimby’s charter, which allows councils to plan and then ignore their own plan.

However, what is happening in Mid Norfolk is giving the lie to that promise. For those of us who backed and supported localism, it is beginning to undermine public trust, and not just trust in the local planning system and support for development. It is beginning to foster the very nimbyism that was not there before and, even worse, is beginning to foster, complicate and compound a distrust in political promises. That is damaging to the planning system at a time when we really need proper strategic planning and local support.

If you will indulge me for a moment, Mr Hollobone, I would like to paint a picture of where Mid Norfolk sits. I know that that has worried colleagues since I arrived in the House eight years ago—it has worried quite a lot of my constituents. As it was a new constituency, most of my constituents were for several years asking, “Where is Mid Norfolk?” It sits right in the heart of God’s county. People who are used to going to the coast will drive past and around my beautiful patch, and
those who drive up the newly dualled A11 to Norwich will leave my patch to port of their journey. People need to be in search of the real, the authentic, the heart, the glinting jewel in the crown to come and find Mid Norfolk; it sits right in the middle, at the heart of our county. It is not a place that someone would need to go to unless they were looking for it.

In Mid Norfolk, we have four magnificent towns: Dereham, Wymondham, Attleborough and Watton. Attleborough and Wymondham are both on the A11, just south of Norwich. Norwich is growing very fast. The Norwich research park is booming. All credit to the Government for their fantastic support through the industrial strategy and the support for small businesses. In many ways, Norwich is becoming a mini Cambridge, which is only 40 miles down the newly dualled A11. Indeed, when the Government have opened up the Ely junction and made half-hourly the rail service, Norwich will become part of a Greater Cambridge cluster. That is why there is such housing demand along that corridor. There are 15,000 odd houses going in at Ely, 5,000 at Brandon, 5,000 at Thetford, 4,000 at Attleborough and 2,000 at Wymondham. It is a corridor of growth.

For that reason, my local council wisely suggested that the bulk of its housing target should be placed on that A11 corridor, where the rail and road links support the cluster of development. Unfortunately, however, the developers, cognisant that they have those permissions and that allocation there, have taken the opportunity of the five-year land supply to begin to do what they would not normally be able to do: dump very substantial, large-scale commuter housing estates on a number of the villages close to Norwich in my constituency, without, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) mentioned, the necessary investment in services and infrastructure.

Dereham, which I like to think of as the gateway to the Norwich research triangle—it has not yet gripped that strategic role for itself, but over the next 10 to 20 years it will become that—is now becoming in the morning a traffic jam, almost as visible from space as the Cambridge traffic jam. The developers are now piling into south Dereham, along the main roads. It is the classic model of putting the big housing on the road, where it is easy, without any infrastructure. A string of villages between Dereham and Norwich—Yaxham, Mattishall and Swanton Morley—have all found themselves the subject of aggressive, large-scale, out-of-town developments.

In each case, the villages have been working on putting together their own village plans, taking the powers that we gave them in the Localism Act; the idea was that local neighbourhood plans would be put together and that the local plan adopted by the council would be an amalgamation of those and work around them. In fact, what has happened is that the local communities have put together plans—I want to talk in a moment about the Swanton Morley plan in particular—and then that process of going through a neighbourhood plan has, as we might have predicted, led to a strong conversation locally about the community’s needs, such as jobs and services. In every case, that has led to more houses being suggested by the local council than were originally thought of.

Therein lies the beautiful truth at the heart of the Localism Act: if we empower communities to think about their own futures, most will end up planning development where they want it, in the style they want it, for their own vision of their own community. People are not naturally nimbys, but they are resistant to growth being dumped on them by a remote bureaucracy, whether it is in Brussels or London.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very encouraged by what the hon. Gentleman says. Back home in my constituency, the local Ards and North Down Borough Council has initiated a new idea—the very thing that he refers to—of village regeneration. It is village regenerating with village, with town, with village; it is a domino effect where we all get together. Out of those plans have come some very forward-thinking ideas for economic expansion, house building and how villages can interact with each other. If we do it right with consultation, we get agreement and we are always better off.

George Freeman: Not for the first time the hon. Gentleman makes my point better than I. He is absolutely right that if we get this right, and if we trust people in communities and empower them, which is what the Localism Act was about, we will be surprised by what communities can do. There are wonderful examples of that around the country, including in Northern Ireland. That is why I am optimistic. I know the Minister is keen to stretch every sinew to ensure that we are able to unlock this and get the houses that we want built.

I appreciate that colleagues represent different areas with different circumstances, but if the Minister said to me, “Can you find a way in which we could build the houses that we need in East Anglia?” the answer from my part of the world would be, “Absolutely!” Let us build a really serious new town—a proper new town—and design something that we could be really proud of. We might even have a couple. Given the housing demand in the south-east of England, one might even say that every county could probably find somewhere to build a stunning new town. We could even make it a competition and see who comes up with the most beautiful one. We could build a new town with proper energy-efficient houses and modern transport. We could make our new towns the test beds of the modern-living technologies that we are developing in this country.

I will give a location for a new town in my patch. On the Cambridge-Norwich railway, where RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall sit adjacent, Lakenheath is a tiny town, with a lot of poverty and deprivation, on former peat that has gone to grade 3 clay. It is a town aching for investment. It is on that railway and would not be 25 minutes from Cambridge. We could build the most stunning town there, possibly on the former airfield, and ease a lot of the pressure on our villages.

I am not saying that because I do not want development. In my patch we could build, and I am pushing a project to build, a garden village on the old Beeching railway line from Wymondham to Dereham. I am working with local developers to see whether we might come up with a model where we can plough the profit from the development back in, in conjunction with the railway company, to create a new model development company, with housing and rail linked in the way that it was by the Victorians. The Government are pushing that model forward in East West Rail.
I pay tribute to the work of the Secretary of State for Transport, who is clear that he wants that Oxford to Cambridge east-west railway not to be a traditional model of slow, bureaucratic franchising and competing interests, but a development company that lays the track, builds the houses and captures the value of housing gain to recycle into public transport.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and apologise for interrupting his flow. The Scottish Conservatives would like to see between six and eight new towns built in Scotland. Is not the heart of the issue about bringing people with us? As well as following the ambition of the post-war generation in building new towns, we must learn from their mistakes in design and infrastructure. We must make sure that these new towns fit with their environments, so that the communities surrounding the developments can support them and feel that they have been listened to.

George Freeman: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We should look at the lessons from those garden towns. Many years ago, I fought the constituency of Stevenage—as colleagues know, it fought back—but Letchworth, the first garden town, is still regarded in that part of the world as a great tribute to proper planning. It is a place of great pride for the people who live in and around it. That is unusual for new developments, so there are real lessons to be learned.

I know the Government are supportive of this model of new town development and of garden village development, but the problem is that it is not happening. Seven years after we passed the Localism Act, when I say “localism” in Mid Norfolk I am greeted with groans and occasionally with jeers—although my constituents are very well-behaved and extremely polite. There was the promise of localism, where we said to people, “You will be empowered. The community will be able to plan. We will support your plans and back you.” But people are seeing their plans ignored.

I want to mention Swanton Morley as a case study. Swanton Morley is the home of the Queen’s Dragoon Guards, and formerly of the Light Dragoons. It has an old RAF base. It is one of my small market towns with a 2,000-odd population, and it has put together a magnificent plan. I want to pay tribute to Roger Atterwill, the chair of the parish council, and Faye, his assistant, who have worked assiduously on the plan over the past two or three years. It is a model of local planning. There were village hall meetings, consultations, surveys—real engagement—and they have produced a real vision for the future of the village.

But unfortunately, on examination, the examiner appointed by the district council struck out all of their sensible, local conditions, such as that there should be an allocation of houses for people who come from the Swanton Morley area and around the percentage of affordable housing, all of which were provided for in the spirit of the Localism Act and in legislation. One cannot help but see that they were struck out because the main planning authority, Breckland Council, has both hands tied behind its back. It is up against the wall with a five-year land supply and it has no leg to stand on: it is terrified of being taken to court by big out-of-town developers.

I want to make it clear that I am not having a go at all developers. There are some magnificent developers in this country and in Norfolk, I would cite Tony Abel, for example. Abel Homes is a really good local business, building high-quality local developments. However, when it comes to the likes of Gladman, which has come into our patch, we never meet the people behind the developments.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend’s point, which he is making so well. In my constituency, the local builders are immaculately behaved, do a very good job and try very hard. But some of the big builders’ behaviour is frankly atrocious. They game the system, cheat the people who are meant to be working for and bully the district council. Their behaviour is often absolutely reprehensible.

George Freeman: I am grateful to my venerable and right hon. Friend for putting that so robustly. I would not be here if I did not share that view. We all understand that we need houses built, and we all know that we need developers to do it, but there is a contract. When we provide developers with the powers and the balance of probability on the sustainable development framework, and we say that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development, we mean sustainable development. We do not mean that as an excuse for them to dump a housing estate on our villages and towns and then sugar off. They have an obligation, as local builders and local landowners understand.

For that reason, I recently called a rural housing summit with Hastoe Housing Association—I see the Minister nodding—which is a leading, if not the leading, rural housing specialist. All around the country it has put together schemes with the support of local communities. It is doing more than anyone in rural housing to defeat nimbyism, because the quality of its developments is so high. At this rural housing summit we showcased best practice from all round the country: people putting together affordable housing schemes, shared equity schemes, covenanted land, parish councils. There is a wonderful cornucopia of good rural housing models, but we are not seeing it in Norfolk because our councils have both hands tied behind their backs.

When I say to my councillors, “Why aren’t you using the design codes that we gave you? Why aren’t you using the powers that we have given you in these Acts?” the answer comes back, “We are desperate to get our five-year land supply in order. We are terrified of legal challenge. We are trying to keep our council tax down. We are bearing the brunt of very necessary public spending constraints, and frankly every penny we make goes back into the deficit.” Our councils have their hands tied behind their backs, and are therefore unable to implement the spirit of the Localism Act.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Is my hon. Friend concerned that the whole thrust, which is understandable from the local councillor’s point of view, is towards economic growth, as otherwise they do not get the funding? So they are all being encouraged to go at a speed that perhaps they would do well not to go at.

George Freeman: My right hon. Friend makes the perfect point. He is absolutely right, and that is happening in my patch as well as in his.
I am conscious that others want to speak. I want to give them a chance to do so and the Minister a chance to respond. To sum up my opening speech, we all know that we need to build houses, but as with so many problems that is a challenge in London. I have been a Minister pulling the ministerial levers, and I know that there is a big problem to be solved in the corridors of Whitehall.

However, in our constituencies, the problem is smaller, more manageable and easier to deal with. In Mid Norfolk, I see the answer to a problem that is very big in the Minister’s in-tray. If we can revisit the spirit of localism, re-empower local communities and re-incentivise councils to retain and harness the benefits of growth and put them into local infrastructure, we will restore faith in the planning system and deliver more growth, not less.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I must call the Front-Bench speakers at 8 minutes past 5. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister and then a couple of minutes at the end for our Member in charge to sum up. There are six Members seeking to speak, so I am afraid that in order to get you all in, speeches will be limited to two minutes 45 seconds. If there are any interventions, some of you will not make it.

4.51 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). I will try to keep to my three minutes or less. I take a particular interest in this issue; I was a parish and town councillor for 28 years. I have taken through village appraisals and village plans, and I almost took through a neighbourhood plan. It is quite an awesome thing to be asked to participate in.

I make no apologies for being a long-standing member of the Campaign to Protect Rural England; I declare that interest. I will largely ask the Minister about points that CPR is bringing to the debate. CPR wants to critique four issues relating to neighbourhood plans. First, where do they sit in relation to strategic planning, if there is such a thing nowadays? Secondly, there is a lack of resources for taking plans through. Thirdly, there is unnecessary complexity; I personally share that concern. Fourthly, there are issues with conformity and precedents.

The CPR asks clearly for the Government to at least reconsider the idea of the neighbourhood right to be heard. It is frustrating, when a plan has been developed, for a development to undermine it completely or for the plan to be ignored because the development has gone through without any real ability to influence it. It is important that we consider that.

I have always been a critic of referendums. I know that 98% of referendums have been successful, but I believe in democracy. I was a parish councillor, and as my old friend the late Stephen Wright said to me, that is the first level of democracy. Why should it have referendums foisted upon it? I think that we have all learned the lesson that referendums are not terribly good for our system of democracy, so I am a critic of that idea.

We need to tease out where neighbourhood plans sit and what influence they have. There are some glaring examples of things not working very well. In terms of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017, we should look again at where the plans are and give them some robustness, so that they mean something when they go into the planning system and so that the people who spent a lot of time getting them through can feel confident that they will be listened to.

4.53 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): First, I say to the Minister that this is not about opposition to housing. In West Sussex as a whole, when I was first elected, the draft south-east plan proposed an amount of housing far below what is now being built under the new system. The objectively assessed need for West Sussex produces 66% more houses than the draft south-east plan, and the new formula will produce nearly double the draft south-east plan. It is placing massive pressure on local infrastructure.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) said so well, neighbourhood plans produce more houses by consent. If we allow neighbourhood plans to be bust, then we undermine the principle of consent, and in the end, fewer houses will be built by consent. That leads us to only one policy—the imposition of housing, which will be massively unpopular.

The Minister must understand that developers are gaming the system. They are ensuring that five-year land supplies are not adequate. Consequently, neighbourhood plans—either in draft form or, worse, when they are made and approved by large referendums—are being broken through. Some of the solution lies in his hands. The Government produced a helpful improvement to the situation last year, but his predecessor refused to entertain call-ins or appeals. When the Minister comes to take any decisions that might be in the balance, he must be mindful of the importance of supporting the neighbourhood planning process.

In the end, the Government face a fundamental choice. They can hold to the Localism Act 2011, a flagship policy that empowered local communities and gave them responsibility, including for decisions about where to locate housing. We are now in a difficult position; public faith in the policy of localism is being gravely undermined by people’s feeling that developers are simply overriding neighbourhood plans or that the Government apply rules that are too tight and do not recognise the power of giving local communities the control that they should have.

4.56 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I helped invent neighbourhood plans, and I am the Government’s neighbourhood planning champion. It is exciting to see neighbourhood plans, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, produce more housing than they were asked to produce. If we look at it in contractual terms, they have gone beyond the contract set up.

What happens when a village decides to produce a neighbourhood plan? First, it needs to see whether the district council has a five-year land supply. This morning, I happened to be with a number of people considering development in the Thames valley. They produced a
map of district councils that do and do not have a five-year housing land supply. It is unfortunate that so many district councils do not. That leaves them open, the moment they put down their name to make a neighbourhood plan, to developers moving in ahead of the plan to take advantage. I have asked in an Adjournment debate that when someone seriously puts their name down to start a neighbourhood plan, no more housing should be built until it has come to fruition, so that it can be taken fully into account.

I agree totally with what colleagues have said about certain firms of developers, such as Gladman, which aggressively game the system, as it has been described. It was partly to overcome that that a Planning Minister two Ministers before this one, Gavin Barwell, decided to reduce the land supply figure from five years, because people did not have a five-year land supply, to three years, for a two-year period from the end of the neighbourhood plan where sites were allocated. That was challenged in the High Court and, as I said in an intervention, the recent decision, in a very detailed judgment, has confirmed it. We are still waiting to see whether it goes to appeal, but the chances are that it will not.

The Government are tightening up the national planning policy framework, and it is about time. All I would say is that the presumption in favour of sustainable development is not itself new; it has been there since the beginning of planning. The only thing that is new is the word “sustainable”.

4.59 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Neighbourhood planning is a hugely important reform. In my constituency, I have seen the way that it brings people together. We have neighbourhood plans in five parishes: Foxton, Great Glen, Kibworth, Lubenham and North Kilworth. I congratulate all the people who have selflessly given their time to make them happen and who have taken part in those referendums.

To make neighbourhood planning work, we now need a new approach. First, we need much greater legal force for plans shortly before their adoption. It was extremely frustrating for people in Great Glen to do all the work of putting together a neighbourhood plan, only to find that just before it came into force, the developer put a new development on exactly the site that a developer is simply sitting on, so developments have to be tacked on to the village in all directions instead, which people hate.

Neighbourhood planning is incredibly important. People can behave responsibly: they come forward with sites and they back more housing in their community. We must not let this important reform die or be gradually picked apart by rapacious developers such as Gladman.

5.1 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The Minister is a man on the rise—one can only be amazed at his great trajectory—and he will want to make his mark on the Department before he moves on to higher office. In the nicest and most collegiate way, I suggest that he listens carefully to what hon. Members say. I echo every word uttered by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who instigated this timely debate.

I urge one note of caution to my hon. Friend, who wants a new town. Just as he said, I wanted Cranbrook to be an exemplar of towns around the world, but soon the developers moved in. I am afraid that the council is now having to move in to put in the town centre because the developers are behaving in a shameful way; they say that not enough people live there to put it in. It is a classic example of big developers gaming the system.

It is not brain surgery. My hon. Friend made the point that if someone builds good housing, which we all need, in the vernacular to enhance local communities, they will be amazed by the silence that follows—by the congratulations that follow in the pub. People want their communities to be enhanced. They want to support the village school, the post office and other local services. They do not want huge blocks of developments.

The big developers have worked out how to make profit down to the square inch, so they do not care if they are not nodding to the local vernacular or if a house looks the same in the north of England, the middle of England and Wales. They just want to make a profit. I hope that the Minister will be as good as the Government’s word and tell us how we can encourage local house builders, who often produce a far better product than larger house builders.

I draw the Minister’s attention to what other hon. Members have said about neighbourhood plans. Budleigh Salterton and East Budleigh with Bicton have produced wonderful neighbourhood plans, which can be expensive and time-consuming. Lympstone also produced one. The Minister’s predecessor received a letter from me in October about a constituent who said that, despite Lympstone identifying the type and design of housing that the community wished to see, it had singularly failed to achieve them in the two years since the plan was made. That letter also singularly failed to be acknowledged, although I prompted the Minister on 15 January. I ask him to look at that.

The neighbourhood plan is a contract with our constituents. We persuaded them that if they were going to be more local, they would have a say. At the moment, they feel that they have wasted their time and they are being ignored.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), I am not in the least bit surprised about the Minister's trajectory. I know that he will be paying careful attention to what is said today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) on his speech and I agree with every word. Indeed, I agree with all my hon. Friends. I will make four brief points.

First, I endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said. Neighbourhood plans will produce more houses by consent than anyone believes is possible, hence the importance of sticking to the system.

Secondly, the integrity of the system is vital. Local people spend hundreds and hundreds of hours of their own free will making a great effort to produce these plans, and it is vital that they are honoured. I am encouraged by the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that the national planning policy framework needs to be strengthened. I would welcome that.

Thirdly, I say again—it cannot be said too often—that the behaviour of some major developers is appalling. It traduces our constituents and our constituencies, our elected councillors and our district councils. It is the kind of behaviour up with which the Government should not put.

Finally, if people are prepared to spend all that time and effort on producing something very important to them, those efforts should be respected in all honour. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs and I have difficulties in that regard, but as he said, it is important that those efforts are honoured and that the Government play a straight bat with local communities.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): There are five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesperson and five minutes for the official Opposition spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to sum up for the Scottish National party in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for introducing it. From a Scottish perspective, it has been very interesting for me to learn from new towns. What has made them successful?

We also have ambitions to align our system of community planning, which has been going for some years, with spatial planning. That reflects what the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) and the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said about the need for integrity—people's views should be respected as part of the planning process.

There is a real need in Scotland to remove some of the complexity. In 2007, not long after I became a councillor, Glasgow was looking at city plan 2, which was one huge folder with another huge folder of supplementary items. It was very complex, and it was difficult for people to get their heads around it and understand the land use. Almost as soon as it was produced, things had moved on and changed. The 2008 crash then changed many people's views about how land should be used in communities.

In the Scottish system, we think that people should have the opportunity to plan their own place and that people should be involved in planning. The community aspect is important, as is improving public trust. In Scotland, we are approaching that through pre-application consultations. Before a planning application is submitted to a local authority, the developer has to go and speak to the local community, to the sound people out and figure out whether its proposal will be acceptable. That is very important and has been quite successful in changing some aspects of that process. My council colleague Norman MacLeod was at one of those events in a part of the constituency that we share, where the developers were presenting all these two-bedroom flats in Pollokshields. Councillor MacLeod said, “There are large families in the area, who will want larger family homes.” That had not crossed the developers' minds. Having that negotiation before developments are built is a better way to get them right.

The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk mentioned his ambitions for new towns in his constituency. That is an interesting prospect, but issues arise about how those new towns would be paid for. Would they be paid for by the developer? If the developer decided not to pay, would the local authority end up picking up the tab, as the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) warned? When a new town is planned in Scotland, the new town development corporation has to be set up. These issues have to be thought about carefully before embarking on a new town, and I imagine the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk is thinking about how it can best be done. We also need to get the right mix of private and public input, as well as schools and everything else that a community needs to flourish.

New towns have sometimes failed for lack of proper planning. BBC Scotland has produced an excellent documentary called “The Storm That Saved a City” about the 1968 Glasgow storm. It described the housing situation in the city of Glasgow, including slum clearances. The council planned to demolish absolutely everything and rebuild from the roots. It moved lots of people out to Easterhouse, Drumchapel and other parts of the city, but it did not put in facilities such as shops, pubs and social gathering places. Those communities still feel that they do not have all the facilities they need. We still have not learned the right lessons, because the Commonwealth games village was built in Glasgow without a school, a nursery or a row of shops. We need to learn from new towns. What has made them successful? What has made them thrive?
It would be useful if the Minister said a little about how the Government will legislate on new towns, and what guidance will be provided. When we build a new town, we build it to be a home—not just a set of houses, or somewhere to wake up in the morning and go to bed at night, but a community to live in for the long term.

5.11 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for securing this incredibly important debate. There is a lot of cross-party agreement on the issue, and I agree with almost everything that hon. Members have said in the debate. My only disagreement with the hon. Gentleman is that I think the issue affects both rural and urban areas.

If we want positive planning in this country, the best place to start is with local neighbourhoods and communities. The reason is obvious: local people know their area best, and they know best how to develop it. They understand not only issues such as local heritage, but infrastructure needs, which are often overlooked in planning but are necessary to make a development successful. I was really pleased that hon. Members raised that today.

I was also extremely pleased that the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk mentioned new towns. I am very keen to hear what the Minister has to say about new towns, because the Government have been a bit tardy, to say the least, in bringing forward new towns or garden cities. I think we probably all agree that garden cities have worked better than new towns, but it would be good to hear an update from the Minister.

There were some weaknesses in the conception of neighbourhood planning. A neighbourhood plan is not a free-standing document; it has to be developed in line with a local plan and strategic objectives. Neighbourhood plans have often been mis-sold to local neighbourhoods, who think that a plan can do something that it cannot. They run into particular problems when no up-to-date local plan is in place. We have all seen neighbourhood plans being developed, voted on and passed in areas where no local plan is in place or there is an issue with the five-year housing supply. Even if the council rejects a development because it is not in line with the local plan, its rejection is often overturned on appeal, using the national planning policy framework and the general presumption in favour of development. If the Minister wishes to give neighbourhood planning more teeth, he needs to look at that.

The Minister also needs to look at resources and at the whole local community effort necessary to developing a neighbourhood plan. I know that the Government have put some resources aside for developing neighbourhood plans, but in my experience such resources are often not enough, particularly in areas of special complexity. Neighbourhood plans are being developed while massive cuts are reducing the ability of planning departments to support parish councils and neighbourhood planning forums to implement them.

We all want neighbourhood plans to be more effective, but there are some issues with them. I was pleased to see, as a sign of cross-party consensus, that “ConservativeHome” has stated that the Government need to look more closely at neighbourhood planning because there are wrinkles to be ironed out. We all want our communities to be given the tools to plan effectively for their area, but we also want neighbourhood plans to be more effectively integrated into our overall planning system. Perhaps they need to be given greater weight—that seems to be one of the crucial issues that the Government still have to address. I appreciate that the Minister is new to his job, but we have great expectations about what he will deliver.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister finishes his remarks no later than 5.28 pm, the Member in charge will have time to sum up.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): As ever, Mr Hollobone, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) on securing the debate. He spoke forensically about the issue and eloquently about his constituency. He highlighted the importance of neighbourhood planning, which has been giving people real power to shape the development of their communities since its introduction in 2011. I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to points raised in the debate and take up the generous offer from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) to listen carefully to concerns. Hon. Members will know that, given the Department’s role in determining certain planning issues, I cannot comment on the detail of individual plans or planning cases. However, I can talk about the practice, the framework and the parameters that create the principles guiding the relationship between neighbourhood plans, local authorities and central Government strategy. I hope also to address the interesting points made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew).

I know that many hon. Members have been directly involved in encouraging and supporting communities in their constituencies to take up neighbourhood planning; I recognise the role that MPs play in the process. I assure all hon. Members that we continue to support the principle of neighbourhood planning and that we are already looking at teething issues and wrinkles to be ironed out. In September, we announced our largest ever support package for neighbourhood planning: a £22.8 million programme that will start in April and provide communities with the help and resources that they need to develop plans up to 2022.

Before I address the important points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk, it is worth reminding ourselves of the wider national context and the big picture on housing. In order to meet demand, we have to deliver 300,000 homes every year by the mid-2020s. We have to provide the homes that Britain needs, but we also have to make them affordable for real people on low and middle incomes. As hon. Members have said, we have to build a lot more of the right homes in the right places. I take that point. There were 217,000 net additions to the housing supply last year. That was the highest level in a decade—an increase of approximately 70% on what was achieved in 2009-10—so there are positive signs, but there is still a long way to go.
We need to be mindful of how we tailor the vehicle, both in the context of local democratic affairs—points were raised today about carrying communities with us—and with respect to the overarching national demand and our mission to build the homes that the next generation needs.

It is absolutely crucial that local authorities play their role by producing up-to-date local plans and identifying a five-year supply of deliverable housing sites. Local plans and a five-year supply of housing sites can provide clarity for communities and for developers who want to do things the right way regarding where new homes should be built. That means that development is planned and is not the result of speculative applications. I have taken on board the points made by my right hon. Friend the Members for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) about some developers. I emphasise “some” developers; let us not tar all developers with the same brush, because, as I think hon. Members have said, there is good practice, but there is some bad practice as well.

As of today, 26 authorities are still to publish a local plan and 131 local authorities have a local plan that is older than five years. So, the big picture is that overall we are doing quite well, but there are certainly areas and pockets where we need to do better. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has written to 15 authorities, giving them until the end of this month to justify why they do not have a plan in place and why the Government should not intervene. He has put other authorities on notice, explaining that a consistent failure to make sufficient progress in that regard cannot be tolerated indefinitely.

I turn to neighbourhood plans. They are, of course, voluntary. They rely on the enthusiasm and the hard work of local people, and, in the round, local communities. They are a powerful set of tools for communities to say where development—such as homes, shops and offices—should go, what it should look like, and what facilities should be provided. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who, as neighbourhood planning champion, has championed the cause of the right kind of local plans.

Neighbourhood plans undergo consultation, independent examination and the community referendum before coming into force as part of the development plan for their area. I take the point that was made by the hon. Member for Stroud about referendums, even though I was probably on a different side from him in our recent, bigger referendum. In this context, however, referendums are important, because they ensure that neighbourhood plans have genuine support and, as a result, some clout and some force. Their status as part of the development plan is very important, because planning applications must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Since the introduction of neighbourhood planning by the Localism Act 2011, 2,300 communities have been part of the process of shaping the future of their area. I think that about 17 of those are within the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk, and I recognise the local initiative that goes into such local plans. I also understand the point that he made about encouraging and not stifling that initiative, which is crucial.

Nick Herbert: Does my hon. Friend accept that the undermining of a referendum by failing to observe what the referendum has decided is, in its own way, just as damaging at a local level, in relation to a neighbourhood plan, as it would be at a national level if a decision made in a national referendum was not observed by the authority concerned?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and he is tempting me to muddy the waters of this debate in a typically mischievous way. I will accept the argument for the principle of democracy through a referendum and say that the result of the referendum needs to be delivered, and we then put in place a system of local referendums—often, people care even more about the issues in such referendums than they do about those in national referendums, because the issues relate to people’s local environment or their quality of life—it is important to make sure that they are respected.

We endeavour to continue to make the neighbourhood planning process stronger and simpler, to ensure that it is attractive to even more communities. This week, for example, we are implementing powers in the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. Those reforms make it easier for communities to keep their neighbourhood plans up to date as local circumstances change—they will change from time to time—and ensure that neighbourhood planning groups are made aware of local planning applications.

Other important reforms set out in the Act came into force last July. Those reforms require decision takers to respect neighbourhood plans earlier in the process, following a successful referendum. There will be further reforms this July, requiring local authorities to set out their policies on supporting neighbourhood planning groups.

I take this opportunity to welcome another neighbourhood planning success. The 500th successful neighbourhood planning referendum has just taken place; they are clearly catching on, notwithstanding the point that the hon. Member for Stroud made. That is quite an important milestone, which was reached by communities in Leeds, Suffolk and Lincolnshire. Those three communities are very different from each other, to touch on the point that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), made. However, they all went to the polls on the same day, and between them they allocated land for employment, homes and local green spaces; those things can come together. Those plans are now the starting point for determining planning decisions.

Our planning policy is clear that where a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that has been brought into force, planning permission should not normally be granted. However, we recognised in 2016 that, in some cases, neighbourhood plans were being undermined because the local planning authority could not demonstrate a five-year land supply of deliverable housing sites, which is one of the key issues. That meant that even recently adopted neighbourhood planning policies were not being given enough weight in determining planning applications. I know that that is the crux of
the experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk, and the point that he wanted to make in this debate.

Communities who had worked hard to put their neighbourhood plan in place were left frustrated as decisions went against the plan, despite their having done everything that was asked of them. As hon. Members have argued, that can only undermine confidence in the referendum process and the localism agenda. Seeking to remedy that, we issued a written ministerial statement in December 2016 to ensure that national planning policy provided additional protection to precisely those communities. The change that was made protects neighbourhood plans that are less than two years old and that allocate sites for housing, as long as the local planning authority has more than three years’ supply of deliverable housing sites.

We will take forward that protection in the updated national planning policy framework, which will be published for consultation before Easter—I think there was a question earlier about its publication. I suspect that that will be the beginning of the dialogue and the debate, not the end of them.

The national planning policy framework will be amended to give local authorities the opportunity to have their housing land supply agreed on an annual basis, and fixed for a one-year period. I hope that that gives some reassurance. Through these new policies, alongside the tough action to get local plans in place, we hope to ensure that we get the right homes in the right places. That is the delicate line that we seek to tread here.

I should just say a few words about neighbourhood plan examinations, because of the significant legal weight afforded to neighbourhood plans. The plans need to be carefully examined in a fair and transparent way. If we had longer today, I would go into the matter in more detail. Effectively, the examinations are the check that, once passed, allows the referendum to proceed, which gives real force to the localism agenda in this sector.

I am conscious of the time that I must give my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk the opportunity to wind up the debate, but I will give way briefly to my right hon. Friend.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Have the Government considered, or are they considering, limiting the amount of time for which builders can hold on to land before building on it?

Dominic Raab: As a new Minister, lots of helpful suggestions come my way. That is something that we will consider, in the context of both the Letwin review and some of the interesting policy submissions that have already been put to me. I undertake to have a look at that point.

5.28 pm

George Freeman: Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak again and for the chance to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon.

I thank colleagues who have come to Westminster Hall to support this debate and the points that I have been making. We find out who our friends are when we put our heads above the parapet, and I could not wish for a better platoon of support. I should also say—that both to you, Mr Hollobone, and to the Minister—that several colleagues who support the points that I have been making could not be here today.

I am grateful to the Minister for his typically assiduous, detailed and honourable answers and reassurances. There was some important and good news in there, in that the Government recognise the importance of the issue and in the steps that are being taken. However, having been a Minister myself, I know that officials often think that the issuing of a written ministerial statement or the granting of a new power might solve a problem. One has to remember that on the ground, our councils are up against real pressures, and new powers and written ministerial statements do not always cut through or solve the problem that exists here and now.

It is really important, not only for this issue of building houses but more broadly, that we recognise how free markets work. The Minister is a great advocate of free markets, as am I, but they operate in the context of the incentives and regulations that we set here in Parliament. If we are going to build the housing that we need and an economy that works for everyone, we really have to get this matter right. I ask the Minister—I am sure the answer is yes, as he has indicated so—whether he will agree to meet me, Councillor Gordon Bambridge, who is my local head of planning, and colleagues to discuss how we can take the matter forward.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 31 January 2018

[STEWART HOSIE in the Chair]

Personal Independence Payments

9.30 am

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): This debate is rather over-subscribed. More than 20 people wish to speak. If everyone takes two minutes, I might be able to get most of you in; if people take four or five minutes, I will get seven or eight in. If you take interventions, the number will go down. It is all in your hands. I cannot impose a formal time limit, but think about your colleagues when you are into your sixth or seventh minute.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the claimant experience of the personal independence payment process.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I am going to be really stingy with interventions. I can already feel the wrath of my colleagues, but I have to do that because of the number of people who have put down their name to speak.

I called this debate because of the sheer volume of casework my constituency office receives regarding personal independence payments. My constituents find many aspects of the process difficult, not because they are not capable but because the forms are confusing and the assessment procedure is complex and exhausting. There are more face-to-face consultations, more regular reviews and more reassessments of awards than under the preceding benefit, disability living allowance.

The initial impetus for this debate came from my constituents, but as soon as I asked on social media for people to tell me their experiences, I realised the huge constituents, but as soon as I asked on social media for people to tell me their experiences, I realised the huge

Laura Pidcock: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the claimant experience of the personal independence payment process.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I am going to be really stingy with interventions. I can already feel the wrath of my colleagues, but I have to do that because of the number of people who have put down their name to speak.

I called this debate because of the sheer volume of casework my constituency office receives regarding personal independence payments. My constituents find many aspects of the process difficult, not because they are not capable but because the forms are confusing and the assessment procedure is complex and exhausting. There are more face-to-face consultations, more regular reviews and more reassessments of awards than under the preceding benefit, disability living allowance.

The initial impetus for this debate came from my constituents, but as soon as I asked on social media for people to tell me their experiences, I realised the huge scale of this issue in North West Durham and all over the country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she agree that the Government made the situation significantly worse by passing regulations in 2017 that have been found to be blatantly discriminatory against those with mental health conditions?

Laura Pidcock: I agree strongly. That ruling was a wake-up call for the Government.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I will make a bit more progress.

I asked people to comment and send me emails about their experiences, and I was absolutely deluged. I received more than 600 emails and 1,500 messages on Facebook and Twitter. Most of those people took a great deal of time to tell me what had happened to them. Individually, their stories are shocking; collectively, they shame the Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. They are testament to a broken and cruel system. I will come back to those harrowing stories in a second.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She mentioned her Twitter appeal and so on. An official survey shows that 76% of people in the system responded to say that they were satisfied. That itself is not a happy position, but it shows that her representation of people’s average experience as wholly negative on the basis of a Twitter appeal does not reflect the results of a scientific survey.

Laura Pidcock: What an absolute joke that is. To diminish those people’s experiences, which made me weep, is an absolute disgrace. Those people took their time in extremely difficult circumstances to tell us about the difficulties with the system. To talk about another survey to try to diminish those experiences is a disgrace. [Interruption.] I will not take any more interventions.

The Child Poverty Action Group handbook on personal independence payments states that the Government’s case for replacing DLA with PIP was that it had become an outdated benefit.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Laura Pidcock: I have to make progress—just give me a minute.

DLA was criticised for having complex and subjective criteria and inconsistent decision making, resulting in too many awards and too few reviews of awards. The Government say that the PIP process is “a more active and enabling benefit”. I disagree in the strongest possible terms. The introduction of PIP was another cuts exercise. The coalition Government made the need to make savings a clear aim of the new benefit. [Interruption.] They said it themselves. According to the Library, PIP was expected to reduce expenditure by £1.5 billion, and 607,000 fewer people were expected to receive PIP by 2018. That kind of reduction cannot be achieved without the anguish and suffering of thousands of people.

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Let me share the experience of a constituent from Kirkby who is a long-time claimant of DLA because of his post-traumatic stress disorder. He is unable to leave the house, so he has always had a home assessment. Since his last assessment, his wife has been unable to leave the house, so he has always had a home assessment. Since his last assessment, his wife has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was told, “No, we won’t do a home assessment this time.” Is it not a disgrace?—[Interruption.] Well, he was denied. He came to me; I sorted it out. The Government need humanity, compassion and, frankly, some common sense.

Laura Pidcock: Those stories are so, so common. The changes have hit those most in need of a social security system while reducing the overall welfare budget, and have taken away the safety net for a massive number of people. When cost-cutting is the motivating factor behind changes, we hit trouble, just as we have with universal credit. Let me take Members through some of the difficulties that my constituents and many other people—

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I am making progress. There are 20-odd people down to speak; it would be disrespectful to them not to do so.
The initial claimant form is often daunting and time-consuming. People have to rely on stretched services and support agencies to complete the form. At the same time, the questions are very restrictive and do not fit the description of everyone’s illness. Following that, claimants are invited to a medical assessment by an outsourcing company—Atos Healthcare or Capita Business Services, depending on their location in the United Kingdom. The accessibility of venues is often cited as a problem: claimants are invited to assessments miles away from their homes and in inaccessible rooms. Some say that that is a test from the outset. There have also been reports of assessments taking place in expensive gyms and spas in my area, which makes claimants feel on edge. Some people are sure that they were filmed upon entering the assessment, and I believe them.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have lost several members of my family to motor neurone disease, a progressive disease for which there is no cure—people do not get better. Does she agree that people with terminal illnesses such as MND should not be up for reassessment?

Laura Pidcock: There are hundreds of stories of people with conditions that will not change being reassessed. That is terrible.

There are extensive concerns about the suitability of PIP assessors—that was a clear theme throughout the correspondence—who often do not have the medical expertise to assess claimants with particular medical conditions. A midwife, for example, may assess a claimant with mental health problems, but they will not know every sign and symptom of every mental health condition, as they are not qualified. That calls into question the accuracy of the assessment.

Constituents have told me how brutal and gruelling the medical assessments are, as they lay bare the claimant’s disability and how they cope with it, but they are based on a medical model of disability rather than a social one. One person put it brilliantly: they said the assessment was like a functionality test, and that it did not capture or consider how someone can live their life each day. The fact that assessors do not take notice of professional medical assessments from doctors or psychiatrists, and that that information is considered only at tribunal stage, is not even questioned. Assembling that information at assessment stage is such a waste of energy for people, especially since doctors charge for medical assessment letters. In my view, that cost should be met by the state, not by the person making the claim.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) rose—

Laura Pidcock: I will take one last intervention, then I must press on.

Kate Green: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree that the costs that pile up at tribunal are in part a function of a mandatory reconsideration system that, again, does not look at additional evidence properly?

Laura Pidcock: That is right. I will come on to mandatory reconsiderations in a second.

The outsourcing of the assessment process is very much part of the problem. Some 60% of assessment reports completed by Capita healthcare professionals and sent to the DWP were judged to be of an “unacceptable” standard. Neither Capita nor Atos has ever met the DWP contractual target that no more than 3% of reports should be found unacceptable. I wonder what it would take for those companies to lose a contract with the Government. No action is taken, because the Government are ideologically wedded to the outsourcing model, despite such poor results. Incredibly, I have read that those companies pay people bonuses for completing extra assessment reports, which in my view incentivises rushing and contributes to inaccuracies. Many feel as if they have been lied about in their reports—that is all part of the same inadequacies. I have even had reports of healthcare professionals who conduct the assessments asking claimants if they have thought about killing themselves. While I understand that it is a difficult subject to broach, sensitive language needs to used when dealing with such topics; otherwise, it can be damaging and triggering for that person.

If a claimant is not awarded the points they think they are entitled to, or they are told that they are not entitled to PIP, they must challenge the DWP’s decision through a mandatory reconsideration. Constituents of mine, and many people who have been in touch, have said that the process is completely pointless due to the DWP not reviewing medical evidence or investigating whether the decision maker’s report was accurate. Actually, DWP workers feel unable to challenge the assessor’s report. Advice and support agencies also state that hardly anyone has their decision overturned at that stage. I cannot help but think that is just another stage in the process to grind people into submission.

If the mandatory reconsideration process is unsuccessful, the decision must go to tribunal, putting tribunals as well as claimants under enormous pressure. Advice and support agencies say that they are under a great deal of strain, trying to deal with the demand from people seeking representation. Latest figures show that 68% of PIP decisions are overturned on appeal, so the DWP’s systems are clearly not working. That is completely indefensible: all that trial and trauma for claimants to be proved right, if—it is a big if—they manage to go that distance. People have reported that they have to wait over a year for a tribunal date.

What is very clear is that the assessment process is working against claimants entitled to the benefit. Many campaigners believe that the companies who provide medical assessments are heavily encouraged to hit targets by the Government in order to cut the welfare budget, and I believe them. Perhaps it is because there is an ambivalence to these people, or—more likely—because the Government do not see it as the state’s role to provide that support.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I will give way once more to the Conservative side, and that is it.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Lady. I would not necessarily disagree with some of the criticisms she is making of the assessment process. Some of my constituents face those challenges, and we would be happy to work
across the House to try to fix them. Does she recognise that under PIP, 66% of claimants with mental issues now get the higher rate of benefit, versus 22% under DLA? Can I ask her for a little balance when she comes to look at the system rather than just criticism?

**Laura Pidcock:** The balance is that thousands of people are locked out of the system and never even get an award because they are so ground down by the process. The Government need to realise what a cruel and callous system they are putting people through and the knock-on effect that has on our constituents. I am a bit shocked by the disbelief on the Conservative side—they look stunned that this is taking place. That is the reality for disabled people in this country. People are falling further into depression and self-harm, having suicidal thoughts and becoming reliant on food banks. All of those things are harmful for our society. Losing Motability cars was a consistent theme, along with falling into debt. The NHS is also being put under much strain.

**Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab):** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Laura Pidcock:** I will make a bit more progress.

In the past seven years of this Government, the Department for Work and Pensions has become a harsher and colder organisation. A culture has grown through successive Secretaries of State that sees claimants as numbers and fraudsters instead of people with needs, and a burden on the state rather than citizens with potential. The Government’s own figures put the rate of fraud for PIP at 1.4%—not even worth talking about—yet the system is built on the presumption that people are lying and need to be found out.

Here is a symbol of that callousness: a few weeks ago in my surgery, one of my constituents showed me a decision letter telling her that she was no longer entitled to PIP—her lifeline. The letter was dated 25 December—merry Christmas from the DWP. That is far from the most shocking story. Over the past week, I have read several hundred testimonies from people who have suffered under the system.

A whole community out there has been frightened, mistreated and intimidated by the Government, the media and the DWP. I will read a few of those testimonies—they put things much better than me—before drawing my speech to a conclusion. One says:

“I hope change can be made as presently the PIP system is too brutal, rigid and unfair to people like me who want to live an able life despite disability.”

Another says:

“Why are they treating disabled citizens as though we are undeserving of welfare support?”

Another says:

“I do not want to be in this situation. I am not choosing this life or lifestyle. I am a human being with feelings and emotions. I need help, support and understanding, not being ridiculed or made to feel like a criminal and waste of space and a burden on society or that I am going to be caught out at any opportunity for my disability.”

This one was the most striking:

“being on benefits is like being in an abusive relationship with the state. We cannot escape our abusers, we need them, we are financially dependent on them”.

This is what I ask of the Government: remove the contracts from Atos and Capita with immediate effect and bring the assessments back in-house; remove the assessors’ bonuses; abolish the mandatory reconsideration step of the process, because it is utterly pointless; make it compulsory to take medical documentation into account at the initial assessment, because it is traumatic for people to have to go through their medical conditions in detail, and the evidence from professionals is already there. There must be consequences for inaccurate assessment reports about people’s health conditions, and we should redesign the assessment process alongside disabled people so that it accepts a social model of disability, not a medical model.

The judgment against the Government towards the end of last year when, as was mentioned, a High Court judge said the changes were “blatantly discriminatory,” should give the Minister pause for thought. It is an opportunity for reflection. What has become of not just this Government but our society when we treat people as criminals and fraudsters for being disabled? Do they really know what fear is experienced across this nation at the clatter of the letterbox? People are scared that there might be a brown envelope from the DWP. It is time for the Government to admit that the system is a disaster and that a review of PIP and the whole benefit system is urgently needed.

9.46 am

**Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who clearly has a huge amount of passion about this subject. Although I would not necessarily agree with all of the stats she cited, it is important that we continue to do everything we can for those who are often among the most vulnerable people in society. Collectively, we will raise many examples and suggestions on how we can continue to improve the system.

I do not intend to speak for long. I have spoken in every debate like this for the past two and a half to three years, so I will try to avoid repetition. First, I want to make it clear that there have been mistakes. In any system there are mistakes. The hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) raised a classic example of a mistake. That should not have been the case; that is not designed to happen. If people need home visits, those should be a given. That was a genuine mistake.

There were claims that PIP was brought in for financial savings. The concept was actually designed under the previous Labour Government; it just happened to come in as we came into office. We are currently spending £3 billion a year extra, and that figure will increase every single year of this Parliament. That is not a cost saving by any definition.

Under DLA, only 16% of claimants got the highest rate of benefit, but under PIP it is 26%. Only 22% of people with mental health conditions got the highest rate, but the figure now is 66%. That is why we are spending £3 billion more a year, and rightly so. If someone with a mental health condition wanted to access the higher mobility rate, they had to be severely mentally impaired unless they had a physical disability, so only 12,660 people with a mental health condition accessed the higher mobility rate. Since the introduction of PIP, over 100,000 more people are benefiting from that rate.
Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that in the impact assessment from May 2012 for the introduction of personal independence payments under the coalition Government, the objectives were to ensure that expenditure was sustainable and to save £2.24 billion a year by reducing claimants by 500,000 a year?

Justin Tomlinson: And the reality is that we are spending £3 billion more on supporting the most vulnerable people. That is partly because we have an extremely proactive Minister who, rightly, meets regularly with charities, stakeholders, individual users and MPs from across the House. I did the same when I was a Minister, and the system continues to be improved.

Finally, under DLA the higher rate was given for visual impairment at 36%, but it is now 79%. The system is not perfect and we need to continue moving it, but we can all access the stats from the Library. They are independent of the Government. They are the reality. That does not excuse mistakes or times when the system lets people down, but it is a fallacy to think that the old DLA system was better. It was not better, which is why the charities and stakeholders support the principle of PIP.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that, taking the journey time for the end-to-end process, the waiting time has been reduced by 40 weeks to 13 weeks in the past four years? That has to be an improvement. There is a long way to go, but I am sure my hon. Friend would agree.

Justin Tomlinson: That is an important point. [Interruption.] There is an Opposition Member who favours randomly plucking stats out of the air. It is the official statistics, independent of the Government, that I am giving; our teams can go and research them in the Library. They shall give an example of a big difference being made. Those who are terminally ill now have their process speed-tracked and the decision is given within seven days.

I shall not speak for too much longer as many Members want to raise suggestions, but I want to address the question raised about lifetime awards. Under DLA 70% of claimants had a lifetime award, and when I became the Minister I thought, “That is sensible; it does away with the need for an assessment.” However, one in three people with a disability or health condition will have such a significant change within 12 months that their condition will have changed—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), on the debate. The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) is right in what he says about how the system should operate, but that is not how it is operating in practice. In the Mind survey, 55% of those surveyed found that their PIP was either stopped or reduced. I also want to mention that study’s satisfaction rate for people with mental health issues. We are making the same mistake with that as we are with the work capability test. If we are going to have a system that is fair to people with mental illness, we need properly qualified assessors, and that is not happening. It was the same with the work capability test: the assessments were done by people who had no qualifications to give them an understanding of people with mental illness. That is not right.

Yesterday in the Chamber I did not get an answer when I asked the Minister, at column 708, what happens to the 22% of people with mental illnesses who, according to the Mind survey, did not appeal because of their condition. I know those cases will be looked at again, but do I advise constituents who have not appealed to make a new application, or will those concerned somehow get around to seeing them? We need clarity for those people, many of whom have valid claims but felt unable to appeal because of the onerous nature of the system. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham is right; in Durham, welfare rights will tell you the appeal waiting time is now more than a year for such cases.
I want to touch briefly on a couple of constituency cases. What the hon. Member for North Swindon said about lifetime awards and people missing out may be true, but I can give him an example of the opposite. A constituent was given PIP from 2016, and when his condition worsened he put in an application for the higher rate and, after an assessment, had his entire PIP taken away. The mobility issue is also creating complete heartache. A constituent of mine has got five stents and has had two heart attacks. He went for assessment in January and did not qualify for PIP. They said he was not entitled, so he will lose his mobility car. He got a letter the other day saying he had not been entitled to the car since last October. I do not know how that view was reached when the assessment happened in January.

I want to nail the idea that people on PIP somehow are shirkers, and the lazy of society. [Interruption.] I am sorry—that is some people’s narrative. I am not going to listen to anyone who comes in here as an obvious Whips’ plant to bolster the number of Tory MPs. Members who want to make a contribution should put in to speak. I give credit to the hon. Member for North Swindon, who at least made a speech rather than some cheap intervention that the Whips obviously told him to make.

In many cases, the people I am talking about are working. The worst case I know of is of a man in his 40s with a degenerative condition, who was a butcher and could not work. He retrained in IT, got a job, went for his PIP assessment and was not awarded the higher rate. Therefore he lost his mobility car. That is a guy who got off his backside, as he said to me when he came to my surgery, and went to get a job because he did not want his children to grow up in a household where the father was not going out to work. It cannot be fair that we are dealing with such people in the way we are.

The system as it has been designed is making all the same mistakes as the work capability test did. It is a sausage machine to get claims through. I would argue—to save money for the Government—for taking out the cases that we know will not improve. We are wasting our time on those individuals’ cases. As to making sure that the system works properly for others, especially those with mental health issues, we must have a system where assessments are done by properly qualified people.

The people who claim PIP do not choose to be in that position. Any one of us here today could end up on it if we had a serious illness or accident. Claimants do not want to be on PIP. The way to judge a society’s fairness is by how it treats its most vulnerable. I am sorry, but the system we have is definitely not fit for work. Indeed, the Government were right to issue a lifetime DLA award to Pauline in the first place, but because of the transition to PIP her life was unnecessarily turned upside down.

Like many colleagues in the Scottish National party, I remain convinced that this Government’s obsession with personal independence payments is little more than an ideological plaything. Week after week, my constituency surgeries are packed with disabled people who continue to feel the sharp end of the Government’s cuts to social security. I remain convinced that the entire system needs a complete overhaul, and today’s litany of horrifying constituency cases from other hon. Members only reaffirms that view. We need action from the Government sooner rather than later.

Last week, I and other colleagues from the SNP group met Scotland’s Minister for Social Security, Jeane Freeman, to discuss progress in implementing our new social security system in Scotland. Establishing a new social security system is the biggest challenge we have faced since the inception of devolution, but I am heartened by the Government’s determination to build a social security system that is underpinned by dignity and respect. When the new social security system is established, my constituent Pauline will finally be treated again with the respect and dignity she deserves. The challenge for the Government today is to ensure that Paulines in Preston, Prestatyn and Penzance are treated with dignity, and the only way that will happen is if the system is fundamentally overhauled.

9.59 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for securing this important debate and for her passionate speech.

Our welfare state was founded by a Labour Government, based on the principles of protecting the most vulnerable in our society and providing a safety net for everyone, rich or poor, should they ever need it. Yet under this Government we have seen our welfare state eroded into a completely dehumanising and cruel experience. Yesterday, the Minister refuted my claims that the welfare system we see today is cruel; if it is not cruel, then what is it? These people have been put through the wringer and squeezed remorselessly—and all for nothing, as we now know.

I am like other hon. Members: rarely does a day go by when distressed constituents are not reaching out to me about their PIP assessments. The dread and anxiety that comes with an impending PIP assessment are overwhelming. That is not surprising, given the life-or-death situations constituents find themselves in. A survey by the Disability Benefits Consortium found that one third of those who have had their funding cut in the middle of a benefits shake-up said they were struggling to pay for food, rent and bills.

That is what happened to my constituent Deborah. Since failing her PIP assessment six weeks ago, she has been living on biscuits. Despite the cold weather in the north-east—it has been freezing—she has been unable to put her heating on. Sadly, Deborah, who suffers with severe mental and physical health problems, has been...
through this once before, so she knows the physical and psychological effects it can have on claimants and their families. Deborah does not want to go through that again, nor should she.

Another of my constituents, Kelly, applied for PIP on behalf of her 17-year-old daughter, who has anti-myelin oligodendrocyte glycoprotein disease, a rare neurological illness. Kelly’s daughter has limited movement in her spine and 50% lung function, due to a severe spinal scoliosis, and now has titanium rods running the length of her spine. Kelly was told that her daughter did not qualify. Susan, who has severe osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia, is in constant pain and can barely walk. She was told she did not qualify. On behalf of my constituents, I ask the Minister exactly how disabled and affected by their disabilities people have to be to qualify for PIP.

The system in place now is not what our predecessors imagined when they founded the welfare state. They expected kindness and compassion for those who need support during difficult times. Yesterday, the Department for Work and Pensions tried to play the compassionate Conservative card and announced that everyone receiving PIP will have their claim reviewed. What does that bittersweet announcement mean for the constituents I have mentioned today and the many others across the country who have already had their payments stopped? Will the Minister provide some clarity on whether and when the Department will consider those claims again?

Given the suffering that my constituents are already going through as a result of PIP, they simply cannot wait any longer. I ask the Minister, please, to confirm today how long this complex exercise is expected to take. I hope, given what we have already heard and will no doubt continue to hear for the rest of the debate, that the Minister will finally put an end to the pain and suffering that so many have had to endure as a result of PIP. I ask the Minister, please, to confirm when the Department will consider those claims again?

For any person facing a PIP assessment, the idea of an assessment creates a lot of worry and stress. For the terminally ill, the pressure is multiplied many times over—on the individual involved, who has been given that terrible diagnosis, and on the families who have to deal with the fallout of that situation. Even insurance companies—private firms—acknowledge that cancer patients and people diagnosed as having a terminal condition need special treatment and pay out immediately. They do not hang about waiting to assess people; they know that the condition is not going to change.

I am grateful to the MND Association, and I will read their description of that terminal illness:

“Few conditions are as devastating as motor neurone disease (MND). It is a fatal, rapidly progressing disease of the brain and central nervous system, which attacks the nerves that control movement so that muscles no longer work. There is no cure for MND.

While symptoms vary, over the course of their illness most people with MND will be trapped in a failing body, unable to move, talk, swallow, and ultimately breathe. Speech is usually affected, and many people will lose the ability to speak entirely. Some people with MND may also experience changes in thinking and behaviour, and 10-15% will experience a rare form of dementia.”

Yet people with MND have to go for PIP assessments. The cost to terminally ill people and their families is much more than just the pain of that shortened journey to the end of their life. Research done for the MND Association shows that people with terminal illnesses face £12,000 a year more in costs, not including loss of income.

Transferring from DLA to PIP, 15% of people living with MND have had their awards reduced. A progressive condition, a terminal illness and a reduced award: surely that cannot be right? I have raised concerns many times over the challenge for many terminally ill people facing the six month rule—the requirement of a “reasonable expectation of death within six months”.

That language is surely incompatible with the variable nature of conditions and terminal illness. The DWP should review its guidance on the use of DS1500s to reflect that terminal illness is not an exact science. Will the Minister review the process for the terminally ill? Will she tell us how many people have been turned down? Will she tell us how that injustice will be urgently addressed? Will she tell us, now that there is to be a review, what appeal process will be made available to those not contacted by the DWP, who rightly feel that they are entitled to an enhanced payment?

10.8 am

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I will focus my contribution on how the PIP system treats those with less visible disabilities by talking about epilepsy. Epilepsy Action has said that nine out of 10 people with epilepsy felt that the Government’s decision maker did not understand their condition—and no wonder! The assessment forms, the descriptors and the face-to-face assessments are not set up in a way that accurately reflects the nature of epilepsy.

It comes as no surprise that three out of five people with epilepsy who were already on benefits had their award decreased when they applied for PIP. In raw numbers, that is 18,000 people, 20% higher than for any other condition. I am concerned that the Department’s previous announcement on supervision and safety—the change that could have the most impact for people with epilepsy—is in danger of being neglected.

People with epilepsy have contacted the Epilepsy Action helpline with their key concerns. First, what is the review’s timeframe? People are waiting to find out whether their award has been changed, but as they will only be notified if there is a change, how will they know when to stop waiting? Secondly, why are claims disallowed before 9 March 2017 not being reviewed, when it is clear that the guidance was wrong before that date? Thirdly, if the DWP has reviewed a case and decided there should be no change, does the claimant have a right to appeal?
There have already been two significant reviews, and many problems with the PIP assessments remain. There are three changes the Government should urgently address. First, they should make decisions based on objective criteria, not on the perceptions of those who have received training for a particular condition, such as epilepsy, are allowed to make decisions on that condition. Secondly, they should increase the timeframe for providing evidence from one month to two months, to make it easier for a patient’s doctor to provide the supporting evidence that they need. Thirdly, they should commit to a full review of the “repeatedly and safely” requirements and issue guidance to ensure that it is being applied correctly for people with less visible conditions.

Taking those measures will not ease the stress of the undoubtedly stressful application process, but it may go some way to helping achieve a fairer system and to granting applicants what was promised in the name of the benefit: independence.

10.10 am

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I shall keep my remarks short, out of respect to the other Members who want to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate, which is of particular importance to my constituents. I have to say that I am deeply disappointed at the state of the two Scottish Conservative Members who turned up to the debate with a clear intention to disrupt the opening speaker. They have now left the Chamber and not stayed for the debate.

This is a timely debate, given the announcement that the UK Government are to review PIP claims, at a cost of £3.7 billion, by 2023. It is hardly a surprise that the High Court concluded that the Government’s changes to PIP were “blatantly discriminatory” to those with mental health conditions. That has been self-evident for some time. Of course, this disaster is of the Government’s own making: they tried to rip off the most vulnerable people in society and now we are all paying the price. The taxpayer will have to foot the bill for those mistakes. What is the human cost? Claimants pushed to the edge and living their lives on the brink. When will the Government get anything right first time?

This fiasco could have been avoided had the Government approached disability benefits with humanity and compassion, rather than—as usual—as a cost-saving exercise. By the time we get to 2023, the UK Government will have delivered the worst possible outcome: a more expensive system that delivers less for applicants. Other Members will be aware—we did not need a court case or reams of statistics to know—that the changes to PIP are having a negative impact; the many distressed constituents who have visited our constituency offices or surgeries in tears are testament to that. They have spoken of feeling humiliated and degraded. They have been made to justify their disability through an intrusive, pseudo-medical assessment conducted by officials working with ambiguous criteria.

Ultimately, we in Scotland can be relieved that PIP is one of 11 benefits being transferred to the Scottish Government. I have no doubt that that will mean a noticeable improvement in the way people are treated, as the Scottish Government seek to create a Scottish social security system that gives claimants dignity and respect. For example, they have announced that claimants in Scotland are to be given the right to have a supporter with them in meetings and assessments. That small but noteworthy change is proof that Scotland will do things differently. Perhaps this Tory Government could yet again learn from the Scottish Government’s example.

Given that the DWP will continue to manage Scottish PIP cases until 2020, will the Minister outline whether this crisis will affect the smooth transition of PIP to the Scottish Government?

10.13 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I will primarily raise issues around the access to assessments, and I will run through some examples of constituents who have approached me. This is by far the biggest area of casework that I receive in my office.

Mr M’s daughter had a stroke and is partially paralysed. She was expected to get to an appointment 40 minutes’ drive away in Scunthorpe for 9 am. There is no direct bus service so they would have had to have caught the 7.34 am train from Grimsby to get there on time, and they did not know how to get to the assessment centre from the railway station. That all put additional pressure on an older parent who is responsible for somebody who has suffered a stroke.

K has mental health issues and other difficulties, including domestic violence issues that impede her ability to freely leave the house. Despite being advised of those difficulties, requests for a home visit or a local appointment were refused and she was expected to attend in Scunthorpe. C is vulnerable because of her alcohol dependency, alongside her depression and anxiety. She has no means of transport but was expected to attend in Scunthorpe. M has learning difficulties, but no exception for that, or consideration of it, was made. There was no real humanity in dealing with that individual.

Another constituent, J, had a stroke. After parking his mobility vehicle away from the assessment centre, he made the extraordinary effort to walk what is a very short distance but what took him more than 25 minutes, with frequent breaks on the way. Having made that journey and dragged himself to the assessment, he was deemed to be sufficiently mobile not to require his mobility car, which has put enormous pressure on him, his family and his ability to live a normal life. Those are a few examples, but there are more: Hogan, Arnold, Snell, Read, MacDonald, Lamb, Jones, Stewart and Godfrey are just a few of my constituents who have all had barriers placed before them just to get to an assessment.

I have had conversations on this and have had questions responded to, and we managed to get additional assessors in the area. However, issues with appointments, maternity and sickness—the assessors made available were under such pressure with the volume of assessments that they went off sick themselves; I hope they did not have to go through the assessment process, because that would have been a double injustice—mean that we do not have enough assessors in the local area to support the needs of my constituents.

I have been able to assist in some of those cases and resolve some of the issues, but why do these people have to come to their MPs or place enormous stress and
There is a wider issue, which was mentioned earlier, about whether due weight is given to medical evidence. In certain cases, the written evidence of GPs and consultants has been discounted or not given proper consideration because, according to the DWP, they are regarded as the applicant’s advocate and are therefore, in the warped world of PIP assessments, somehow biased. The irony is that the Government give total credence to the advice given by their own so-called health professionals, who, as we have heard, are not necessarily trained in the area of medicine that they are due to assess. Reconsideration of that issue in particular should be a top priority for the Government.

Anna McMorrin: I want to set out the case of a constituent who came to me. A medical professional, he was terminally ill and had weeks to live, but he was advised that he would be eligible for PIP only from December of that year. His partner was distraught, as was he. He wanted to use that money for the last few weeks of his life. It turned out that there had been an administrative error, but they had to come to me to sort that out. That is a disgrace.

Matt Rodda: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I would like to make a suggestion to the Government. How about going back to the drawing board and designing a system that listens to people and allows them to express their issues in their own words. Above all, how about developing a system that demonstrates real compassion and decency, which we had for many decades in our welfare state? The Government can and must do better. It is so obvious that the current system is designed and contrived to cut public spending. I ask the Government to think again.

10.17 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important debate. I will reinforce the points made by a number of Members this morning. To put it quite bluntly, I believe that the emotional trauma caused by PIP and the Government’s approach to its administration has led to suffering on what can only be described as an enormous scale.

I will give one example of a constituent, as her case illustrates the fundamental problems with PIP, and then make two other brief points. My constituent suffers from chronic long-term and debilitating back pain, which was made worse in the aftermath of an operation, during which she suffered terribly. However, after her disability living allowance was terminated, she was awarded much less support through PIP and her mobility car was taken away from her because she had not scored enough points in the arbitrary assessment. Ironically, it can be said that, in this and many other cases, personal independence payments reduce people’s personal independence and mobility. That is one of the fundamental problems with this system that we need to consider today.

I will briefly address two other points; I realise other colleagues would like to speak. First, the length of time that people suffer because of the trauma caused by the system is a problem. It is important to note that, all too often, the ordeal does not stop with the assessment, which is just the beginning of a very lengthy process. My constituent lives in flat so small that there is not even room for her husband to stay. She has to contend with living alone in cramped conditions and in pain. As if that were not bad enough, she is having to find the strength to challenge her initial assessment report formally, because it does not reflect her condition or what she said to the so-called health professional.

10.21 am

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

Let us imagine how anxious someone must feel, knowing that they have to sit through an interrogation process that will deem whether they are quite disabled enough to be eligible for a helping hand. Not only does that person have the already huge day-to-day disadvantage of being disabled or suffering from mental illness, but now, thanks to the Government, they are forced to sit through a point-scoring process to judge whether they are fit to work. PIP is not fit for purpose when it comes to many physical conditions, and it certainly has not been fit for purpose for those suffering from invisible illnesses. How disgraceful that in 21st-century Britain a Government are implementing public policies that clearly disadvantage those with mental health problems.

My constituent, George, suffers from a range of debilitating conditions, and he is prescribed a huge amount of medication just to enable him to get through the day. He is also almost completely reliant on the use of a wheelchair. After working for his entire life, George, at 63, thought that when his health deteriorated, there would be support to help him to survive and pay his bills. At first, that support was there, and George received higher rate mobility and the highest rate care components of disability living allowance. However, when he was called for his PIP assessment, things took a dramatic turn for the worse.
George will not mind my saying that he is reaching an age at which he would be likely to retire soon if he was fit and well, but he has been put through a process whereby he was tested to see whether he was disabled enough. One observation that was made during his assessment was that he could walk unaided for 20 metres, but not 50. That is not considered a restriction on his ability to walk. Leonard Cheshire Disability, the charity for disabled people, makes the point that the change to the criteria obviously means that far fewer individuals qualify for the enhanced mobility component of the benefit. That is penny-pinching at the expense of someone’s dignity.

The charity has also gathered the information that 74% of disabled people surveyed did not feel as though the assessor understood their disability. That was and remains one of George’s biggest frustrations: he did not feel that the assessor listened to him, understood his needs or treated him with any compassion. How can someone hold so much weight in determining the future of an individual’s life without being held accountable? Also, why cannot assessors consult experts in any condition of an individual’s life without being held accountable? Someone hold so much weight in determining the future of an individual’s life without being held accountable? That is penny-pinching at the expense of someone’s dignity.

The charity has also gathered the information that 74% of disabled people surveyed did not feel as though the assessor understood their disability. That was and remains one of George’s biggest frustrations: he did not feel that the assessor listened to him, understood his needs or treated him with any compassion. How can someone hold so much weight in determining the future of an individual’s life without being held accountable? Also, why cannot assessors consult experts in any condition of an individual’s life without being held accountable? Someone hold so much weight in determining the future of an individual’s life without being held accountable? That is penny-pinching at the expense of someone’s dignity.

The Prime Minister also stated that in the majority of cases, the change at appeal is due to the presentation at appeal of new evidence that was not presented at the original case. However, in the vast majority of cases that are brought to my attention at my constituency office and through Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly citizens advice bureaux, no new evidence is presented at appeal. The appeals are agreed, because the appeal panel recognises that constituents are genuinely in need of PIP and it supports the appeal. Furthermore, a growing number of assessments are consistently refused, and people are forced to go to mandatory reassessment and to appeal. I understand that currently about 65% of claims are overturned on appeal and the length of time people are waiting is unacceptable. People are being assessed and reassessed. The benefit was taken away from my constituent.”

The chaos that is being caused is having a cruel impact on thousands of people across the country. The Prime Minister’s reply was that the assessments are being conducted as well as they can be, and that people are getting the awards that they should be getting and are entitled to. She also stated that since the Government introduced the personal independence payment, 8% of cases have been appealed and 4% of the decisions are changed on appeal. In my easy calculation, about 50% of decisions are overturned on appeal, and things are getting worse.

Ruth Smeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my view? My constituent, Sarah Hassell, has cystic fibrosis, a degenerative disease. She is 30 and will not see retirement. Not only was she taken to a tribunal, but after that process, she was brought forward again for assessment. Her benefit was taken away, and she tried to kill herself because of this process, which she had already gone through once. The system is simply not working, and the tribunals are not working.

When I wrote to the Secretary of State to ask for a response, I was just sent to a civil servant and was not graced with a response. My constituents need much better from this process.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend outlines a very sad and tragic case. It is one reason among many why the Government have to take note and listen.

The Prime Minister also stated that in the majority of cases, the change at appeal is due to the presentation at appeal of new evidence that was not presented at the original case. However, in the vast majority of cases that are brought to my attention at my constituency office and through Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly citizens advice bureaux, no new evidence is presented at appeal. The appeals are agreed, because the appeal panel recognises that constituents are genuinely in need of PIP and it supports the appeal. Furthermore, a growing number of assessments are consistently refused, and people are forced to go to mandatory reassessment and to appeal. I understand that currently about 65% of claims are overturned on appeal and the length of time people are waiting is unacceptable. People are being assessed and reassessed. The benefit was taken away from my constituent.”

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Every one of us has an email inbox full of these claims. Every single week, a new claim comes forward. The Minister has spoken about home assessments, but home assessments are not being done. It can be seen in Westminster Hall today how supportive the Labour party is, and how unsupportive the Tory party is, in relation to the whole PIP process.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point, with which I wholeheartedly agree. The number of cases being brought to appeal and the length of time taken highlight the unnecessary cost of taking the cases to a tribunal. It stands to reason that if a large percentage of appeals are accepted, the original decisions are fundamentally flawed.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that for those with long-term conditions, such as muscular dystrophy, the right level of assessment is
important to avoid the need for people to go to appeal, given that an understanding of the condition could avoid that appeal?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend highlights the current state of affairs and how necessary it is for the Government to take action.

I will conclude by briefly highlighting one of the many cases that has been brought to me. A client in my constituency—a gentleman who lives with his wife and three children in a housing association property—suffers with epilepsy, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, anxiety, depression and heart problems. He was already in receipt of PIP and was awarded enhanced daily living and mobility at tribunal in February 2015; that award was backdated. He switched his enhanced mobility for a car through the Motability scheme.

My constituent was contacted about the renewal of his claim in April 2016, and the renewal was sent to him. The local citizens advice bureau assisted him with completing the form, and medical evidence went in. His condition had deteriorated, but he was awarded zero points for daily living and mobility. So he had to return his mobility car, which he relied on, and borrow money from a family member to purchase a car.

The mandatory reassessment was lodged, and my constituent was awarded nine points for daily living and eight points for mobility—on appeal, those were enhanced further. The case went to tribunal and the judge advised him to go back to the Motability scheme as soon as possible and get his car back, but in the meantime he had wasted money on purchasing one. Interestingly, no additional evidence was given at the appeal stage that the DWP had not had prior to the tribunal. That is just one of many cases, and I am sure that Members across the country have similar concerns. The situation is grave, as most Opposition Members and our constituents know.

Rosie Cooper: Before my hon. Friend finishes, I want to make the point that there is a fundamental lack of understanding and compassion among assessors. Unbelievably, one assessor telephoned my deaf constituent and left them a message, which they would never, ever be able to access. How many penalties would they have? How many would they get? How many would they have to go through? How many would they have to pay?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend highlights an interesting point, and it is something that the Government need to get a grip on.

Unfortunately, the Government seem unwilling or unable to see the mess that is being caused or to do something about it. Will the Minister take stock of how many have been fed up and upset at being turned down for PIP that they have told me in tears that they refuse to go through an appeal process, despite clearly being entitled to, and in desperate need of, the support that should be provided. They and many others are effectively denying themselves support that they should be entitled to.

Members have raised a range of concerns about the PIP process, and I will touch on some of their speeches. The former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), acknowledged that mistakes have been made and that improvements could be made. He is right. One of the biggest mistakes was the UK Government’s attempt to deny people with mental health conditions access to personal independence payments. They were ruled discriminatory for doing that. Perhaps the UK Government should look at making improvements that improve people’s experience and are not discriminatory.

The hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) described issues faced by their constituents in applying for PIP. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) rightly raised the additional difficulties being faced by people with terminal illnesses and touched on the briefing from the MND Association.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) made a very good speech based on his constituents’ experiences. He was right to highlight the total disrespect of a couple of the Scottish Tories who came in with prepared interventions and were clearly trying to upset and disrupt the opening speeches. They showed total disrespect to those Members who have prepared speeches and not been called, and total disrespect to the disabled people watching this debate. They turned up to get their names on TheyWorkForYou and up their speaking record, then cleared off halfway through the debate. That is cynical, disrespectful behaviour and I hope they will reflect on it.

In this otherwise informative and impassioned debate there were good speeches from the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). This debate could not be more topical, as we have been hearing about and debating the UK Government’s approach to PIP in the past week. We have had a written statement, two urgent questions and a stream of written questions on the UK Government’s response to the High Court ruling on PIP. The High Court ruled that the UK Government’s PIP regulations were “blatantly discriminatory” against people with mental health impairments. That follows the damning report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which found “systematic violations” of disability rights.

We welcome the fact that the UK Government are finally going to accept that they got this wrong and will implement the High Court ruling, but this whole shambles...
prompts a number of questions. It is going to cost £3.7 billion for the Government to review all cases and to rectify the error of excluding people with mental health issues, but how much has it cost the Government to oppose the matter in the courts? How much has it cost people who have applied and been turned down for PIP support, not just financially, but in terms of their health?

Yesterday the Minister was angry that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) suggested that some people’s experiences of PIP and other benefits may have led them to consider suicide. The sad story that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) gave in her intervention, and a case that I have shared with a previous Secretary of State, will hopefully allow the Minister to reflect on her comments yesterday. It is absolutely clear that there is an issue in this regard, and I hope she will reflect on that.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I also raised a case yesterday with the Minister of someone who had followed the process correctly, had completed their review forms and had submitted them in the timescales, yet were called to refund all the money they had received thus far. That was the administrative failure of the Minister’s Department. That case is exceptionally bad. We talk about reducing harms for people in society, but it shows that when the DWP fails, the onus is on the individual to suffer the consequences and not on the Department to compensate them and deal with the issue.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman was right to raise that case yesterday, which I saw him do, and I hope the Minister will reflect and respond on it.

Yesterday, the Minister suggested that savings will not be made to cover the £3.7 billion cost, but I would appreciate it if she categorically ruled out any further cuts to any other aspect of social security to fund the review, and if she explained how the DWP intends to cover the cost. Does this shambles not expose the urgent need for the UK Government to review the whole PIP application process? We hear time and again, as we did this morning, about the appeal process success rate and about how Ministers have lost court cases on their policy. We have also heard personal testimony about the way in which the application process impacts those who apply and need support.

This is topical because PIP will be devolved to the new Scottish social security agency, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). The Bill to create the agency is currently being debated in Committee in the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government are seeking to make a number of changes to the way in which PIP is assessed to make sure that it treats people with dignity and respect. First, the Scottish Government are seeking to make an automatic provision that would allow the agency to gather all the relevant medical or related information at application stage, which would reduce the number of face-to-face assessments, reduce the burden on the applicant and hopefully ensure that the correct decision is taken at the outset, rather than people having to go through the flawed mandatory reconsideration and appeal process, which was raised by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green).

Secondly, the Scottish Government will ensure that private contractors are not involved in the assessment process. There are a range of other measures that the Scottish Government will take to ensure that we get the system right for those seeking support. In conclusion, hopefully the Minister will consider the new system in Scotland once it is up and running, and the UK Government will look north and learn some lessons.

10.39 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important and timely debate. She made some valid points and highlighted the sheer volume of responses that she received when she put out a call on social media. That demonstrates the clear problems with the PIP system and with the benefit.

My hon. Friend talked powerfully about the outsourcing of the assessment process, which we all know is simply not working from our experience with the work capability assessment. It is about time that those assessments were brought back in-house because there is poor-quality decision making and no scrutiny. Frankly, it is unacceptable that taxpayers’ money is going out to those providers.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that outsourcing decisions waste money and are against the interest of claimants? Discrepancies between Capita, which sees 59% of claimants at home for a home assessment, and Atos, which does the vast majority of PIP assessments but sees only 16% of claimants at home, expose the divisions in the private sector and show why the assessments should be brought back in-house and monitored properly.

Marsha De Cordova: It is important that the Government listen to the valid point made by my hon. Friend, and I hope the Minister will address it. We have heard testimony about the Department’s approach to disabled people. People said that it felt cold and that they were not treated as human beings, but they have to engage with it.

I pay tribute to my many hon. Friends who have spoken—it is important that so many of them are here—including my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for North Durham (Mr Jones), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), and the good interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Ruth George) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green).

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby highlighted the points about face-to-face assessments well. The assessment process, the centres and the information provided have to be accessible, but that is not happening on all occasions. That needs to change. This debate has been called because of the crisis in the claimant experience of personal independence payments.
Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Having witnessed the way in which the Tory party did politics in the run-up to the 2010 election and having sat opposite them between 2010 and 2015, this is not an accident. It is a deliberate part of the party’s electoral strategy: to demonise the poor and to say that this country’s problems are caused by the most vulnerable people in our society. The experience that claimants receive is a deliberate part of the Conservatives’ political strategy.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is spot on. Let us be clear: from the outset in 2010, the Government’s fundamental aim for the new benefit was to make savings and to reduce the case load of disability benefit claimants. That is a fact. The expectation was to make a saving of 20%, which equated to around £1.5 billion. It is untrue to say that that was not the case. PIP was supposed to cover the additional costs of living with a disability, but that has not been the case in practice. The assessment framework is flawed and it causes delays.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Having heard the cases that have been discussed, does my hon. Friend agree that the process is dehumanising? It degrades individuals who are at their most vulnerable. Does she also agree that we need to take a two-pronged approach? The private sector makes millions of pounds and causes misery for others, but we must also bear in mind the fact that the policy itself is seriously flawed.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend, too, makes a valid point. We have to look at the policy intention behind PIP’s introduction—to make savings and to reduce the number of disabled people who were entitled to the benefit.

The assessment framework creates a series of financial problems. Poor-quality decision making has led to disabled people losing vital financial support. The evidence is damning—it is there for all to see. When decisions are challenged, in 68% of cases taken to tribunal the finding is in favour of the claimant. That indicates that there is a problem. The process is lengthy and stressful, and many people do not know how to challenge a decision or what they need to do, so many will go without and lose that financial support.

If a claimant wants to challenge a PIP decision, they must first ask for a mandatory reconsideration, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham discussed in detail. That was supposed to improve the claims process, but in reality, it has had the opposite effect. Many disability organisations have noted the number of decisions on claims that have passed through the supposedly rigorous mandatory reconsideration stage, but have gone on to be overturned at tribunal.

According to the Department’s own figures, about 20% of PIP MR cases lead to the decision being revised. It seems that the appeal tribunal process is being used as a backstop for poor decisions that should have been resolved at the initial stage or at the mandatory reconsideration.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): My constituent, Anthony, who visited my surgery on Friday, has a chronic illness. He has been through the process up to the point that my hon. Friend describes and he is awaiting a date for the appeal court. He will lose his car in April. He has been to advice centres to seek advice, but they are full with a backlog, so he has now come to me. Without a date for the appeal process, what can be done and what should the Government do? He faces months and months of distress.

Marsha De Cordova: Perhaps the Minister can clarify what my hon. Friend’s constituent should do. We cannot have individuals losing their vehicles unnecessarily.

Poor decision making is taking place. It has become so bad that the most senior tribunal judge said that the evidence provided by the Department was so poor that it would be “wholly inadmissible” in any other court. There has been a 900% increase in complaints about PIP.

I will talk briefly about the High Court decision. There was an urgent question yesterday, but I am not sure that the Minister answered all the points that were made. The regulations were introduced to reduce the number of claimants who qualify for PIP. The High Court said that they were “blatantly discriminatory” against people with mental health conditions. What is most scary is that but for the High Court decision, the Government could have just carried on as usual.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Marsha De Cordova: I cannot take any more interventions—I apologise.

Where do we go from here? Clearly, the Government have no idea when the examination of those 1.6 million claimants will take place. Will it be weeks, months or years? The Minister has not provided a good timeframe and I ask again if she can give us a timeframe as to when the PIP assessment guide will be updated. When will the backdated payments begin to be paid? Will there be compensation for PIP recipients who have incurred debt as a result of those regulations? Will the Department update its administration and staffing costs, which are also expected to be published? Will the Minister guarantee that no claimant will lose out as a result of their case being reconsidered? Given the damage that has already been caused, it is simply not good enough that Parliament and PIP claimants are being left in limbo while Ministers are trying to get their house in order. There have already been two independent reviews by Paul Gray, but the recommendations of the most recent one were accepted only in part by the Government.

The Minister has accused the Labour party of scaremongering. That is wholly untrue. The wealth of evidence presented today has highlighted the human impact of these benefits policies. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has found the Government in breach and is still waiting for them to respond. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has called on the Government to carry out a full cumulative impact assessment of their welfare reforms, but they still have not done so. Only last week, the European Committee of Social Rights found the Government to be in violation of the European social charter. Something is clearly wrong. Labour has made it clear that we would scrap the assessment regime and replace it with a good, open and holistic assessment framework.
The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for securing this really important debate. I always welcome every opportunity to discuss PIP with parliamentary colleagues from all parties, and I hold regular advice surgeries.

I have so little time and have been asked so many questions that it will clearly not be possible to reply to them all, but I shall try to respond to as many as I can, which means that I will not be able to take any interventions. However, I have already set out a calendar of forthcoming events at which Members can come and speak to me. I understand how busy colleagues are, so if it is more convenient they can ask their caseworkers to come, bringing the cases that have been raised today so that we can go through them in detail.

It is clear from the cases that have been raised passionately and sincerely today that there are problems—I readily acknowledge them, and we are working hard to fix them. However, I have also heard a lot of confusion. Some hon. Members have raised issues that relate to ESA, not to PIP. Clearly some people are not aware of other financial support programmes such as Access to Work, which could help in some of the cases raised. A lot more support is available than hon. Members may realise, which is why I am running detailed teach-ins to ensure that all Members fully understand the wide range of support available.

Before I answer hon. Members’ detailed questions, I really want to set the record straight. Accusations have been made today, about me as a Conservative and about all Conservatives, that frankly I am not going to accept. It is simply not fair to say that Conservatives think disabled people are scroungers or do not deserve the support that we so want them to have. Conservatives want to ensure that everybody in our society can play their full part. We want to support people with disabilities to do so. Judge us on our actions.

Myths have been cited repeatedly that we are cutting spending on supporting people with disabilities or health conditions. Independent data shows that that is simply not true. Every single year since 2010, the coalition Government and now the Conservative Government have spent more and more money, and we are committed to spending more. Expenditure on the main disability benefits has increased by more than £4.1 billion in real terms since 2010 and is set to reach a record high of more than £23 billion this year. It will continue to grow each year to 2022.

People have been scaremongering because they do not remember that people on disability benefits are exempt from the benefits freezes and that their benefits will rise again this year. PIP is not included in the benefits cap. As I said yesterday, it is really important that we get the facts out there. It really concerns me that people who really need support will be put off from going to jobcentres or contacting us to get the benefits that they need and richly deserve.

We have heard a lot about the claimant experience and the customer experience. In my short time at the DWP, I have visited DLA processing centres, assessment centres and Jobcentre Plus offices, where I have seen DWP staff who are highly motivated and well trained to provide a good service to some of the most vulnerable people in society. I really encourage hon. Members who have not done so to visit their local Jobcentre Plus, speak to job coaches and see the excellent work that goes into supporting people with disabilities and ensuring that they get the support available. That includes support into work; a huge number of people with disabilities want to work, and we want to enable them to.

Hundreds of thousands more people are now getting support as a result of PIP than with DLA. In the constituency of the hon. Member for North West Durham, as we migrate people from DLA to PIP, 900 people’s awards have been increased. Some 41% of her constituents who have moved from DLA to PIP are getting more money. When Opposition MPs say, “Let’s scrap PIP and all go back to DLA,” they are saying that they would deny their constituents an opportunity to benefit from PIP. More people, particularly with mental health conditions, are being supported now than were ever supported under DLA.

I want to bust a myth. In this country, we are all rightly proud of our welfare state, but there is a myth that it was a Labour invention. Developing the welfare state took many MPs from all parties over a considerable period. I am just as proud of the modern welfare state as any other Member of this House. The first woman MP in Cornwall, Beatrice Rathbone, was a Conservative. She worked with her auntie Eleanor Rathbone, and together they were pivotal in the legislation that brought in the welfare state—a milestone whose anniversaries we still celebrate. It was people reaching across the political divide, working for the benefit of the most vulnerable in our society, who enabled us to develop the modern welfare state. Conservative Members are just as passionate about ensuring the best possible support for the most vulnerable people in our society.

I assure all hon. Members that, like my predecessors, I am committed to continuous improvement. We have commissioned independent reviews of the PIP process and we are taking their recommendations on board. We are working closely with stakeholders. Only last week, I had a meeting with my PIP stakeholder group, which includes representatives of all the main UK disability rights organisations and charities, including disability rights organisations from local authorities around the country. I will be setting up panels of ESA and PIP claimants to ensure that we listen directly to their experiences as we embark on our continuous improvement process.

It is also important to revisit current experiences. I accept that we always have to make improvements, but 89% of people said that they felt that the assessor treated them with respect and dignity. Undoubtedly we have more to do, but I am committed to making the improvements that we all want to see.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Ms Pidcock, you have only 30 seconds, I am afraid.

Laura Pidcock: I am completely astounded by the Minister’s use of her time. She ignored every single one of our points. I would like her to write to every single Member who took time to set out in detail the inadequacies of the system, because they were all completely ignored while she spoke about Conservative Members, the history of the Conservative party and justice on welfare.
The Minister said that the Government would be judged on their actions. They certainly will. Every single disabled person in this country is waiting to see what the Government will do to remedy the system’s inadequacies. An alternative reality is being presented by Conservative Members—

Laura Pidcock: Their use of figures diminishes disabled people’s experiences. It is a shambolic system.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
that I have had with people in the police, the criminal justice system and social work. I believe that it illustrates pretty well many of the ways in which the criminal justice system fails to meet the needs of people in our community, especially those who suffer from mental health problems.

I will not name these people: my constituent and her son want to retain their privacy, which is perfectly legitimate. However, the Minister should be acquainted with this case; last week, I forwarded him my correspondence file, which is fairly substantial, so that he would be aware of the background.

My constituent’s son is resident in Romford. He has a history of mental illness problems, but prior to the episode that I will discuss he had taken himself off some of the medication that he had been prescribed, because it had side effects that disagreed with him. He was reported missing by his partner on 27 April 2014. She contacted the police because she was concerned that he might kill himself. Eventually, he was traced by two police constables to a shopping centre in Romford. Questioned by the constables on the street, he told them that he was in possession of two kitchen knives, and at that stage he said that he did not intend to harm others; later in an interview, he said that he was considering harming some of those he loved.

The detaining officers—the two police constables on the street—proceeded, quite rightly in my view, to detain my constituent’s son under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. Given the information that his partner had provided the police and what he himself had said to them in the street, that seems to have been an entirely sensible step to take. Afterwards, as a standard procedure, the constables contacted their station sergeant. The sergeant instructed them to take him—let us just call him “M” for the purposes of today—not to a place of safety, that is the hospital, but back to Romford police station, where he would be interviewed under caution. That was done and the interview was conducted. There was no legal representation for M when he was in the police station and there was no appropriate adult present either.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the speech he is making. Does he agree that, at that point in the police station, it should be a requirement of the system for investigating officers to inquire as to whether the individual is already under treatment by a mental health team and, if so, for them to seek information from that team about the individual’s psychological condition?

Mr Carmichael: I am almost certain that if the medical condition being experienced by the person in custody was physical rather than mental, that course of action would be routine—simply what was expected. That is what I mean when I talk about a culture change being necessary. We need to treat people with mental illness in exactly the same way as we would treat people with a physical illness.

In fact, M disclosed in the course of his interview under caution, which unfortunately was not tape-recorded, that he was hearing voices and that he had been on medication, but had stopped taking it because of its various side effects. At the conclusion of the interview, he was charged with possession of a bladed article under section 139 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. He was seen by medical professionals at some point in the course of his detention. I eventually had to submit on behalf of my constituent a data subject access request to get the custody records to find out the names of those medical practitioners. I still do not know their qualifications or whether they had, as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) mentioned, access to the records that would have disclosed his full treatment history.

My constituent’s son eventually appeared the next day, 28 April 2014, at Barkingside magistrates court. He pleaded guilty and was remanded in custody until 12 May for psychiatric reports. Those were not available on 12 May or 14 May—a familiar story for anyone who deals with the summary courts—and he eventually appeared on 21 May, when those medical reports were available. Unfortunately, at that point it was apparent that the probation service reports were not available. It was 11 June before his case was finally disposed of. He was admitted to bail on 21 May and sentenced on 11 June. He was placed on a community order for six months on the condition that he remained under the supervision of the police service. In the meantime, he spent something in excess of three weeks in Pentonville prison, on remand and in custody, and 24 hours in police custody over a case that ultimately resulted in a community disposal.

I have enormous regard for those who staff and manage our prisons, but I do not know of any body of work that suggests that people suffering from a mental health problem are ever helped by being locked up in prison. That is essentially the point here. If my constituent’s son had been taken not to the police station, but to a hospital where he could have been treated and stabilised at the earliest possible stage, an inappropriate use of resource would have been avoided and he would have got the treatment he required.

Following the community order, I became involved with my constituent and a lengthy correspondence ensued. Fast-forwarding to 12 February 2015, I eventually received a letter from a deputy assistant commissioner at the directorate of professionalism within the Metropolitan police—she is a fairly senior officer—that concluded that my constituent’s son’s “welfare and mental health was correctly managed during his time in police detention and that he was assessed as being of sufficient mental capacity to understand his actions on the day in question.”

She concurred that the officers had “acted correctly.” Unsurprisingly, my constituent was disinclined to let matters rest at that point. There was further correspondence, including with somebody with the glorious title of “professional standards champion”. That was not particularly fruitful, and it led eventually to a complaint to the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

On 25 January 2016—this is getting on for two years after the initial incident—the IPCC upheld the complaint. It observed in passing that the constable who had been the original arresting officer had received management action in relation to the Metropolitan police’s mental health policy; I pause here to say in parentheses that the only person in this whole sorry saga who acted correctly was the original arresting officer. At every stage in the process, he seems to be the one who gets the training, the management interventions and the counselling. If this poor constable is sitting somewhere in a police
station in London sticking pins into an effigy of me. I would not blame him, but he was never the object of our concern. It was the failure of those above him to implement their own procedures properly that has probably brought us to this point today.

Thereafter, the correspondence between the Metropolitan police and me discloses a culture that requires change. The concept of professionalism, a directorate of professionalism and professionalism champions seem to exist for the purpose of protecting police officers, rather than admitting fault, learning from the experience and moving on. Those things exist for the protection of colleagues, rather than the investigation of complaints. To this day, I still do not know the qualifications of the force medical examiner who saw my constituent’s son in custody. I suspect that having made a data subject access request, I will get that information if I go to the Information Commissioner, but the fact that I have to anticipate that tells us everything we need to know about how such complaints are handled.

In many ways, my constituent’s son is fortunate. The episode was not perhaps as acute as it might have been. He is particularly fortunate to have a mother who is an intelligent, strong-willed, determined and articulate woman. She was never going to be fobbed off with excuses or half-answers. Without the support of his mother in Orkney or the support my office has been able to give him through her being my constituent, I am pretty sure that the original arresting officer will be inclined in the future simply to do what he has been told by his superiors. In that way, the culture and the mistakes continue.

The Metropolitan Police Service could probably have dealt with the issue in April, May or June 2014 had they simply accepted that they made a mistake and apologised. They did not do so because of the culture that exists. I suspect and have good reason to believe—I speak often to police officers and others within the criminal justice system in London and other parts of the country—that that culture continues to exist. That requires change if we are to give people who suffer mental health illnesses and who come into contact with the criminal justice system the treatment and respect they deserve.

10.17 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate and the way in which he presented it. Perhaps coincidentally, it follows a debate I was here for yesterday on perceived failings in the way in which the criminal justice system deals with people on the autism spectrum.

The underlying challenge is the same: it is about awareness, understanding and ensuring not just that the right protocols are in place, but that they are implemented by everyone. That is a challenge, and I wholly endorse what the right hon. Gentleman said about the progress we have made as a society and a Parliament in our understanding of mental health and the consequential priority that we need to attach to it. I pay tribute to his work on that in the Cabinet of the coalition Government, and to the work of many of his colleagues, not least the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who is tireless on this subject.

We have made progress, but the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is entirely right to raise tough questions about implementation and culture inside the criminal justice system and the police system. I do not think anyone would argue that the police are the agency best suited to dealing with people who are solely or primarily unwell by virtue of mental ill health, but the reality is that the police spend a lot of their time dealing with, supporting and safeguarding people on the mental health spectrum.

I have just completed a tour of our police system in which I talked to every single police force in England and Wales. One of the most consistent themes in all those conversations was concern about the increasing amount of time that our police officers spend with people who have a spectrum of mental health concerns. In some of those cases, that is entirely right and appropriate, because those people may be pursuing criminal activity or there may be a public safety issue. Increasingly, however, the police are being called into situations to which those two criteria do not apply. That is increasingly uncomfortable territory for them, because they are not necessarily the most appropriately qualified people to deal with such situations.

Let me address the right hon. Gentleman’s fundamental point about culture. I must put on record some of the improvements and the good things that are happening, but I need to acknowledge that there remains a stubborn cultural issue around how the police, and other bits of the public sector system, respond to complaints. I have been very explicit with the new chief executive of the Independent Office for Police Conduct, which is the new body that is taking over from the Independent Police Complaints Commission, that the Government, the IOPC and the police need to work together to try to change the culture. That is much easier to say than to do.

Too often when something goes wrong, as it inevitably will, there is a tendency to circle the wagons, blow smoke and protect the police family. We need to move away from that, and towards a culture of learning from mistakes. That is how the police improve. I argue strongly that doing so is very much in the interests of the police family, because we police by consent. That is built on a foundation of trust in our police system. Incidents such as that which the right hon. Gentleman recounted chip away at confidence and trust in our police. Therefore, it is in the interests of the police system to embrace the need for a new culture. When I speak to the superintendents conference, they volunteer that that is what we need to do.

It is a cultural change. I do not think the problem is necessarily with the frameworks, the procedures, the standards or the rights of prisoners in custody. We have made considerable progress on that, but I acknowledge that there remains a stubborn problem with its implementation in practice.

Kate Green: I accept what the Minister says about culture, but I wonder whether he could look at one systems issue, namely the matter of obtaining medical
information from a person’s own mental health practitioner where an individual in detention is already under the care of mental health services. I understand that is not part of routine procedure at the moment. Will the Minister go and look at that, and see whether it should be?

Mr Hurd: I certainly give an undertaking to the hon. Lady that I will look into that. Prisoner rights in custody are pretty clear in terms of the duties on a custody officer—a custody officer is required to determine whether a detainee is, or might be, in need of medical treatment or attention, and to make sure that he or she receives appropriate treatment or attention if he or she appears to be suffering from an illness or injury or a mental disorder—but I give the hon. Lady that undertaking and will write to her.

Having acknowledged the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, I want to place on record some of the genuine improvements that have been made. He raises a real concern, which has weight in the police system because of the amount of time police officers spend, in the modern age, dealing with people on the mental health spectrum.

A considerable effort has been made in recent years to improve local responses. Crisis care concordat partnerships have been successful in pushing people together at a local level to address long-standing issues such as the overuse of police cells as places of safety. As I have gone around the system, I have been very impressed to hear about the various triage schemes in many areas. Those schemes encourage closer working and exchange of real-time information between the police and health professionals. There are different models. Some have health staff embedded in police control centres. Others have health professionals working alongside police on the ground, and sometimes in the custody suites. The common feature of those models is that they enable the police to deal more confidently with people in crisis, informed by professional advice about the best solution.

Many areas are developing community-based voluntary sector or partnership drop-in centres—sometimes called crisis cafes or places of calm—to which those who feel themselves nearing a crisis may be referred, or may self-refer, for support and advice. Such co-operation mechanisms have resulted in a significant and, I hope, welcome reduction in the use of police stations for those who have committed no offence. In 2016-17, a little more than 1,000 such uses were recorded, compared with just under 8,500 in 2012-13, so there is progress on that front.

We are changing the powers available to the police under the Mental Health Act 1983. In particular, the use of police stations as places of safety has been completely banned for under-18s. For adults, regulations now set out very specific criteria on when a police station can be used. Police officers are required, if practicable, to consult a mental health practitioner before detaining a person under section 136, but I will come back to the hon. Member for Streford and Urmston (Kate Green) with a more refined position on requirements to consult the individual’s own medical practitioner.

The period for which a person may be detained for the purposes of a mental health assessment under section 135 or section 136 is now reduced to 24 hours to ensure such assessments and arrangements for further care are completed as swiftly as possible and that people are not unnecessarily delayed. Police powers to detain a person under section 136 have been extended to any place other than a private dwelling, enabling the police to act promptly in places such as workplaces.

Better community partnership and changes to the 1983 Act have clearly made a difference.

Mr Carmichael: The point on which the IPCC upheld the complaint of my constituent’s son was that he should have been detained under section 136 as well as the Criminal Justice Act 1988 provisions, and that did not happen. That was a fairly narrow point, in many ways, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is fairly widespread. What is the Home Office doing to establish an objective picture and find out what is happening on the ground? I suspect the procedures are not that bad, but the implementation requires some attention.

Mr Hurd: I accept the point that the IPCC found that guidance to detain under both section 136 and for any accepted offence had been breached in that case. I am not quite sure how long it took between 2014 and that judgment—probably too long. I accept that, but I come back to my earlier point. The right hon. Gentleman will know from experience that from the specific, we learn and probe general application. That is why our complaints process must work better than it does at the moment, not just for his constituent’s son and others in that position, but for the police officers concerned.

A lot of police officers are, in their words, being left out to dry for long periods of time, while the processes take too long. We want a swift process of finding the truth; we want accountability—accountability matters—but then we want a culture of learning and thinking, “What have we learned, and what are we doing about it?” We are not there yet, but everyone is talking about it in the right way. Part of my responsibility as Policing Minister is to continue pushing on that.

I am running out of time, but I should mention that if a person who has been detained for an offence is identified as having possible mental health or substance misuse issues, they may be referred to liaison and diversion workers for advice and onward referral to support services. Such schemes now provide support across 80% of police custody suites and courts in England, with the expectation that 100% coverage will be achieved by 2021.

On police use of force, a new memorandum of understanding between police forces and mental health and disability settings was finalised in 2017. At the extreme end of that is the response that we have to make to the report on deaths in custody. Some of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has picked away at—the human testimonies, and the attitudes of the police when they feel defensive—come through very clearly in that report, and we have to break those down.

As I hope I have made clear, across a range of the avenues available to the Government, we are making some progress. I repeat my undertaking to come back to the hon. Member for Streford and Urmston on her question.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Prisoners: Outdoors Endurance Activities

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

2.30 pm
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered outdoors endurance activities for prisoners.

It is an honour to be here and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth—I do not think that I have been fortunate enough to do so before. I welcome colleagues on both sides of the House to the debate.

I start by praising and thanking all those who serve in the Prison Service. I frequently call them members of the forgotten army. Being an ex-soldier myself, I think that is rather appropriate, because all too often our prison officers are forgotten. There is no doubt that much can, and should, be done to improve their working environment, but I will not expand on that today. I am here to promote an exciting initiative that was trialled in Scotland and then taken on by the former MP for West Dorset, Sir Jim Spicer, who sadly is no longer with us.

In the Gallery today there are three distinguished guests, two of whom sit on the Airborne Initiative committee. Buffy Sacher has years of experience in the Prison Service, and General Sir Rupert Smith inspired me personally when he came to address young officer cadets at Sandhurst in—I think we agreed at lunchtime—1978, which was many years ago. As we all know, he has served with huge distinction in our armed forces for many years. With them is Keith Potter, a resettlement officer in the Prison Service at the young offenders institution Her Majesty’s Prison Feltham, where the Airborne Initiative is currently being run. I thank them all for their input. I also thank Russ Trent, who was the governor of the young offenders institution HMP Portland and is now the governor of HMP Berwyn—I hope I got the Welsh right.

I am delighted that the Minister—I have a huge amount of respect for him, as we all do—is here, and I thank him for his time. I am speaking today about a remarkable organisation that helps young offenders and those on the margins of criminality to achieve their potential by building self-worth and giving participants a sense of achievement.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): When I read the motion, I thought that outdoor endurance for prisoners meant being on the run. I suspect and hope that my hon. Friend will disabuse me of that notion and point of the initiative, he will be glad to hear, is to stop prisoners running and reoffending. I will say more on that, if that is indeed the case.

Richard Drax: I always welcome interventions from my hon. Friend, given his sense of humour. The whole point of the initiative, he will be glad to hear, is to stop prisoners running and reoffending. I will say more on that in a moment.

The Airborne Initiative is a five-day residential course on Dartmoor. Candidates are serving young offenders, former young offenders, those in halfway houses and those not in employment, education or training. That includes young men who are allowed out of prison on licence, are serving a community sentence or have been identified in their communities as being at risk of offending. 

I hasten to say that, so far, no young women have taken the course, in the main because there are 20 times more men in prison than women.

The aim of the project is to keep those people out of jail, and certainly to discourage them from returning, as well as to encourage them to strive for more positive goals in life and, of course, to build self-reliance and self-respect. The Airborne Initiative was born out of a pioneering experiment in 1994 in Lanarkshire, in Scotland. For 10 years, specialist social workers and outdoor recreation experts took in hundreds of male criminals aged between 18 and 25, and combined outdoor physical activities with counselling for youths who had not responded to conventional punishment and rehabilitation.

As the name suggests, the scheme was supported and inspired by the regimental elders of the Parachute Regiment, of which Sir Jim Spicer was a notable member. Admiringly, the regiment decided to give something back to the region from which it had drawn so many of its recruits. Despite having measurable effects on the rates of reoffending, the Lanarkshire Airborne Initiative was controversially wound up by the Scottish Executive in 2004. I became involved personally in the project when Sir Jim called me and asked for my help, which I was more than happy to give. Sir Jim had decided to pilot the scheme at the young offenders institution HMP Portland, using all the experience gained in Scotland. He wanted to establish a course that would be an alternative to custody, as opposed to a pre-release course.

However, unlike in the Scottish scheme, the Prison Service, along with volunteers, would run the course and provide the instructors, with serving members of the Parachute Regiment in support as often as resources permitted.

The new initiative was greatly helped by the generous donation of the use of the Duchy of Cornwall’s Dartmoor base, through Prince Charles’s capacity as colonel-in-chief of the Parachute Regiment. The Airborne Initiative is also extremely fortunate to have had two serving paratroopers assigned to each of its last seven courses. The carefully selected young paratroopers are generally a few years older than the participants, although closer in age and experience to the participants than most of those in authority with whom they have to deal. The extra guidance and support that the young soldiers provide, together with their obvious professionalism and resourcefulness, act as a powerful example of alternative life choices. I am told that the feedback from candidates is very positive.

I saw a before-and-after video of, if I recall correctly, one of the first courses in HMP Portland. Six or seven young men were interviewed before they went on the course, and again a week later, after they had attended the course. In the first interview, I saw what we would all expect. Regrettably, I saw the stereotypical image that is all too frequently associated with young men in prison: lack of inspiration, complete lack of interest, an “all about them” attitude, and no life aspiration at all. Probably there were lots of very complicated reasons for that—reasons that many of us here could not understand, not least home break-up.

Off they went. Then the governor said, “Now, look at this.” Then I saw the film after they had all come back. After only a week, their body language was completely different. They sat up straight. They talked to their instructors. They spoke to one another. One young man...
turned to the others and said, “I’m very sorry I got you lost for hours on end.” I said, “Hold the movie just there. That young man has just apologised to his colleagues for getting lost.” After six days, a tiny light had come on in that young man’s mind about responsibility, camaraderie and friendship.

Enduring the outdoors can be tough, not least on Dartmoor. I should know, having walked across it enough times. It is purpose-built to capture young men and women — although, as I say, no women have been on the course yet — who are slightly lost for many complicated reasons. All that comes at very little cost to the Government. Airborne Initiative is a charity, and one that is proving very effective. I was impressed, and the video reaffirmed in my mind that supporting this noble endeavour was the right thing to do. I very much hope that the Minister will respond to my speech positively and reassure me and our guests, who work so hard for this cause, that there is a way forward in the Prison Service to expand it further or, if not, to give the existing set-up the resources to do the job properly.

Today, YOI Portland has evolved into a resettlement prison, with fewer youths available for Airborne Initiative exercises, and the beneficiaries of that are the young men at YOI Feltham and Brinsford. The project is ably managed by the new course instructors: Keith Potter, who is with us today, Gavin Raines at Feltham and Lee Edwards and Rob Cowley at Brinsford. Each course caters for 15 to 22 young people, who are usually aged between 18 and 21, with candidates carefully chosen by governors, prison officers and other youth workers. According to a recent instructor’s report, a typical course includes dawn starts, circuit training, caving, swimming in the River Dart before breakfast — and why not? — and then a good hike, orienteering, hill walking, ice baths to repair aching muscles, cooking and obstacle courses, all complemented by fireside chats in which emotive topics are tackled.

All of us — I am sure that includes the Minister, beside whose endeavours and adventures mine, frankly, pale into insignificance — have sat round a campfire and talked to people from many backgrounds. I assure you, Mr Howarth, there is no better time to have a chat about life than when you are sitting there wrapped up warm, ideally with a whisky in your hand, and pouring out your woes — or not — to those around you. It engenders a very rare sense of camaraderie.

The course activities are all aimed at learning about leadership, responsibility and team-building skills. Obviously, it is challenging in places and tests an individual’s stamina, determination and physical and mental strength. Young men are taken out of their comfort zones and must learn to react positively to the environment they find themselves in.

In another experiment that I witnessed — this time, as a journalist with the BBC — I was asked to go to the New Forest to observe a two-day project run by volunteers from the fire service, the police and the ambulance service. There were 12 young people divided into three teams of four: the baddies, the not so bad and those who were there because they had been quite good and deserved a break. That was quite a range of individuals. I soon spotted the baddies, who were all too keen by spot. They were dressed in their tracksuits, and, again, their body language was: “not interested”. The phones were on, and they were not listening.

The first task, given by an ex-Royal Marine sergeant-major who was built like a tank — not a man to mess with — was to erect a tent to keep them warm at night. It was one of those dreadful tents with lots of bits, not one of the modern ones that go “ping!” and the whole thing pops up. The instructors said to the 12 people, “You’d better make some cover for the night,” and they started to build their tent. After about an hour, it got to a certain height, but no way was it going to provide the cover necessary.

The staff all went over, gathered the young men and women around and said, “Okay. What lessons have you learned?” There was a pause, and there were grunts and groans, and then one asked, “How do we actually do it?” The sergeant-major said, “Young man, that is the very first question you have got right. How do you do it? We will show you.” The staff got the tent and showed them how to do it. They all joined in and the tent was erected.

The young people were given various tasks to do. The two troublesome young men were intentionally sent on an assault course with two of the girls on the course. It was not very difficult, but the problem with the young men would cope with the young girls. The young boys thought they were tough and they were going to win at all costs, but as soon as they got on to the assault course and the girls started lagging behind, they had a choice: plough on or go back. Both went back and, by the end of the assault course, the girls were being encouraged and helped — “come on, come on, let’s do it” — and they got to the end, and they won. The change on those young people’s faces! The sergeant-major turned to me and said, “Richard, tell that to the do-gooders. Show this to the do-gooders.”

The point of my story is that it takes so little to turn these young people around, whether they are young men or women in prison or the younger generation that might, sadly, end up in prison. We can get to them. The answers are not complicated.

The Airborne Initiative boosts self-esteem while teaching self-discipline and the value of the group. It creates a strong work ethic and challenges the young participants to achieve their own personal successes; so often, they have, sadly, achieved none. So far, 331 youngsters have benefited from the beauty of Dartmoor and all it can have, sadly, achieved none. So far, 331 youngsters have benefited from the beauty of Dartmoor and all it can. The current reoffending rates for prisoners in the first year after leaving prison is 65%, which is a horrendous figure. Over the past four years, more than 200 young offenders have been through the course and reoffending rates have dropped dramatically. A fifth have gone into further education, training or work.

The Airborne Initiative has already held more than 30 courses on Dartmoor. Another seven are planned each year, with up to 22 participants taking part in each course. The initiative is working with the police and probation service, and courses are now included as part of an offender’s community service. In South Dorset,
we are justifiably proud of our role in developing the project. Former YOI governor Russ Trent, a big supporter of the initiative when he was at the helm, said:

“I have personally seen young men grow in confidence and build trust with people in authority during the Airborne Initiative. It’s a great programme that brings different parts of the criminal justice system together.”

There appears to be no downside to the initiative. With its success in cutting re-offending and helping young people to evade criminality, it should be cherished and promoted. That is the crux. For an enlightened scheme such as the Airborne Initiative to thrive and survive, it needs the participation of all parts of the criminal justice system, from governors to prison officers, the young offenders themselves, the probation service and all the other organisations associated with prison life. Regrettably, and to everyone’s detriment, the current situation in our prisons is becoming so difficult that even the most enthusiastic governors are unable to release prison officers to accompany their charges on the course.

Bill Wiggin: In my constituency, Monty Don, the television celebrity, led a team of young people. They gardened and kept some pigs and there was a huge improvement in their behaviour. A lot of them were drug addicts and drug dealers.

Any sort of interaction of any kind is a good thing, because cutting reoffending rates must be the Government’s No. 1 priority. Will my hon. Friend elaborate? We know that 20% of participants went into higher education, but is there anything further to say about the reoffending rate? Perhaps the Minister will elaborate. It would be the icing on the cake.

Richard Drax: I am not at liberty to give the exact figure on the reoffending rate, because the participants are still being monitored. There is a figure, but as the organisation is a charity it needs the support of an organisation such as the justice system to confirm its own figures and say, “Yes, you are absolutely right—it is x%”. All I can tell my hon. Friend, from the evidence I have, is that is it dramatic.

One issue that I want gently to bang home is release on temporary licence. I understand from the experts that the rules were changed in 2015. I have had dealings with governors at both the YOI and The Verne, which was a prison and is going to be one again shortly, and they say that they are unable to release prisoners because the criteria are so strict and inflexible.

The point that General Sir Rupert Smith made to me today was to compare a young man on a moor and a young man in a city centre maintaining someone’s garden or whatever. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that the young man on the moor will wander off and do damage whereas the young man in an urban environment could slip away, thump somebody or commit another crime. The system does not allow that sort of flexibility. That is the plea of all three people sitting behind me in the Public Gallery. I know from the governors I have spoken to that ROTL needs to be looked at urgently.

I know that the Minister agrees that we need to hand back power to governors—I have heard the Government and the Minister say that. Let us do a little more than suggest it; let us do it. Let us say to governors, “It’s up to you,” rather than mollycoddling or health-and-safetying—whatever the right word is nowadays. I believe that, if someone is in charge of something, they are ultimately responsible—that is their job. If something goes wrong in the police, the chief constable gets it in the neck. If something goes wrong in a prison, the governor gets it in the neck. If a Minister makes a total mess, he or she resigns.

There is no point in having something else to protect the person because that will negate the thing or create inflexibility, and they will be so terrified about letting prisoners out that they will just not do it. Let us be confident. The men and women running our prisons are professionals. Let them say, “Okay, Bob, Jack and Robert, you can go, but you three certainly can’t because you are too much of a risk. That is the assessment I have made. Off you go.” That is my plea, and if the Minister can respond to that point we will all be extremely grateful.

Several times recently, participants’ places on courses have been cancelled at the last minute. The last course in June, which was set up for 22 candidates, eventually ran with only 15 due to staff shortages and crises requiring manpower elsewhere in the Prison Service. For the Airborne Initiative, that is not cost-effective; for the young men who missed out, it is a tragedy.

As I come to the end of my speech, I want to touch on an issue that I feel passionately about. Buffy Sacher and everybody else will agree with me about what is going on in our Prison Service. What I am about to say highlights my concern. The most recent Independent Monitoring Board report on the YOI in South Dorset, dated September 2017, makes pretty grim reading, unfortunately. It describes “a broad picture of things worsening and intractable problems persisting”, and lists serious disturbances and cell damage. The number of staff assaults is rising and the number of prisoners with mental health issues is increasing—and they certainly should not be at a resettlement prison and YOI. Medical facilities are being overwhelmed. The lead member of the safer custody unit has resigned, and the flow of legal highs, such as Spice—I know the Minister is aware of this—is increasing. The report says that access to mobile phones creates “debt, self-isolation, self-harm, gang activity, violence” and “disruption”.

I inquired a bit further about mobile phones, because I was staggered that prisoners are allowed them. I can see that they are valuable tools for hardened prisoners who operate with their bad colleagues outside. Large debts are incurred for drugs or whatever else the prisoner is given by the gang member in the prison, who is also a prisoner, and then of course demands are made for the debt to be paid. Prisoners end up being bullied and family members outside are threatened; it is very harmful. I am just a simple ex-soldier—I say take the phones away. Give prisoners access to a phone on the wall once a day, like they used to have. I personally do not understand why they have mobile phones. The IMB also reports “grave concerns about staffing levels in the prison”, which, although up to benchmark quotas, are “unrealistic, given the difficulty of the prison population.”
I invite the Minister to visit the YOI in Portland. We would very much like him to. It is an old building on various landings. It is not a modern prison, which could be managed much more easily. The staff are divided into perhaps two prison officers per landing. If there is a conflict or a disruption on another landing, they are dropped down. They have no choice but to lock the doors—lock the prisoners in. There are not enough officers to manage that old-style prison. I have heard that complaint frequently in my many visits to the prison and the conversations I have had with members of the POA, none of whom are militant—they are all utterly charming and speaking to me and the governor in a perfectly reasonable way. Those men and women have an honest gripe, which needs to be looked at.

The Government are well aware of those problems, and I know they are moving swiftly to tackle prisoner officer numbers and pay levels, which is to be welcomed. That cannot come swiftly enough for what I term the forgotten army of prison officers, one of whom described conditions in Portland to the IMB as “Hell”—the “worst it’s been for 20 years”.

The report is not good reading. There have been other instances. A pretty grim report along the same lines was published the other day about a prison in, I think, Liverpool. Until we sort out Portland prison—the YOI is both adult and young offender, with a majority of adults—we cannot hope to get this initiative off the ground, because the prison officers are tied up looking after the prisoners.

Tough love—that is what I call it—has a proven track record. Where it is succeeding, let us back it. I ask the Minister, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, to look seriously at the Airborne Initiative and give it the resources and backing at a ministerial and Government level to expand faster and further. There are many organisations providing services to our prisons from the charitable sector, the voluntary sector and the private sector. In my experience some work, and some do not.

My criticism of the whole system is that there is not someone to sieve it all and say, “That’s good; that’s not good. We’ll have that, but we don’t want that. Let’s roll out that; let’s not roll out that.” It is a bit disjointed. This initiative is proving to be good and effective, and is cutting reoffending and giving young men a chance. God forbid, the alternative is years more in jail, which costs us about £40,000 a year for the rest of their lives. That is a fee that none of us wants to pay out of our taxes. This initiative really is worth pursuing, and I am fascinated to hear what the Minister says. I sincerely hope, from my perspective and from that of my three guests, that we have his support.

2.58 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in debates such as this. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on bringing this issue to us today. When I saw this debate announced last week, I said to myself, “Here is a scheme that I am interested in.” This year, in just the past few weeks, we have initiated a similar scheme in Northern Ireland through the Department of Justice, which has responsibility for prisoners. I want to use this opportunity to explain how that scheme works and to support the hon. Gentleman’s proposal.

After hearing the hon. Gentleman’s speech, I will say something quickly that is not directly relevant to this debate, although the analogy could be considered so. In 2016, I read about a survey of 2,000 parents of five to 12-year-olds in a nationally representative sample, which found that 74% of the children spent less than 16 minutes playing outside each day. The UN guidelines on the treatment of prisoners require at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily. The headline read, “Prisoners receive more exercise than children”, which is the media doing what they always do—looking for a headline that skews what the issue is. That is for another day’s debate, but it is worth highlighting in this one to flag up that we need a sea change when it comes to the physical activity of our children. We also need it for prisoners and those in prison.

We all know the saying, “If you do the crime, you do the time”, and we understand that. At the same time, however, we can rehabilitate prisoners to grow away from their past and go to their future, where they will have learned, been trained and be associating themselves with new opportunities, not going back to the past they once had. We are all familiar with TV programmes about prison—this week, the Piers Morgan one comes to mind—and in the USA prisoners might be indoors for 23 out of 24 hours, in a lockdown. The impact of that is great, as it would be here back at home. Another TV programme—again, not one I often watch, but I see the previews—is that one on Channel 4: “Hunted”. Some people go on the run by choice and other people try to catch them. I am very aware of some of the analogies in the world outside.

I turn directly to the debate. We have recently had a pilot of outdoor activity for prisoners at Magilligan Prison in Northern Ireland—perhaps the Minister and the shadow Minister are aware of it. Those prisoners were the first in Northern Ireland to take part in what was called the “parkrun behind bars”. I saw it on the TV news a few weeks ago, on 6 January or thereabouts, and thought, “What’s this about?” The scheme illustrates well what can be done.

The UK-wide parkrun initiative was piloted at Magilligan on 6 January, with 15 inmates and 12 staff out on a five-kilometre run. That was possible there because of the nature of Magilligan. Perhaps it is not for other prisons—I cannot speak for everyone because I do not have that knowledge—but at Magilligan it is possible to have the parkrun within the walls of the prison. In an intervention on the hon. Member for South Dorset, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), who has just left the Chamber, mentioned the notion of people going on a run outside the prison—but in this case they were not: they were on a run physically within the walls of Magilligan.

The pilot was set within the confines of that low-security prison. The scheme, barring any issues, could be a regular way of inmates getting exercise in controlled settings and yet outdoors. I have no doubt that the ability to enjoy the fresh air and perhaps have a bit of freedom readies prisoners’ mindset for what they would rather be doing when they are eventually released and get outside prison.
The news reports were that up to 412 prisoners could get involved as two-kilometre walkers, as runners in the five-kilometre race or as volunteer organisers.

People from outside were brought in to participate, which brings a certain level of normality into the project. The parkrun scheme helps with not only the physical needs of inmates but—this is so important—their mental health, which we need to focus on. It is well known that those who exercise regularly are better equipped to deal with high-stress situations; I am sure that every MP is very athletic, because they deal with high-stress situations each and every day.

The organiser of the parkrun, Matt Shields, said:

“We believe prisoners have a lot to gain from parkrun, not only because of the obvious benefits of physical activity and volunteering, but also because of the ties it will foster with their families on the outside.”

A certain mindset is needed, which is the focus of the parkrun strategy and what it is trying to achieve. I do not know this scheme intimately, as others might, but from watching the TV and news excerpts, it seems to me that it is an opportunity to do just what the hon. Member for South Dorset was talking about in Dorset and elsewhere, as well as in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Minister and the shadow Minister will comment on the scheme. I am sure that the Minister will do so.

Matt Shields went on:

“They can share experiences by taking part in parkruns simultaneously, meaning families can share results weekly and compare improvement and feel part of a common activity.”

So while prisoners are practising and training inside, their families and those outside can be doing similar things, which is almost an interactivity between two different locations, bringing people together. Parkruns have other things apart from physical activity—lessening mental stress and keeping focused mind-wise and body-wise for the outside.

As an activity that prisoners and staff can do together, parkruns also break down barriers and build cohesion among the prison warders and prison officers and the inmates. We are all aware of some places where conflict and aggression happen sometimes because of where people are, but this is a way we can do things better. I again quote parkrun organiser Matt Shields:

“For everyone involved we feel this is a win, win”.

That is surely a win, win, and one that could be replicated across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The parkrun at Magilligan is certainly a start, and other parkruns are being looked at, including in other prison settings.

To conclude, I certainly support a scheme that may—not even may, but does—help to provide benefit to the rehabilitation and mental health of prisoners in a low-risk category, such as category D, which many of those prisoners are, as long as there is no chance of putting the public into danger or harm’s way. Let us remember that we have a responsibility for the general public and to ensure that their safety is in place—that is our paramount opportunity and responsibility. However, we also have a duty of care even to those who have done wrong and are repaying their debt to society—I believe that in my heart—and there is a safer and better way for them to do that than with weights in a gym.

3.7 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing today’s debate. When I saw its title, I immediately wanted to get involved, because it was about activity and prison. I lead an active lifestyle because I am a football referee, and many of the spectators who watch me say that my decisions are so criminal I should be locked up for them, so that is where I thought I would go with the debate. Then I realised we were talking about something totally different.

My remarks are initially from a Scottish perspective, because the scheme originated in Scotland in 1994. I looked at some of the figures from and studies of the Airborne scheme, which, sadly, only lasted a decade. I found out that 58% of the offenders who started the scheme successfully completed it, and only the ones at the high end and those involved with drugs struggled. Crucially, among those who participated in the Airborne scheme in Scotland, reconviction rates were reduced by 21% in comparison with people who had been offered alternative actions during their time in prison. That was a crucial point—it was a successful scheme. Other things have happened in Scotland, but I can see why that one was taken on board south of the border and why we are having this debate to explain its merits.

Given my limited knowledge of the debate from the title, I sought a briefing on it from the House of Commons Library. I was very disappointed that the Library staff said, “We can’t give you a briefing, because we know absolutely nothing about it.” That is why the debate is important and why it is right for my hon. Friend to take the matter forward. We must get the message of that successful scheme out there and encourage its extension, if required, to ensure that its benefits are felt far further afield.

I also want to speak about exercise within the prison population. As I was looking for other things to discuss in this debate, I spoke to one of our researchers, David Robertson, who works for another Scottish Conservative MP. I told him I was going to speak about endurance activity and prison, and he said to mention John McAvoy.

I had not heard of John McAvoy until about an hour ago, but he is a fantastic and inspirational character who spent 10 years behind bars. At the age of 16 he owned a sawn-off shotgun and robbed security vans. At 18, he was sentenced to five years in prison for armed robbery. He got out two years later, and he was immediately re-arrested in a flying squad operation and sentenced to life imprisonment in Belmarsh Prison. On his very first day he wondered why there were so few people in the exercise yard with him. Then he noticed that one of the people with him was Abu Hamza, and it suddenly dawned on him the type of people he had been incarcerated with.

John McAvoy spent some time feeling bitter about being in prison, but decided to get fitter. He had a fitness regime of 1,000 press-ups, 1,000 push-ups and 1,000 sit-ups every day. He then became an amazing rower, broke the British record for rowing a marathon and smashed the world record for distance rowing in 24 hours. He did all that because he decided not to waste his time in prison, but to get involved in endurance sport and to carve out a career in it. He decided that his life was no longer going to be around the crime family.
that he was brought up in and that had led him to spend a decade behind bars, but that he would use his time in prison to get fitter and become an international athlete. &&

John McAvoy has written a book called “Redemption”, which is about how he took part in the London to Brighton footrace. I was gripped by the opening pages, which I read before I came here today. He tells us how he and No. 76 ran along and completed the race, and at the end of his opening remarks he describes how he went home, fell asleep on the couch and the next day returned to prison. So he did all that endurance racing while he was still a prisoner.

Now John McAvoy is a motivational speaker who goes out and encourages people who have been in prison, and who are ashamed of what they have done and do not want to be labelled with it in their future. He describes how he got involved in the local rowing clubs in London, and how people there were not ashamed to be associated with him, but wanted to help him. For me, that exemplifies how sport can be a great bridge for some people, and a great leveller. People can use it to overcome their past problems and look to a far better future.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset for securing this debate, which has allowed me to look into a small story that tells us about the opportunities that some people have. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned mental health. I was involved in the justice system in Scotland when I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament. An estimated 80% of the prison population in Scotland have mental health issues, which shows how significant the problem is in our prisons across the country. When four out of five prisoners in a country the size of Scotland are affected by mental health problems, anything we can do to improve their general health, wellbeing and mental health has to be worked on and recognised.

I looked up the World Health Organisation, which the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. It set up a European network for promoting health in prisons:

“The aim of the network is to promote health, in its broadest sense, within the prison community. It is built on a recognition that while imprisonment results in a loss of personal freedom, the negative effects of custody on health should be reduced to a minimum. It also endorses the principle that time spent in custody can be used positively to aid the prevention of disease and, as far as possible, to promote health.”

We have heard in this debate that the Airborne scheme, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset has explained, does exactly that. I support any measures that can advance such commendable aims.

3.14 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing this debate, which gives us an opportunity to air issues about purposeful activity in prison. I welcome what he said about the Airborne Initiative and the fact that he has brought it to a wider audience. I welcome his comments in promoting the scheme. He is absolutely right about purposeful activity and investment, and about giving young people and more established prisoners the opportunity to receive education, feel self-worth, contribute in a positive way to a task, develop new skills, work as a team, show respect for peer groups, and show and learn respect for prison officers. I join him in praising the work of the Prison Service and the very difficult work that prison officers do.

Any investment in building skills, confidence and trust; showing people that there is a life outside prison; and encouraging people to learn new skills is extremely creative. The scheme—a public sector partnership with the voluntary sector—is a very positive model, and the hon. Gentleman has made a very strong case for it to be looked at.

I came to the debate because I wanted to hear what the hon. Gentleman said. Having done so, I think there are two challenges: one for him and perhaps more than one for the Minister. I want to talk about those challenges and how we can build on the laudable objectives that the hon. Gentleman set out. In making the case for the expansion of such initiatives, it would help if he clarified, now or later, some of the key issues that he touched on, which need fleshing out. First, it is important to look at the value and the reoffending rates. He was absolutely right about the figures. Reoffending rates of between 60% and 65%—perhaps averaging 65%—are simply unacceptable.

The purpose of prisons and young offender institutions must be punishment—that means deprivation of liberty, being away from family and not being able to do the things that we wish to do in society—but there also has to be reform. Reform is about employment, housing, training, the removal of drugs and alcohol and the problems associated with them, tackling mental health issues, promoting self-worth and dealing with all the issues the hon. Gentleman mentioned. It would help his case if he could establish in detail from the Airborne Initiative what the reoffending rates were. He touched on them, but the details would establish whether we could attribute the reoffending rates to the initiatives that were taken.

Also, we need to know the costs per place in the scheme. The hon. Gentleman mentioned two prison officers having to accompany prisoners, which represents a cost. Are there additional costs that the Prison Service has to cover, and does the Airborne Initiative require public sector support in addition to its voluntary activity? Did the hon. Gentleman look at completion rates? I did not get a sense of how many people started and completed the courses. We need to know about not only reoffending rates, but the impact one or two years down the line. I know from my own school life, private life and business life, that I can point to certain things in my life and say, “That two weeks, six weeks or four days made a real difference to my life” when I look back on them two years later. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will undertake such an evaluation.

Richard Drax: I am listening carefully to the right hon. Gentleman’s excellent speech, and he is raising perfectly fair points. A point I would add—is this for the Minister, too—is that, as I said in my speech, the effect of the scheme began to be monitored carefully now or later, some of the key issues that he touched on, which need fleshing out. First, it is important to look at the value and the reoffending rates. He was absolutely right about the figures. Reoffending rates of between 60% and 65%—perhaps averaging 65%—are simply unacceptable.

The purpose of prisons and young offender institutions must be punishment—that means deprivation of liberty, being away from family and not being able to do the things that we wish to do in society—but there also has to be reform. Reform is about employment, housing, training, the removal of drugs and alcohol and the problems associated with them, tackling mental health issues, promoting self-worth and dealing with all the issues the hon. Gentleman mentioned. It would help his case if he could establish in detail from the Airborne Initiative what the reoffending rates were. He touched on them, but the details would establish whether we could attribute the reoffending rates to the initiatives that were taken.

Also, we need to know the costs per place in the scheme. The hon. Gentleman mentioned two prison officers having to accompany prisoners, which represents a cost. Are there additional costs that the Prison Service has to cover, and does the Airborne Initiative require public sector support in addition to its voluntary activity? Did the hon. Gentleman look at completion rates? I did not get a sense of how many people started and completed the courses. We need to know about not only reoffending rates, but the impact one or two years down the line. I know from my own school life, private life and business life, that I can point to certain things in my life and say, “That two weeks, six weeks or four days made a real difference to my life” when I look back on them two years later. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will undertake such an evaluation.

Richard Drax: I am listening carefully to the right hon. Gentleman’s excellent speech, and he is raising perfectly fair points. A point I would add—is this for the Minister, too—is that, as I said in my speech, the effect of the scheme began to be monitored carefully only quite recently. The charity now needs the Government’s help to monitor the effect even more carefully, and to do all the things the right hon. Gentleman suggested. There is work afoot to do that, but we need help from the Government if we are finally to get all the statistics, costs and figures that he has mentioned.

David Hanson: I think that would be valuable, because we are, like it or not, in a time of tight resources, particularly in the Prison Service. There are many strains on the whole prison system. If it can be proven that the
scheme has the value that the hon. Gentleman evidently believes it has, it would be a useful addition, for the reasons I have mentioned.

My argument now moves to the Minister. The hon. Member for South Dorset made some valid points about the challenges of operating a voluntary sector-funded scheme that aims to build self-confidence, education and self-worth at a time of challenge in the Prison Service. Perhaps I might outline the challenge for the Minister, who is new. I welcome him to his position and wish him well in a difficult and challenging job. He will have constructive support from the Opposition and from the Justice Committee, on which I sit. We wish him well, but in the past seven years we have lost 7,500 prison officers. I know that there is a move to bring back 2,000-ish, but we will still be 5,000 short of the number that we had before.

The hon. Member for South Dorset said that one of the challenges was releasing prison officers for the activity. Self-harm incidents, drug abuse, deaths from self-harm, and assaults—all on prison officers, and prisoner on prisoner—are at record levels. The Minister knows from last week’s report from Liverpool about the difficulties and challenges of broken window syndrome in the prison system. To make possible schemes such as the one that the hon. Member for South Dorset wants to make progress with, those issues need to be realistically addressed; I hope that that is constructive. We shall welcome the Minister’s remarks today, but his challenge, as long as he is in his present job, is to make an impact on the situation.

This is not just a matter of prisoner officer numbers; it is about attitude. I met Russ Trent last week at HMP Berwyn—which the hon. Member for South Dorset pronounced perfectly. Russ was at HMP Portland, which I visited perhaps nine years ago when I had the privilege of doing the job that the Minister now does. I know that there is good work to do, and it is partly about leadership, understanding, and giving governors and prison staff the time to invest in education, self-worth, respect, positive attitudes and teamwork. Unless the Minister addresses some of the structural issues, there will be less opportunity to support valuable schemes.

I have two final points, the first of which is about governor autonomy. The plea of the hon. Member for South Dorset was to roll the scheme out more widely and organise it. I am still not clear what that means with respect to the Minister’s central Department and governor autonomy. Perhaps that can be answered today, or perhaps it is for another day. Does the Minister have confidence in governors to make local decisions about deploying prisoners and prison officers to support such schemes? Where does accountability lie? The Minister can help today by taking on that question.

That leads to my other central point, on which I am pleased the hon. Member for South Dorset touched—release on temporary licence. If there is governor accountability and autonomy, if risk is managed locally, if governors have the resources to determine that x, y or z prisoner can benefit from the course and if the governor determines that the risk can be released on temporary licence, I hope that the Minister will give the decision his backing. If governor autonomy means anything, it is allowing those decisions to be made at the local level. If the Minister does not know now, he will learn in the next few weeks about the restricted nature of ROTL, which the hon. Member for South Dorset pointed out. The risk is transferred to the Ministry of Justice, and governors’ ability to make judgments at a local level is restricted, so there is a lack of participation in the type of scheme so ably promoted by the hon. Gentleman.

My challenge to the hon. Member for South Dorset is to get clarity about the worth of the scheme. I wish him well in doing that, because if it works, it will work well. My challenge to the Minister is to tell him that the scheme will not work, and will not be supported, unless he gets the basics right. I know that he is focused on that, but a series of prisons Ministers has presided over a reduction in staff and increases in incidents, self-harm, attacks and prisoner-on-prisoner violence. Those problems have not allowed good work to thrive. It is impossible to undertake such good work while dealing with drugs, attacks, self-harm and the problems that the hon. Member for South Dorset raised. I wish the Minister well, in the context of the need to do better overall.

3.25 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) for obtaining the debate. He made a convincing and eloquent case, highlighting the benefits and positives of outdoor endurance activities. I join him in thanking all those who work in the prison system, who are doing a very difficult job.

I know that the hon. Gentleman has a keen interest in the prison system, particularly in the challenges faced by prison officers, but also in programmes designed to help young offenders. One of those is of course the Airborne Initiative, which he has spoken highly of, and he displays great passion in supporting it. It is a breath of fresh air to hear success stories from the criminal justice system, and the Airborne Initiative clearly is one.

That is not to say that we must not talk about the challenges faced in prisons. The present situation is an emergency, which bleeds through to outdoor endurance activities, including those that the hon. Gentleman promotes.

I thank all the hon. Members who have taken part in the debate on an issue that deserves attention for the clear benefits associated with it. Some Members have mentioned similar schemes with benefits. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) talked about someone who went to prison for serious offences and was effectively rehabilitated and experienced positive effects while he was there; when he came out he spoke to warn others of the risks of offending. I have had the benefit of working on a similar scheme in my district, where rehabilitated offenders worked, in partnership with the police, fire service, local authority and others, with young people at risk of falling over the cliff edge into a life of crime. The message was a simple one, from someone who had served time in prison and was telling young people about the risks and dangers, and what prison life is really like. Unfortunately—tragically—a life of crime is sometimes glamorised for young people, and shown in a “blingy” way. That is just one project, and clearly there are massive advantages to be gained.

Being outdoors can have a significant impact on wellbeing. That cannot be overlooked. However, extended endurance activities can help to improve mental
health and reduce reoffending rates. Young offenders have often lacked such opportunities. Many have never have been part of a team on a 50-plus-mile hike over several days, and they feel the benefits even more keenly. Anything that can improve mental health in prisons must be seized with two hands because there is an epidemic of mental health issues within prison walls. Accurate figures do not exist because the Government do not collect them, but even optimistic estimates give the number of prisoners with a mental health issue as one in three—higher than in the general population. Many of them have serious mental illnesses, but many others have milder conditions, where exercise and meaningful activity can have a positive impact. Both the NHS and the Royal College of Psychiatrists endorse that. I do not profess that exercise and outdoor endurance activities are some kind of silver bullet for mental health issues; clearly they are not. They are a useful tool as part of a wider arsenal, as they can help to provide offenders with motivation to get their lives back on track and reduce reoffending.

Poor mental health and low self-esteem among prisoners increase their chances of reoffending, so it is only logical that positive mental health should reduce it. The impact on mental health of outdoor activity reduces reoffending rates, as do the Airborne Initiative and the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which cannot be encouraged enough in young offender institutions. In these programmes, offenders are exposed to a wealth of transferable skills such as manual work, navigation, planning and teamwork, among others that the hon. Member for South Dorset highlighted. All those skills can be used to build a CV and increase employability, or to light and develop a passion for activities that can be pursued through education.

It does not matter whether work or education is chosen; both reduce dire reoffending rates—almost half of adult and more than half of young offenders reoffend within a year. We also have to tackle the issue of reoffending to address the wider challenge of overcrowding, which leads to prisoners doubling up in single-occupancy cells and being locked up for most of the day. Outdoor endurance activities can have a positive impact on the prison estate as a whole among the offenders who are able to participate. As I mentioned, the effect of these activities on young offenders is even stronger, so programmes such as the Airborne Initiative are best targeted on them.

Young people who go to prison are some of the most vulnerable individuals in the country, and also the most neglected. They experience difficult upbringings and challenging circumstances that crush their self-esteem, sometimes leading to their becoming offenders in the first place. No one is born an offender; there is no genetic predisposition to committing a crime. It is purely down to an individual’s environment lacking support mechanisms or role models, both of which are provided by outdoor endurance activities and similar programmes. Instructors and supervisors give young offenders someone positive who they can look up to, and who can help build their self-confidence.

The positive impacts are there for all to see, but why are they not implemented on a wide scale across the country? Surely the Government recognise the imperative. We should be doing everything that we can to improve the life chances of offenders, to prevent them from coming back and costing the Government the £13 billion that reoffending costs. Unfortunately, unless the Government address seriously their underfunding of the prison system, wider adoption of any outdoor endurance activities remains a pipe dream. Their potential is constrained by the consequences of policies that prevent offenders from doing any outdoor activity at all, let alone week-long residential trips. Offenders are locked up for most of the day because of the increasing violence that has become all too common in our prison system, which a number of hon. Members have referenced.

That violence is the consequence of the huge reduction in prison officers towards which the Government have actively contributed, with measly pay offers and pressure piled on remaining officers. The dwindling prison officer numbers are the reason why prisoners cannot be let out of their cells, and why any initiatives to get prisoners into the great outdoors for the Airborne Initiative or other schemes cannot be adopted wholesale and rolled out nationwide. There are not enough prison officers to supervise them while they are away from prison, and there are not enough officers to escort them there in the first place.

The Government clearly do not grasp the benefits that outdoor activities can provide for offenders. If they did, they would not force local authorities to cut the youth services that provide the same development of skills and teamwork as outdoor endurance activities, and that provide the same reduction in reoffending rates among young people. Between 2010 and 2016, almost £400 million was cut from youth services, leading to a loss of nearly 140,000 places and the closure of 600 youth centres. The Government are now being asked to put the cart before the horse: to support services that combat reoffending among young offenders, but they should have been providing those same services that deliver the same benefits to young people before they go on to commit a first offence.

It is all very well and good to put these ideas forward; we should be looking at both new and proven ways to reduce reoffending and increase the wellbeing of offenders, but because of the Government’s policies, that sadly cannot happen to the extent that it needs to. Offenders are locked up for too long even to do basic outdoor activities, and prison officers are not present in the numbers needed to escort and supervise offenders safely. Although the Minister is new, I am very keen to hear his views not only on outdoor activities, but on some of the broader issues that have been raised in the debate.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I am sure that the Minister needs no reminding before I call him to speak, but it is customary to leave time at the end of the debate for the Member moving the motion to briefly respond. I call the Minister.

3.36 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) for bringing the debate. It was fantastic to see the energy that he put into it. His interests as an ex-soldier and as the Member of Parliament for South Dorset came through. It is great that an initiative partly pioneered in the first place by a Member of Parliament is now being pioneered again and promoted by another Member of Parliament.
The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made some characteristically powerful comments, reflecting on some of the practicalities of the subject and some of the moral and philosophical background when it comes to balancing the protection of the public with our obligations towards prisoners. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) provided a good example in John McAvoy of exactly the kind of transformation that can happen for somebody who would, by definition, have been considered one of the most at-risk prisoners most likely to reoffend. He has come through an extraordinary personal journey and transformation.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) was almost the longest serving prisons Minister in British parliamentary history, I think, so he is quite an intimidating man to have opposite. He made, I think, more than 67 separate visits to prisons; he has a deep understanding of the whole system, and I will not attempt to quibble with him on any of the things that he said. Indeed, he and the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) pointed out very powerfully that there is no point in simply looking at this thing in isolation.

For any of these schemes to work, we need to think much more broadly about who these people are, who they were before they got into prison, as the hon. Member for Bradford East pointed out, what kind of routines are—how much money there is, how many prison officers there are—and what kind of routines are run in prisons. In addition, there were practical issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset, which extend all the way from relief on temporary licence conditions to conditions in relation to drugs.

I do not want to expand on this subject too much or trespass too much on your time, Mr Howarth, but clearly the challenge that we face is very remarkable. We are all aware of fantastic initiatives—the Airborne Initiative is one of the most powerful and admirable—and we have been aware of them as they have been run for some time. The right hon. Member for Delyn will be aware of many such initiatives that he will have seen when he was the prisons Minister.

The tragic truth is that, although there have been incredibly powerful initiatives for many decades around the country, and although each of these programmes points to fantastic improvements, reoffending rates in general have barely moved. That has been true with more resources and fewer resources; the reoffending rates were roughly the same when the right hon. Member for Delyn was the prisons Minister as they are today. That is partly for some of the reasons that were mentioned.

This is a very difficult cohort to deal with. As hon. Members know, nearly half the people entering prison are almost functionally illiterate. Nearly 60% or 70% come in with pre-existing behaviour issues and particularly drug use problems. Nearly 90% are reporting different ranges of mental health issues. There is an incredibly high homelessness rate among people who leave prison, and they have many problems getting employment. Even the Airborne Initiative, a successful scheme, touches only the percentage of people—it is in the mid-20s—who get into education or employment. These are terrifyingly difficult issues to deal with and to turn around.

That is why the hon. Member for Bradford East and my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset were absolutely correct to pay tribute to the Prison Service. At the centre of a lot of this is the dedicated, tailored work of prison officers. We have tried, by having a keyworker programme where one prison officer is assigned to six prisoners and through some of our work with physical education instructors, to ensure that we build up tailored relationships. Having 2,500 more prison officers is important, because it will begin to make that possible, but each prisoner is different—that leads to the question of empowerment—and each prison is different.

One of the reasons why we need governor empowerment is that the kinds of education and activities provided for young, short-term prisoners will be quite different from those provided in a category C prison, let alone in the high-security estate. Governors need to be able to adjust.

Balancing the power of the centre with empowered governors is more of an art than a science. Obviously, in any organisation, we need to trust people and empower them. They need to feel that they are in charge, that they have the necessary levers and, in the end, that the buck stops with them. To take an extreme military analogy, the captain of a ship needs to feel to some extent that, if the ship crashes, it is his fault. Equally, of course, he operates in the huge system of a navy, where there are many other reasons why a ship might crash that might not be entirely down to the captain. Getting that balance right, setting decent national standards and holding people like me to account will be critical.

I expect to be held to account on some of the basic standards issues that were raised. Frankly, I should be able to come back here in 11 months’ time and show that we have significantly reduced the number of people testing positive for drugs in our 30 worst prisons. I would like to come back and present cleaner prisons and prisons with fewer broken windows, and I would like to be judged on some of the basic issues around education provision. If I am not judged on those things, I am not doing my job.

Richard Drax: As always, the Minister is making an eloquent and powerful speech. On his point about reoffending rates staying the same, the Airborne Initiative is aimed at the young. If we stop those people—all right, 20% is not 50%, but it is better than nil—moving on to category C, B and A prisons, we surely will be achieving. If the scheme works and we stop young people from going up the chain to more serious crime and longer prison terms, that surely will be another reason why it is particularly brilliant and different.

Rory Stewart: One hundred per cent! Any scheme that dramatically reduces reoffending does an incredible amount for the individual young person, because it gives them a chance to have a life that is not in prison, and for the public, who would be the victims of the crime that that person would go on to commit. It also, of course, makes a huge difference to the Prison Service and the prison population, because it means there are fewer people in prison and there is less pressure on the whole system. For all those reasons, reducing reoffending has to be at the centre of this issue.

Reducing reoffending is partly about the Airborne Initiative, but it is about many other things, too: ensuring that people have accommodation to go to when they leave prison and trying to ensure that they have jobs to
go to as well. A lot of that is not in the gift of my Department. We need to get together a taskforce with all the other bits of the Government and ensure that local authorities have houses to provide, that employers are really reaching out and so on.

There are brilliant ways of doing this. To take one example, there is a fantastic scheme being led by Liverpool Allcourse prison, where prisoners are being trained on metal welding and metal painting, and are connected directly with a company that employs metal welders at the other end. The same is happening with recycling machinery: prisoners make huge recycling trucks inside the prison and are connected with the recycling company for a job as soon as they leave the prison gate. They get some income—that can go into an escrow account, which provides them with some money when they leave—and a vocational qualification, and they get a job at the end.

The Football Association is leading a fantastic programme to pair every premier league club with a local prison. Two people from the club are paired with 16 prisoners, who train for level 1 coaching qualifications with the aim of filling a gap—we need 4,400 coaches in 16 prisoners, who train for level 1 coaching qualifications at the local prison. Two people from the club are paired with them. Fulham football club is another great example. It meets prisoners at the gate, takes them out, connects them with a catering company and stays with them. Fulham football club is another great example.

Prisoners really want through-mentoring. They want people meeting them at the gate. Clink restaurant is a good example. It meets prisoners at the gate, takes them out and tries to involve them in activities outside the prison. None of this stuff is a silver bullet, but it is all stuff that we need to lean into, facilitate and make easier.

Let me set out the action points that I want to take away from the debate. We clearly need to work out exactly what the problems are with getting prisoners into the Airborne Initiative and to solve them. I will contact governors so that, next time the course is run, we do everything we can to ensure that prisoners are available to go on it. We will have to deal with the deeper structural issues in the next debate, but the basic philosophy is absolutely central: if PE instructors in prisons, prison officers and the voluntary sector work on outdoor education and sport and think about how to connect those things together, that can transform prisoners’ lives, transform reoffending and protect the public.

Along with everything I am talking about in terms of back to basics—the stuff with drugs, cleaning up prisons, fixing broken windows, having basic standards and getting 2,500 prison officers back in—Britain, with its astonishing love of sport and the outdoors and the commitment of soldiers from the Parachute Regiment, MPs and everyone in the Chamber—can make a huge difference to vulnerable lives, and ultimately to public safety.

3.50 pm

Richard Drax: I will not keep everyone waiting for long. I thank the Minister for that most helpful reply. The only point he did not mention, I think, was about meeting the three guests afterwards to discuss ROTL and the problems governors have. If he could, they would much appreciate that. I thank all who participated in and supported the debate from all parts of the House. We had an eloquent speech from the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), whose experience came through in buckets.

I entirely agree that through-mentoring is essential, and yes, as we discussed before we came into the debate, it could be extended to adults. The only comment to make about that is, “Let’s get it right for the young first and really get it going.” I thank the Minister for getting hold of the governor and saying, “When this comes up, we want the 22 places filled.” Let us get that working and, as has been suggested, get the facts, statistics and costs in black and white. Then, if it really is working, there will be even more evidence to push it out.
Richard Drax

Finally, as the Minister said, the key is those who run the organisations, systems and initiatives. These young people get five days or six days of brilliance with an ex-regimental sergeant-major, a footballer or whoever it may be, who inspires them to say, “Oh, my goodness gracious—I have never met this before,” but then, oomph, back into prison they go. Through-mentoring will be key to ensure that, when they go back into prison, someone is there with the next initiative, or whatever it may be. I absolutely concur.

Thank you for listening to me for so long, Mr Howarth, and I thank all those who contributed. I also thank the Minister very much for his helpful reply.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Perhaps I will abuse the privilege of the Chair—unusually for me—and say that it was a privilege to chair a debate in which everyone who took part made thoughtful contributions. Taken as a whole, it was a constructive debate—even down to the Minister’s response, in which he set himself some rather big targets.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered outdoors endurance activities for prisoners.

3.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

A75 Euro Route: Upgrade

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the upgrade of the A75 Euro route in Scotland.

It is a pleasure to lead my first Westminster Hall debate under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I was elected to this place last June. In my manifesto, I pledged to campaign for more investment in Dumfries and Galloway’s infrastructure, with a particular focus on our roads. No road is more in need of urgent attention than the A75 Euro route, a 95-mile-long stretch of road from Stranraer to Gretna that links the south-west of Scotland to the M74 and M6 and thereby the rest of the United Kingdom. This trunk road is a key artery of Dumfries and Galloway’s local economy, and I fear that if we do not see a sustained programme of upgrades to the A75 in the near future it will have a detrimental social and economic effect, something my constituency can ill afford.

In addition to its critical importance to the economy of Dumfries and Galloway, the A75 is of serious concern to businesses in Northern Ireland, given that 45% of Northern Ireland’s trade with the rest of the United Kingdom transits through Loch Ryan in the west of my constituency. Halfway up Loch Ryan is the port of Cairnryan, home to two international ferry companies that operate ferries to and from Belfast and Larne. It is a route of strategic economic importance and a major hub for freight and tourism, with over 9,000 sailings per annum carrying 1.7 million passengers, 415,000 cars and 410,000 freight units.

Depending on their destination, vehicles will use either the A77 or the A75 when ferries dock, and because of the road conditions that can often cause frustration for convoys and drivers—something I can attest to.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the ports in Loch Ryan, of which there are two. They are extremely busy and getting busier year on year, but does he agree that there has been little or no investment in the road infrastructure leaving those ports? The road infrastructure in general is badly neglected, but the A75, an extremely busy route for the ferry ports, needs investment and has been neglected over the past 10 or 20 years.

Mr Jack: The A77 Euro route to the north of Cairnryan runs through my hon. Friend’s constituency. I both agree and disagree with him: I completely agree that those roads need a lot more money spent on them, but I disagree that they are getting busier. Part of the problem is that they are not getting busier because, as I will come on to in my speech, we are losing hauliers’ business down to Dublin and across to Holyhead and other ports.

Going back to my point about frustration for convoys and drivers, being stuck behind a fleet of lorries on the A75 is not a pleasant experience. The A75 is predominantly a single carriageway road with very limited overtaking opportunities. Poor roads to and from the ports are putting them at an extreme disadvantage and in turn threatening jobs and livelihoods that depend on those
ports. Last November, I met representatives from Stena Line, which has invested over £100 million to provide Scotland with a first-class new port facility at Cairnryan. P&O has also invested a lot in its terminal and in its vessels. The investment those companies have made has not been matched with vital road and rail development to help the ports remain attractive and competitive. Frankly, if such private investment is not supported, that is a disincentive for future investment.

The message could not be clearer. If we continue on the current trajectory of neglecting the A75, the consequences could be grave. The warning signs are already in place. Unfortunately for us, while we continue to talk among ourselves about the need to act, Northern Ireland has stepped up a gear and ensured that its road connections are keeping pace with economic development. That has resulted in a growing number of Northern Irish hauliers diverting their traffic flows to sail from Dublin; in all honesty, who can blame them?

Other UK ports, such as Heysham, Holyhead and Liverpool, are gearing up for the future and the increasing traffic flows of freight and tourism resulting from investment in the surrounding roads, whereas Cairnryan is in clear danger of being left behind. An easy, quick win would be for the Scottish Government to increase the speed for vehicles over 7.5 tonnes on the A75. At the moment they are restricted to 40 mph, but that could be lifted to 50 mph, which in turn would shorten the travel times that hauliers have to face.

However, it is not only ferry companies, visitors and hauliers on whom the condition of the A75 is having an effect. Local people in my constituency who travel the road on a regular basis are just as, if not more, frustrated. I commend the efforts of those involved with campaigning to improve the roads. Both Dual the A75 and the A77 Action Group, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), have been active campaigners on the issue and have argued their case strongly at every opportunity.

It would be remiss of me not to recognise that there have been some improvements to the A75 in recent years, and they are welcome, but they have not gone far enough and they are just a sticking-plaster solution to a much wider problem. Since 2007, more money has been spent on maintenance issues than on capital investment.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government have commissioned a study to look at the rationale for improving road, rail, public transport and active travel on key strategic corridors in Scotland, including the A75. I look forward to the initial findings of that study being published later this year, and I understand that the outcomes will be fed into a second strategic transport projects review. The Scottish Government have said they recognise the importance of the A75 to the strategic transport network, to the economy of south-west Scotland and to the rest of the country, and I hope they come up with the money to demonstrate it, starting with bypasses for Springholm and Crocketford. Those two villages have been making the case to be bypassed for years, and they are in desperate need of it.

As seems de rigueur in this place at the moment, Mr Betts, I am going to bring the debate on to the subject of Brexit—but, you will be relieved to hear, only briefly. As preparations continue for Britain to leave the European Union, it is important that our economy is firing on all cylinders and ready to embrace the opportunities and rise to the challenges that we will face. It is more important than ever that our road network is able to cope with the demands of a post-Brexit economy, and that means investing in every region of our country. In Dumfries and Galloway, I want an A75 that is not only fit for the future, but one that makes the port of Cairnryan the most attractive port for the transport of goods to and from Northern Ireland, a vital partner in trade and tourism.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I apologise for my late arrival due to the fact that I was at another meeting. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his efforts to highlight this important issue. He knows that, for our part in Northern Ireland, we regard it as an extremely important issue for the Northern Irish economy. We have had a number of meetings recently and our party leader is meeting representatives from the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and other constituencies in Scotland to discuss the matter further. He has our full support, both in his own constituency in Scotland and from a Northern Ireland perspective.

Mr Jack: The right hon. Gentleman’s support is very much appreciated.

To conclude, it could be argued that this is a matter for the Scottish Government, since transport is devolved, but at a UK level it is an important arterial Euro route that connects my constituency to the rest of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, as we continue discussions on the exciting borderlands growth deal initiative, I hope that investment in the A75 forms part of the final terms of that agreement. That is something I will continue to call for.

I am delighted that the Transport Secretary has accepted my invitation to visit Dumfries and Galloway to travel the A75 himself later this year. That is also an invitation I extend to the Secretary of State for Scotland. The road in questions runs through part of his constituency, and I know that he, like me, is all too familiar with the issues that I have raised.

I should also put on the record the fact that I appreciate the support of our neighbours across the water. As one Northern Irish politician put it, “Scotland’s loss is our loss too”. If we were to lose those ports at Cairnryan because they cannot compete with those to the south, that would be a great loss for all of us.

I want all businesses to have the greatest opportunity to make a positive contribution to UK plc as we leave the EU, but I fear that the deficit of investment in the A75 Eurom route, and the port of Cairnryan’s difficulties with that, will mean that it becomes more and more marginalised as an even greater volume of freight is lost to the central corridor ports. We cannot and must not let that happen. There is an urgent need for upgrades to the A75, and I look forward to hearing what the UK Government can offer.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I have had a double whammy of introductions today, answering my first session of oral questions in the Chamber and replying to my first debate as Minister in Westminster Hall. It has been a busy old day.
I begin by thanking and praising my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for securing the debate to fight for this road in his constituency. He has clearly been a great advocate for his constituency in his short time in the House, and I know that this debate is important to him and his constituents. He is clearly at the beginning of a campaign that he put in his manifesto for election to the House, so I have no doubt that we are going to hear a lot more about this in future.

I recognise that the A75 is a vital economic artery that runs the length of my hon. Friend’s constituency of Dumfries and Galloway, from the historic town of Dumfries in the east to the town of Stranraer in the west. Transport links are important in all our constituencies, but they are absolutely key in rural areas, underpinning local economies and communities. Those links support important sectors, such as agriculture and fisheries, which are the foundation of Scotland’s thriving food and drinks industry. I am sure we have all enjoyed the tastes and drinks of that great nation. They are also the lifeblood of the vibrant tourism industry in south-west Scotland. Many of my constituents enjoy great holidays in that area, although they often complain about the time it takes to get there.

Those links also make it possible for hard-working people to access job opportunities across a wide region, which is crucial if we are to be successful in rebalancing the economy, as the Government are keen to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) is therefore quite right to talk about the amount of investment that may or may not have happened over the past 10 or 20 years. Those links also link vital transport infrastructure, such as our coastal ports, to Scotland’s main road network.

With all that in mind, I am grateful for the chance to respond to the debate regarding the upgrading of the A75 in Scotland. I know that that is a priority issue for my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway, and he has previously raised it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. He is of course right to recognise the importance of trunk roads like the A75 and, indeed, the A77, which runs down from Glasgow, through his constituency and by the ferry terminals of Cairnryan.

I am aware of recent calls from the Freight Transport Association for the Government to prioritise infrastructure investment in that area, which it reports handles about 45% of Northern Ireland’s trade with the rest of the UK. The contribution from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) brought that to our attention.

Research carried out in 2016 estimated that the Scottish trunk road network as a whole contributes around £1.38 billion in gross value added to the Scottish economy. The same research estimated that the network also generates employment for 31,000 people, which is no mean feat. That is certainly recognised by stakeholders in my hon. Friend’s constituency and across the borderlands region.

As a result of the work of the Scotland Office on the borderlands growth deal, proposals for upgrade work for strategic road connections, such as the A75, are among the key asks. I am aware of safety concerns raised by many local groups, such as Dual the A75, which has petitioned the Scottish Parliament on the issue. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has tasked the local government partners to that growth deal to consult and engage further with all local stakeholders across the region to develop the projects. We are expecting significant progress on that by April.

The UK Government fully recognise the social and economic importance of improving connectivity and enabling investment across all parts of the country. Our investment and support for schemes such as UK city deals in Scotland, as well as the UK Government’s industrial strategy, demonstrate our commitment to help to support the Scottish economy and deliver for people in all parts of Scotland.

Ultimately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway has mentioned, road investment in Scotland is a devolved matter, and the need to regenerate the A75 is something the Scottish Government will need to deliver on. The A75 is the responsibility of Scottish Government Ministers and is managed by Transport Scotland, and its maintenance is carried out by Scotland Transerv. I am sure Scottish Government Ministers will note the points made today.

I was pleased to hear that my hon. Friend’s invitation for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport to visit his constituency was accepted; there is nothing more effective in getting investment for a piece of road than getting the Secretary of State to travel along it. I wish him well with that. I will most certainly pass on his invitation to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to visit and see the issues for himself.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. He is clearly fighting passionately for his constituency. He made a strong case on the importance of this road and the investment that it needs. If we are to secure those decent links, particularly between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, especially as we start to leave the European Union, this is something that really needs to be addressed. I sincerely hope that Scottish Government Ministers listen to the points that my hon. Friend made. I know he will be vociferous in making sure that they continue to be made in future.

Question put and agreed to.

4.17 pm

Sitting suspended.
People with Autism: Public Building Access

4.30 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the accessibility of public buildings for people with autism.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

Imagine what Parliament would be like if there was less information—less information at once, anyway. Imagine if we all agreed that there could only ever be one voice speaking in our debating Chambers and Committee Rooms. I will admit that I am not completely perfect in that regard, but just imagine what that would be like. Imagine if we redesigned the atrium of Portcullis House so that it was less of a goldfish bowl of sights and cacophony of sounds. Imagine if there were quiet areas where Members, staff and members of the public could retreat if there was simply too much going on and they needed to calm their minds.

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Gentleman’s intervention makes me hopeful that we might one day achieve what I desire, even though it would require a lot of self-restraint on my part.

Imagine if we had routes through the parliamentary estate that steered people logically from one place to the next with predictable and straightforward signs, few distractions and gentle lighting.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this important debate. I noticed with interest at the launch of the autism and education report this afternoon that there was a designated quiet space. While I would not necessarily suggest that we always need that as MPs, what a great idea for any future public events that there is somewhere for people to go if they feel slightly overwhelmed by the number of people, the noises or the visual effects in the room. Does she agree?

Thangam Debbonaire: Yes, I do agree; but I also slightly disagree, in that it might not hurt some of us as MPs to seek a place of quiet every now and then and still our minds, because there is so much going on for us.

If we did all that I just said, we would remove many barriers to people with autism using our public spaces. Would it not make a better place for all of us? It is about children, but also adults. I want to reiterate what I was saying: my life has been immeasurably enriched by children and adults on the autistic spectrum and my now husband, then partner, Kevin, started working with children with autism, as he still does, in a school that he runs. I am grateful to my friends, family, husband, his colleagues, particularly Paulla Keen, and my own staff member who takes a lead on autism in my team, Councillor Mike Davies, for what they have taught me about autism and about how bringing down barriers for people with autism can help us all. Like 99.5% of the public as surveyed by YouGov in 2016, I had heard of autism before; but in those 15 years my life has been immeasurably enriched by people with autism.

Paula Sherriff: Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking organisations such as Sainsbury’s, which is now operating an autism-friendly hour? That takes place about once a month, and is designed to educate staff and shoppers so that if a child is having a difficult moment it is not necessarily a naughty child having a tantrum, but it may have become overwhelmed by noises and things going on in the store. I have done a pro forma letter that can be sent out to attractions in my constituency, so perhaps we can encourage other organisations to do the same.

Thangam Debbonaire: I happily agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, other supermarkets are available, but I encourage those supermarkets to do likewise and believe that some of them are. Indeed, I will go on to talk a bit more about how we can encourage other organisations to do that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), is it not important to note that this is not just about children? It is also about adults with autism and providing the kind of atmosphere and location that they can benefit from.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not just about children; it is about adults. I want to reiterate what I was saying: my life has been immeasurably enriched by children and adults on the autistic spectrum who have insights and illuminating ways of looking at the world that I have personally benefited from and would hate to feel when being denied to our public life.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. I, too, have seen local businesses, such as intu Trafford Centre in my constituency, make tremendous efforts to train their staff and alter some of their business practices to welcome people with autism and to make the centre a safe space for shopping and leisure. They have found that it is not just people with autism, but people with dementia, learning difficulties or other sensory impairments, who have benefited as a result. Does she agree that what is good for autistic people may in fact be good for all of us?
**Thangam Debbonaire:** I absolutely agree. Indeed, that is the top and bottom of my speech: what is good for people on the spectrum is good for us all. Private businesses and shopping centres have sometimes led the way, and public buildings need to follow suit because doing so would benefit us all.

I am sad to learn from the National Autistic Society report “Too Much Information”, which was also published in 2016, that only 16% of people with autism and their families think that the public understands autism in any meaningful way. The consequence of people’s lack of meaningful understanding is that autistic people and their families are often effectively excluded from many public spaces. Half of autistic people and their families told the NAS in that survey that they sometimes do not go out because they are worried about the public’s reaction to their autism. Some 28% have been asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism, and 79% of autistic people reported feeling isolated. It does not have to be this way. I reiterate, along with my hon. Friends, that it is not good for anybody—people on the spectrum or the rest of us—for autistic people to feel excluded.

Although I am far from being an expert, I am going to share some of what I have learned about autism and making institutions accessible. First, I have a very technical definition, so bear with me. The “International Classification of Diseases”, 10th edition—ICD-10—is the most common used diagnostic manual in the UK. It defines autism profiles as:

“A group of disorders characterized by qualitative abnormalities in reciprocal social interactions and in patterns of communication, and by a restricted, stereotyped, repetitive repertoire of interests and activities. These qualitative abnormalities are a pervasive feature of the individual’s functioning in all situations.”

I apologise to colleagues for using a technical definition, but over the past few months and years I have felt that sometimes people think they know what autism is but may confuse it with a mental health problem or a learning difficulty. Although some people with autism do have one or other or both, those are not defining characteristics. A revised edition of the ICD is expected this year and is likely to align closely with the latest edition of the American diagnostic and statistical manual. I refer colleagues to that definition for further information, but it includes sensory difficulties and has clearer criteria.

When my cousin Sunitha, who lives in Chennai, India, found out that her young son Ricky was on the autistic spectrum, it was not a surprise. She had known that something was not right. Ricky was not speaking at age three, and there were other things that meant she knew that he understood social interaction in a different way from other people. It was a difficult adjustment at first, but I am proud of how my cousin Suni and her family—her beautiful daughter Rachael and everyone else in it—have changed how they interact with one another and with Ricky, and how they support Ricky’s interaction with the world. Their experiences in India illustrate much of what needs to and can change in public buildings in the UK and beyond.

As with many, but not all, people on the autistic spectrum, Ricky does not speak much, although he is no longer non-verbal. He has outstanding skills in listening, reading and writing in several Indian languages, but his lack of fluent speech—and that of many autistic people—could come across as stand-offish. It might make it harder for him to get information about how to use a public building. Although some of his skills are far beyond most of us, they are not typical. Making a public building accessible needs to include giving clear information visually and logically as well as a non-verbal means of gaining that information.

Again, as with many but not all people on the spectrum, Ricky likes routines and sometimes has trouble adjusting to change. Some people, they ask, “Does that make me a little bit autistic? I like routines and I don’t like change.” The National Autistic Society mentions the myth that “we’re all a bit autistic” on its website, but that is a myth about autism that I am keen to scotch—no, we are not. My routines help me to organise my day. Ricky’s help to prevent him from experiencing sensory overload and to soothe him when he does.

Ricky wants to take the same route to school each day, which is fairly straightforward, but when he goes on holiday—as he does when my mum, my husband and I visit India—some experiences can be tricky for him, such as a very noisy and chaotic queue for a zoo, which we quickly left. That is an example of something we did to accommodate Ricky but which benefited us too—I did not like the queue either.

We have been able to enjoy holidays mostly because his amazing mum and the rest of the family are brilliant at facilitating what Ricky needs to be comfortable, including certain books, access to certain things on his mum’s phone and certain foods. We are all pretty much in agreement about avoiding noisy, chaotic experiences that would cause him sensory overload. We have all realised that we like spending gentle time together doing familiar things. It works for me, and it means that Suni and the family can have a holiday.

We have built up to several days’ holiday each year because we have found certain places, such as the Green Hotel in Mysore, where Ricky knows what to expect and where the staff show great understanding, without any special training, by being thoughtful and by responding to specific requests from one of us, which can help.

Although visiting a public building for the first time could be a new and upsetting experience, an organisation can help. It can provide information in advance on a website, or on arrival in a leaflet, with matching, visually clear and logical information in the building. Even without training or an explanation of autism—I do not think the staff at the Green Hotel know what Ricky’s condition is—staff can be encouraged to accept different ways of communicating, and see them as a bonus to us all rather than a limitation.

When Ricky is experiencing sensory overload, he will sometimes use repetitive movements, sounds or actions to try to bring some order and method to a stressful situation. That could be profoundly misunderstood and seen as weird, disruptive or even aggressive. The response of staff to that behaviour in autistic people may make being in a public building unwelcoming. Indeed, in the 2016 National Autistic Society survey, 28% of autistic people and their families said that they have been asked to leave a public space, which upsets me terribly.

Some people with autism have different ways of understanding non-verbal social communication from neurotypical people. They may be very literal in their interpretation of what someone says and jokes and sarcasm may not work, or may work in a different way.
Again, that may be seen as weird, irritating or difficult and our responses might make a public building unwelcoming.

If people in public buildings are given clear information about autism—how it might present and what might contribute to that sensory overload—they can learn to adjust their responses to people who behave in ways they do not expect, without necessarily knowing that that person is on the autistic spectrum. Some people’s autism will not be noticeable, and other people may have no idea what is going on, but that does not mean that they are coping with an over-stimulating environment, sensory overload, disruption or noise.

Autism is a difference, not a disease. Understanding that difference helps people who work in public buildings to make adjustments or to change how they present the building so that even if they do not know that someone is autistic, the building and organisation are more accessible.

I have chosen to focus on public buildings because we should all have access to them as users and as potential employees. The ability of people with autism to do great work and to flourish could be even better if buildings were more accessible to them. My relationships with people with autism are a privilege. Their different interpretations of the world around us are insightful and illuminating. Making public buildings more accessible would bring those insights into public life to the benefit of us all.

Since launching the autism-friendly award in 2016, the National Autistic Society has supported over 40 public and private venues to become autism-friendly. Each organisation took steps to improve staff understanding, introduced pre-visit information, adapted its premises, consulted with autistic people and their families, and encouraged wider public awareness of autism, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) mentioned.

With help from the NAS, over 1,000 sites will be autism-friendly in 2019. That is fantastic and it would be great for us to be one of them. The parliamentary estate already has part of the autism award, but I would like us to go further. The NAS works with a large banking group that has more than 800 sites, so clearly there are businesses that understand the benefits of making their buildings autism-friendly to their excellent employees, potential employees, and customers who are on the spectrum. It benefits business and it benefits public space.

Public buildings and the organisations in them have no reason not to do the same. Local authorities should take a lead—hence bringing the debate to the Department’s attention—but schools, health services, the police and other public bodies should make the most of what the NAS and other autism organisations can provide.

In my own constituency, the NAS and the Bristol Autism Spectrum Service helped me to provide a more autism-accessible service and worked with me to hold what we believe was the country’s first autism-specific constituency surgery. I strongly encourage other hon. Members to do the same. We can and should lead by example in this place. In summer 2017, the Houses of Parliament received the National Autistic Society’s autism-friendly award, joining the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and Stormont, but as I walk around I can see plenty more to do.

Restoration and renewal is an opportunity. Under the Equality Act 2010, businesses and public spaces are not allowed to discriminate against an autistic person because of their disability. I am sure that staff here and in restaurants and council buildings alike would not dream of telling someone, “You’re autistic. You must leave”, but a lack of understanding could mean that they react unhelpfully to what seems like odd behaviour. That could lead to a situation that causes them to ask the autistic person to leave, in effect, because of their autism. My experience with Ricky at the Green Hotel in Mysore shows that staff in public spaces do not need to discriminate in that way, however unintentionally.

Businesses and public bodies have an anticipatory duty under the Act to make reasonable adjustments, which means thinking in advance. In October 2017, over 5,000 restaurants, shopping centres and other venues across the UK took part in autism hour, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) has mentioned. For 60 minutes, they took simple steps to make their premises autism-friendly by dimming lights, reducing noise and carrying out autism-awareness activities.

John Howell: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. I like the stress that she puts on the information available for people with autism. Does she have any thoughts about whether building regulations for new buildings need to be changed to make them more autism-friendly? How might we physically adapt older buildings to accommodate people with autism?

Thangam Debbonaire: I would love building regulations to be altered to take into account what needs to happen to make buildings not only autism-friendly, but friendly to people with dementia and learning disabilities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston has said. I hope the Minister will address that important point in her remarks.

In my constituency, local voluntary parents’ group SEND a Welcome, which provides mutual support and public-awareness raising for families with children with special needs, including but not confined to autism, has encouraged many local businesses, such as the Boston Tea Party on Gloucester Road, to do similar things. That means that their families can use local shops and businesses, and it is also good for us all.

That work is so promising and so welcome, but all public buildings should have more than an autism hour. We should have autism days, months and years. In fact, we should simply be accessible to the one in 100 people on the autistic spectrum. Everyone present seems to agree that that is in everyone’s interest. What is good for people with autism is good for us all. The findings of the NAS’s “Too Much Information” research suggest that adjustments are not happening as consistently as they should be. The NAS can help, but it needs to be supported by the Government. I hope the Minister will address that.

Before I draw to a close, I have some questions for the Minister. I am grateful for the commitment that I believe she has to doing better to ensure that autistic people have the right to public spaces. My constituent, Ms H., is a young woman at a local mainstream state school. She is on the autistic spectrum and has been in touch with me this week and on several previous occasions about the need for greater understanding of autism. When I contacted her about this debate, she said:
I recently went on a trip, and became distressed with the noise. I ask this because Thangam Debbonaire shown me what can be done in publicly owned buildings, and so many examples. They and so many others have mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and the NAS, Bristol Autism Support, the SEND Welcome, Sunitha and her family, my husband and his colleagues, equal right to use public space respected. My cousin changes as a matter of right, so that they can have their demonstrated great commitment to autism awareness.

Secondly, given the high level of social isolation experienced by autistic people, will the Government ensure that their new strategy to tackle loneliness includes a specific focus on making public spaces accessible to people with autism and their families? Thirdly, how else will the Minister encourage more businesses and all public spaces to become autism-friendly? I recognise that business is outside her Department, but good examples can have a knock-on effect.

Fourthly, what steps will she take to ensure that the renovated Parliament meets the access needs of autistic people and their families? I strongly encourage her to consider that issue and discuss it with her colleagues in other Departments. Finally, what steps will she take to ensure that managers of public buildings and organisations are aware of their Equality Act duties in relation to autistic people? I refer to schools, health centres and police stations as well as council buildings. It would be fantastic if she talked to her colleagues about that.

I began my speech by suggesting changes and asking whether they were too much for the custodians of public buildings to contemplate. They are not—and the time to contemplate them is now. Yesterday, we had a very constructive debate in this Chamber on the treatment of adults with autism by the criminal justice system, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). Today, the all-party group on autism launched its report on autism and education, based on an inquiry chaired by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Kevin Brennan). Today, the all-party group on autism launched its report on autism and education, based on an inquiry chaired by the hon. Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). I am grateful to them for their work and to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for her leadership of the all-party group. I also praise Mr Speaker for his personal commitment to the issue, which shows great leadership in the place. Many right hon. and hon. Members have demonstrated great commitment to autism awareness.

One in 100 people and their families deserve these changes as a matter of right, so that they can have their equal right to use public space respected. My cousin Sunitha and her family, my husband and his colleagues, the NAS, Bristol Autism Support, the SEND a Welcome parents group in Bishopston, the shopping centres mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston and for Dewsbury, my assistant Mike—there are so many examples. They and so many others have shown me what can be done in publicly owned buildings, and not out of pity or because being autistic is inherently a struggle.

I really urge colleagues not to refer to autism as a struggle, because being autistic means seeing the world and relationships in it in a different way. It is not a disease. Many people on the autistic spectrum value their identity as neurodiverse. We neurotypical people too often unnecessarily make things a struggle for autistic people; we create barriers where none are needed.

Autistic people are not making special pleading or asking us to feel sorry for them. They are asking for equal rights. They have a right to use public space, and it is time we made that right a reality.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I understand that two Back Benchers wish to speak. To allow time for the winding-up speeches, I ask them to speak for no more than seven minutes each.

4.54 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this important debate.

Everyone should have the right to easy access to public buildings, and the roughly one in 100 people in the United Kingdom who are on the autistic spectrum are no exception. Although, of course, there is more that can be done, we have made great strides in making public buildings more accessible to people with visible disabilities—take the advances that have been made on wheelchair access. However, it is important that we also make public buildings more accessible to people with invisible disabilities, such as autism. Easier access to public buildings makes it easier to go about one’s daily life and access public services.

People with autism should not have their access compromised because basic, common-sense adjustments have not been made to certain buildings. Accessibility is as much an issue for them as it is for people with more visible disabilities. According to the National Autistic Society, 79% of autistic people and 70% of their families feel socially isolated. It is crucial that public buildings are organised in a way that makes autistic people and their families feel comfortable going to them.

There are a number of simple adjustments that can be made to buildings to make them more accessible to people with autism, such as removing overly bright colours, loud noises and clutter; ensuring that signage is clear and explicit; and making the layout of the building more predictable. It does not take much to make some relatively small adjustments that can really help people with autism and their families.

Likewise, it is important to promote autism awareness among staff. Half of autistic people and their families sometimes do not go out because of concern about people’s reactions to autism. The more we educate staff in public buildings—and the public in general—about autism, the more accessible public spaces will be for people with autism and their families. Encouraging understanding is just as important as making physical adjustments.

It is important that the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local authorities all work together to make public buildings more autism-friendly and more accessible to people with both visible and invisible disabilities. The UK Government have a good record of
4.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on bringing the issue of autism to Westminster Hall so honestly, compassionately and clearly. No one who listened to her speech could fail to be encouraged and energised by it.

If I may, I would like to offer a Northern Ireland perspective. The hon. Lady referred to what is happening in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and I would like to give some introductory information about autism in Northern Ireland, as well as about some other matters. Statistical analysis has been carried out on the rate of autism in children in Northern Ireland, and its findings are concerning, to say the least. They suggest that the estimated prevalence of autism in the school-age population in Northern Ireland has increased from 1.2% to 2.5% in less than a decade. There is a significant difference in the estimated prevalence rates of autism between the genders: males are four times more likely to be identified with autism than females, in line with UK-wide and international figures.

The Northern Ireland urban population has a statistically significant higher prevalence rate than the rural population, and we need to try to understand why that is so. Worryingly, using the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measure ranking, the rate of autism from 2008-09 to 2013-14 was higher in the least deprived decile than in the most deprived. However, by 2016-17, the rate of autism in the most deprived area was 47% higher than in the least deprived area and 42% higher than the Northern Ireland average. Those figures illustrate the problems with autism.

In Northern Ireland, we have had a report by Autism NI and we have done some other work; I say “we”, but the work was done by the Northern Ireland Assembly, in which I served before coming here. Autism NI is a very active group in the Northern Ireland Assembly and it has come forward with some great strategies, visions and ideas for the future. Some of the things that it has put forward—back in my time at the Northern Ireland Assembly and since then—have been very significant.

My introduction to autism has been through interaction with people as a constituency MP, as a Northern Ireland Assembly Member and as a local councillor. I have filled in forms for parents to claim disability living allowance for their children, and I have dealt with other benefit issues as well as referrals for educational assessment so that schools can get the classroom assistants that they need. Those are the real things that affect people, and engaging with them is how we learn about autism.

An interesting point was made in a separate debate this morning. We come to these debates to add our bit of knowledge, but also to gain knowledge from others. It is good that we will be able to leave this debate with knowledge from Scotland, from the hon. Member for Bristol West, from the shadow Minister, from the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and, indeed, from the Minister.

The estimated prevalence of autism has increased across all school years. In 2009-10, 74% of children identified as having autism were classified at stage 5 of the special educational needs assessment. I have been directly involved with that assessment, so I understand the issues clearly. However, in 2016-17 the percentage of children identified as having autism and classified at stage 5 of the assessment had fallen to 63%. There was a slight improvement in that time, which is probably down to the autism NI strategy. That strategy has addressed some autism issues, although it will take a while to work out all the figures.

Autism is a massive factor for children and young people in Northern Ireland, but it is not a death sentence by any stretch of the imagination. What is required is to teach communities about tools for people with autism. I loved it when the hon. Member for Bristol West made a comment about a wee boy or girl having autism. As she said, people with autism are the same as the rest of us; they just have a different way of doing things, and it is important that we understand that. As I say, I loved that little comment, because my mind was working in a very similar way. I think that those who deal regularly with people with autism would know what I mean.

One tool that I have come across is the Autism Friendly award, which is provided by the National Autistic Society and helps to teach communities about autism. The award helps businesses to become educated and aware of what they can do to help themselves and the families who use their services. It might be a simple thing, but it can really make a difference, and that is what we want.

According to the National Autistic Society, 79% of autistic people and 70% of families with autistic children feel socially isolated. I have often been involved in cases with a single parent—often a lady—with an autistic child and a couple of other children. The children are all pressing upon her. I see such women in my office and I understand how they can feel socially isolated, because their whole life is focused on looking after their children and doing their best for them.

Half of autistic people and their families sometimes do not go out because of concern about people’s reaction to autism, which goes back to the point that the hon. Member for Bristol West made earlier. We have to be more understanding and not stare, as children sometimes do; sometimes adults stare, too. We need to be aware of these things.

The NAS website states that:

“Even though more than 1 in 100 people in the UK are autistic, many of them and their families still struggle to access essential community spaces, businesses and shops”,

so the Autism Friendly award for business is good. The NAS website continues:

“The National Autistic Society’s Autism Friendly Award champions premises who commit to making sure that autistic visitors receive the same warm welcome as everybody else.”
This doesn’t mean investing in expensive alterations or training your staff to be autism experts. Small changes can make a massive difference to autistic visitors and just a little understanding can go a long way.

We have worked with everyone from airports, heritage sites to sports arenas, local hairdressers and high street stores. Every customer-facing organisation, whatever their size or business, can benefit from becoming autism-friendly.”

That is what the NAS wants to achieve, and we in this House should want to achieve it, too.

I am conscious of your instruction about time, Mr Betts, so I will come to a close. Each venue that achieves the Autism Friendly award will help to make the UK a more autism-friendly place by opening its doors to autistic people and their families, whose lives are affected daily by businesses that do not understand their needs. I fully support initiatives such as the Autism Friendly award. They help to raise awareness and make a positive difference to families with autism, who simply need a little compassion, a little more understanding and — I say this gently — a little more support from the Government. I believe that, as a matter of principle, every single Government-funded building must be autism-aware and autism-friendly.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to this debate, and I wish her well in her new position. I should have done that at the very beginning of my speech, and I apologise for not doing so. She and I came into the House at the same time. I know that she is a lady of compassion, so we look forward to a compassionate response.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The two Opposition spokespersons are next. Five minutes each, please.

5.5 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, Mr Betts, to serve under your chairship.

I am grateful to have been able to contribute this week to not one, but two debates on autism. It is great that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was able to secure a debate on this important subject, and it is right that this House considers it.

Our understanding of autism has obviously changed greatly over the years and everyone can be grateful that there is now more information and awareness about autism than ever before. So far, there have been contributions from the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who mentioned the example of Sainsbury’s, which, in encouraging other businesses to contribute, is very much valued; from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), on how raising awareness can benefit everyone, which should be heard in this House; and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, as always, provided a valuable contribution and insight from Northern Ireland.

In the limited time that I have, I will take the opportunity to highlight two factors that are, of course, relevant to my constituency. First, there is the Autism Resource Coordination Hub—ARCH—in Hamilton, which supports individuals suffering from autism and their carers. Often, ARCH identifies local campaigns where it can provide advice and guidance on how to improve buildings and their surrounding areas, in order to improve the experience of those with autism as they live their daily lives, and also to encourage public buildings and spaces to improve their environment so that people can use them freely and accessibly.

Secondly, I will raise the concerns of one of my constituents, Julia Fordyce. Her son, Macoist, has worked with various services over the years. He has finished school and is now a young adult attempting to enter the workplace. However, his experience of entering a Department for Work and Pensions building on various occasions has been less successful than would be expected. I will use not my own words, but those of his mother and main carer, Julia, to tell the Minister about how they were made to feel in a DWP building. I hope that doing so will help to improve the services of all Departments in working with those who have autism.

Julia has said:

“We were greeted by 2 advisers who were sat behind a glass panel, Macoist found the glass panel very unnerving.”

She said that it was clear that the advisers had not read about Macoist’s disabilities and had no understanding of his claim. She continues:

“Our second appointment with his work coach was even more challenging.”

She says that the work coach insisted on moving rooms to recommence part of his assessment, which made Macoist extremely agitated and made the experience far more difficult than it needed to be.

Julia goes on to say that on another occasion her son “had an on-going sick certificate which made no difference at all.”

She says the work coach insisted on taking Macoist through the entire process once more, as if he had never read the documents. The work coach then summarised matters and Macoist agreed to a work commitment of two hours a week. However, she says:

“For Macoist any kind of change has a dramatic affect on him mentally”—that is, on his mental health. She goes on to say that for Macoist, travelling to new places and having new experiences can be stressful enough, but the experience in the DWP building could have been improved. It would have been improved simply if, for example, DWP staff had come to their home beforehand, explained what he might encounter at the Jobcentre and talked him through it.

I understand that it is not always possible for a DWP officer to do that, but I wonder whether that could be considered as part of guidance, or as an example of best practice, to take back to the DWP. Such experiences are very different for every individual, but for those who suffer from autism, they are not great. Macoist was ill-prepared for the changes to the environment that he experienced. That made the experience of working with the DWP less than successful and less enjoyable than it could perhaps have been.

Macoist is ready to engage. He wants to work and is keen to be part of the active workforce. If the Department for Work and Pensions can simply alter its policies and procedures, that would be beneficial. His mum, Julia, said:

“I know as his parent and carer I have found the whole experience extremely stressful and dread the next step of having Macoist assessed because I have very little faith that his disabilities or needs will be recognised and fully expect I will have another challenge on my hands.”
I wanted to take this opportunity to give a voice to my constituent. The accessibility of public buildings should not be exclusive to the likes of large chain supermarkets or cinemas; it should also be part of our Government Departments. They should ensure that they provide the best possible service, and that they factor awareness and experience into their own environments. Those who have autism and their carers face the essential challenges of everyday life. We can improve our own service delivery and our Departments' awareness and guidance. I strongly encourage the UK Government to follow the example of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and develop an autism strategy to improve individuals' life experiences and I think that is a brilliant idea. We should celebrate people's differences and not define them specifically by the characteristic.

In the same way that someone in a wheelchair is not defined by their wheelchair, someone with autism is not defined by their autism. They have different needs—the same as the rest of us. However, their condition means that reasonable adjustments should be made, and the Equality Act 2010 applies. Will the Minister commit to raising awareness among businesses and those who own and operate public spaces of their duties to all under that Act? Too often, we hear, “We are wheelchair-accessible”, and that is simply not good enough any more. An autism-friendly city should enable those with autism confidently to access community infrastructure such as shopping centres, tourist attractions and public transport. There is a wealth of information on the noise and the sensory overload of public transport systems, so perhaps we should consider how we can change that.

I want to mention my local authority, Wigan. It has autism champions at the business expo event to talk to businesses and raise awareness of people with autism as customers and employees. Those champions show that only very minor adjustments are needed and that people with autism can be excellent employees. If businesses rule out those people without thinking about it, they are missing out.

This week, we have had a number of events raising awareness of autism, and that is to be celebrated, but words are not enough, just as it is not enough to have an autism hour and then forget about it the rest of the time. We need action to ensure a fully inclusive society and environment. The wonderful example of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West and her autism-friendly surgery will make many of us think about what we are doing to ensure a truly inclusive Parliament and a democracy in which all can take part.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): If the Minister could allow a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the debate to come back, that would be helpful.

5.16 pm

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this debate on loneliness and inspiring contribution. I agree that quiet spaces and logical ways through the parliamentary estate would benefit us all.

We all aim for an inclusive society, and public places should be for all the public. It is great that 1,000 spaces are now autism-friendly, but that raises the question of how many are not. We have heard some worrying statistics. Some 79% of people with autism and their families feel socially isolated. Last week, I went to a Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness reception at No. 10, where there were many comments about social isolation and loneliness. People mentioned old people and young mums, but there was no mention of autism. I encourage the Government to add people with autism and their families to the strategy and to build them into it.

As we have heard from many Members, these changes can help other people, too. I often think about my mum who, as she got older, did not like going into crowded places with music because she could not hear the conversation over it. Simple adjustments will help many people.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned many things from Northern Ireland. We can learn from across the UK, because there are people with autism in every part of the United Kingdom. The Labour party recognised that isolation and the need to include everyone in society. Our last manifesto had the specific objective of making the whole country autism-friendly. As we heard from the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), many of the physical adjustments will not be major ones—a lot of it is to do with awareness.

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about children staring and telling them not to. Children will stare, but would it not be great if their parents could explain, “Yes, these people are different, but differences are what makes the world go round”? Being different is not bad, and that is the key point. It is about getting the awareness so that while people may stare, they will react differently and say, “That person is just different.”

Some councils and areas are working towards making autism-friendly cities a reality. Liverpool has the ambition of becoming the UK’s first autism-friendly city. It is working on museums and cultural spaces and raising awareness of the condition and celebrating the achievements of those living with autism. There was an exhibition at the Tate of artwork by people with autism recently, and I applaud the work the all-party parliamentary group on autism and thank other Members who have spoken this afternoon. I will run through the names so that Hansard has them. We have had interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and the hon. Members for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for their contributions.

I am coming to this debate with more of a technical view because I thought it would be helpful if I laid out what has happened so far, what the Government intend to do and how we will take that forward. It might be a bit dry—I apologise—but I wanted to get the technical bits on the record.
Autistic people prosper with the correct diagnosis and the correct support to meet their needs. Degrees of autism mean that some people require lots of support while others need less. I understand autistic people can face challenges in public buildings, particularly with orientation, noise, way-finding and signage, but also with many other things. People perceive an environment in different ways, and we are all on a spectrum of need, whether we are from a neurominority or whether we are neurotypical. My husband will work out which one I am; it is a challenge, but there we go.

We know that care is needed to shape our built environment to work for all. There are more than 600 different recognised neurodiverse conditions. Making buildings suit all is a complex issue. There are no recognised or accepted industry standards for designing buildings to meet the needs of people with neurodiverse conditions, although work is under way that I will describe.

It might help if I explain the current requirements for access to buildings, including public buildings. New buildings have to meet the access requirements, as set out in part M of schedule 1 to the Building Regulations 2010. The requirements are supported by detailed practical guidance in what are called approved documents. Volume 2 of “Approved Document M” covers non-domestic buildings and includes guidance relating specifically to public buildings. The guidance helps public building owners to comply with the regulations. It aims to encourage an inclusive design approach that includes everyone. To put the mind of the hon. Member for Bristol West at rest, we have been undertaking research into the effectiveness of the guidance, and I hope we will be able to publish that shortly.

Building owners are also covered by the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. In particular, that requires providers of services and facilities to members of the public to make reasonable adjustments so that people with disabilities are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared with people without a disability. The duty can relate to physical features and how services and public functions are accessed and delivered. I will come back to the issue of the Department for Work and Pensions raised by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East.

Statutory guidance does not stand alone; other sources of independent guidance can help. Many people turn to the British standard BS 8300, which describes accessibility and inclusive design for buildings. Inclusive design should address all forms of neurodiversity, including special considerations specific to autistic people. The British standard in that area, known as BS 8300-2, was published very recently, on 11 January 2018. Part 2 of the standard gives recommendations for the design of buildings in order to accommodate users with the widest range of characteristics and capabilities. It is applicable to the entrances of buildings, including outward-opening doors and windows, and to the interiors of buildings, such as entrances and reception facilities, and it covers much more besides.

Nevertheless, it is recognised that more needs to be done in the design of buildings to address the needs of neurodiverse people. Last year, to address a known gap in guidance on how to cater for neurodiversity, the British Standards Institution sponsored the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design to carry out a survey called “Design for the Mind”. Officials from the Department took part, and spread the word to generate participation among design professionals. Perhaps later on the House authorities might like to look into that matter very deeply.

Researchers spoke with many designers, architects, access consultants, autistic people, carers and specialists with experience in the field to draw up some basic design principles for making better buildings. The survey sought to understand how to cater for the needs of neurodivergent people. The report published in February 2017 identified 11 common themes, important for the design of environments. The themes address issues such as clarity, which means making things easier to understand; sensory loads, that is to say, making the most of the senses while avoiding sensory overload; layout, including having familiar layouts and providing a preview of what is ahead or beyond before someone enters a space; flooring; decoration; signage; acoustics; and lighting.

Some people felt that the most important consideration for design of an environment for autistic people was taking advice from autistic people. The survey identifies a gap so that others can take up the baton. The republished British standard BS8200-2 stops short on neurodiversity because it lacks evidence to back up more focused advice. The Government are considering a request from the British Standards Institution to match-fund a new, publicly available specification, known as a PAS, in the broader field of neurodiversity, which would include autism. I expect that we will reach a decision on that shortly, so I am delighted that the hon. Member for Bristol West has introduced such a timely debate.

As well as legislation and standards, we want to encourage the industry to strengthen inclusive design, including consideration of neurodiversity, through better education and training. In recent years, the Department has provided significant support for a number of initiatives to promote inclusive design, including work with the Design Council/Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment to develop high-quality, cross-disciplinary, continuous professional development modules on delivering inclusive design, and the development of a web-based hub for sharing knowledge, research and best practice in inclusive design. We are also supporting the Built Environment Professional Education project, which aims to ensure that newly qualified built environment professionals have the knowledge, skills and attitude to deliver accessible and inclusive buildings—not just buildings fit for the future but designers fit for the future.

Last autumn, the then Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), launched a design quality symposium at the Royal Institute of British Architects, where 45 industry and local government representatives met to discuss how to improve design quality, which includes how effective quality and inclusion are integrated into the places and buildings that we plan and build. There will also be a national design conference this spring to raise the bar even higher.

Today’s debate has been an important one, and we welcome interest in autism and the built environment, and how that environment is perceived and used by autistic people. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West on raising the issue, and celebrate the
valuable progress that the “Design for the Mind” project and the British Standards Institution have done to date to develop design and guidance.

I will try to answer some of the questions that hon. Members raised, particularly the question that H asked. The answer that my boffins have come up with is that helping children and young people to understand autism can be the key to peer acceptance. Raising awareness among teachers and other school staff will, in turn, help to increase their awareness and understanding. Since 2012, more than 150,000 people have been trained to deliver autism awareness training in education. That includes not just teachers and teaching assistants, but support staff, receptionists, dining hall staff and caretakers—everybody who is involved with pupils, including people who go on coach trips. We are currently in discussions about, with a bit of luck, extending the contract with the Department to do more on that. I hope that H will be happy with that answer.

The autism strategy commits to increasing the understanding of autism and building communities that are more accessible to autistic people by approving autism awareness training for frontline public staff, in line with the needs of their job. To answer the question from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East, I would add that the information will now be sent to the DWP to make sure that it can also take part in the process. I hope that the hon. Lady is happy with that answer.

Work has begun on developing a cross-Government strategy on loneliness in England—sorry, but Lanarkshire are doing their own thing up there, and in Northern Ireland. The strategy will bring together Government, local government, public services, voluntary and community organisations and build more integrated and resilient communities. We have also announced that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government now has a designated Minister for Loneliness—the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak).

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South wanted to know what we were going to do. Building regulations and British Standards are for all people, whether they are wheelchair users or someone with an invisible disability. Work to improve standards requires research, which is why we have commissioned the research about part M to fill in those aims and include everybody. As I said, the research will be published very shortly.

To conclude, this is about raising standards and improving the built environment for autistic and neurodiverse people. I look forward to working with everybody on the issue, particularly my friend the hon. Member for Bristol West and everybody who has spoken today. We want to continue the important work.
Leaving the EU: Chemicals Regulation

[Relevant document: Written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, on The Future of Chemicals Regulation after the EU Referendum, reported to the House on 24 October 2017, HC 389.]

1.30 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, on The Future of Chemicals Regulation after we leave the European Union and the customs union. Our Committee looked at that last year. I am delighted to be here with you, Mr Evans, and with so many colleagues to debate this vital matter. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for granting the debate and to colleagues for attending. I look forward to good speeches and good debate.

Nine months after the Environmental Audit Committee’s report, the chemicals industry in the UK remains deeply concerned about the Government’s decision to leave the European single market and customs union and the impact that doing so will have on their business. Today, I will set out why our chemicals industry is the foundation stone of UK manufacturing; how the chemical regulation framework established by the EU through REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—regulates the UK chemicals industry; and what the Government’s decision to leave the single market and customs union means in terms of jobs, trade, potential increases in animal testing, duplication of regulation and costs, the risk of tariffs and increased red tape.

Let us begin by looking at the chemicals industry. From the leaked Brexit economic analysis this week, we see market freeze in the automotive and aerospace sector, and curtains, and medicines.

What is REACH? It is the EU’s regulation, agreed by this country about 10 years ago, which regulates chemicals and hazardous substances. It covers more than 30,000 substances bought and sold in the EU single market. It also covers products and articles such as the coating on a non-stick frying pan, flame retardants in sofas, carpets and curtains, and medicines.

Our chemicals inquiry came out of our inquiry into the future of environmental regulation after we leave the EU. People kept saying, “You need to look at the chemicals sector”, so we decided to do so. The inquiry found that, first and foremost, UK companies want to stay in REACH. They have made more than 5,000 registrations with REACH. Another deadline is looming—31 March—by which smaller tonnages of chemicals will have to be registered. By the end of March, UK companies will have spent an estimated £250 million on registering their products on the database. One concern raised in the inquiry was that smaller manufacturers, looking ahead at the potential of a hard Brexit, would baulk at spending £20,000, £30,000 or £40,000 on registering a chemical when that registration could fall exactly one year later, on exit day.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the Select Committee and my hon. Friend on the report. I represent a constituency in which 7,000 manufacturing jobs are dependent on the chemicals sector and there are 1,250 jobs in chemicals companies. That exact point about the cost of registration has been raised by companies in my constituency. Some of them have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on registering chemicals over the years, and they suggest that in the Brexit negotiations we should seek third-country status, so that our companies can continue to register within REACH. Does she agree that that would be one route forward?

Mary Creagh: I certainly do, and that was the route recommended in the report. The report was slightly curtailed—we had to rush it out in a form that was not as fine and detailed as we would have liked because of the early calling of the general election—but we were clear that that was the most pragmatic and cheapest route.

The looming deadline raises the threat of market freeze. If a small company decides not to register and just to run down its chemical feedstocks, when a big multinational manufacturer comes to apply that coating to whichever tiny aircraft engine part or car part requires it, the supplier—in some cases they are unique suppliers—might say, “We’ve run out of that stuff now.” We could see market freeze in the automotive and aerospace supply chains long before we leave the EU, because of that deadline and the lack of certainty about what will happen.

Leaving REACH puts at risk our trade in chemicals. The European Chemicals Agency has said that without an agreement to the contrary, all UK registrations will be invalid after exit day. Therefore, the jobs of my hon. Friend’s constituents and investment in their companies will all be put at risk. I will come on to talk about the threat from double regulation.

Secondly, the inquiry found that the chemicals regulation framework established by the EU through REACH would be difficult and—critically—expensive to transpose into UK law. It is not just a list of rules or restricted
[Mary Creagh]

substances but a governance mechanism; it is an entire working body of parts. It involves data sharing and co-operation. For the UK to establish a duplicate system of chemicals regulation, as the Minister proposed when she gave evidence to us, will be expensive for us—the taxpayer—or the industry, or both.

Thirdly, after Brexit, REACH could become zombie legislation, which is no longer monitored, updated or enforced. When we debated the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, I tabled new clause 61 to try to remedy that by ensuring that we remained part of REACH. However, it is part of the difficult third of EU environmental legislation that cannot be neatly cut and pasted into UK law through that Bill. The Minister in response said that the REACH regulation is directly applicable, but that is essentially meaningless without the chemicals agency to govern and regulate it. We will end up having zombie legislation, duplicating regulation and potentially diverging from the EU, which could also be a bad thing for British business.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend did an excellent job on this report and is doing an excellent job of leading the debate. Does she share my concern that when the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs gave evidence to the Committee, it seemed to have only just started conversations with the chemicals industry about all these issues and how complicated they would be? It was almost on a learning exercise—doing its homework—long after article 50 had been triggered.

Mary Creagh: I did notice that. I went over the road to read the impact assessments that were not impact assessments, and it was good to read a secret document on the chemicals sector that quoted our Committee’s report heavily. There was some good analysis in there, but I was grateful to see that however thin our report was, the civil servants involved had looked at the evidence we had taken. It was certainly a very useful exercise.

The Government’s response to our report was pretty thin gruel—a couple of pages, and quite dismissive. That reflects what my hon. Friend says about the Government making it up as they go along. They are knitting their own policy as they go. There is nothing wrong with knitting, but we do not want something that ends up full of holes.

We put out the response because we wanted to see what the industry would do. It is fair to say that last year, when we were doing the report, the industry was perhaps more concerned about the impact of tariff barriers than it was about regulatory barriers. It was happy to give Government the benefit of the doubt, to believe what it was hearing and to accept reassurances, but as the exit day deadline heaves into view, that belief has been replaced by thorough scepticism and in some cases downright fear, particularly about the impact of a hard Brexit.

We put the Government’s response up on our Committee’s website and invited comments. The Chemical Business Association said, “the Government’s response to the EAC’s report is woefully inadequate. It fails to provide even an outline of how the Government will manage chemicals regulation post-Brexit.”

EEF, the manufacturers’ organisation, said:

“The degree of uncertainty in this area is causing concern not just in the chemicals industry but also very much among downstream manufacturing industries which are reliant on a wide range of substances and chemical formulations.”

That is why 20% of the 126 companies represented by the Chemical Business Association were looking at moving to the EU. We had that evidence almost a year ago, and it would be interesting to know how many of them have established presences in Dublin, Paris or Frankfurt.

On a recent visit in my Wakefield constituency I went to a bed manufacturer, Global Components. It is in Ossett, in what used to be called the heavy woollen district—the Dewsbury part of my constituency. I was not expecting to hear about Brexit, but the company told me that 90% of its products are imports, so it has been hit by the fall in the value of the pound. It is finding it harder to recruit new staff and has delayed a major investment as a result of uncertainties over Brexit. Crucially, the foam it uses in its mattresses comes from a German supplier, and the price of that foam has risen by 30% since the referendum. Global Components is having great difficulty passing those costs on to its consumers.

The European Chemicals Agency has been very clear that without an agreement to the contrary, all UK company registrations will be invalid after exit day. No REACH means no licences. No licences means no market access. No market access means no trade. It is that simple. As one senior executive said to me, on condition that I did not say his name or his company, “Brexit is a business-killing issue.”

If we leave the single market and the customs union, businesses will no longer have access to the database they helped to fund and build. UK science, testing, ingenuity, innovation and creativity helped to build the database. UK scientists are present in Helsinki. We helped to build the database, but now we are ripping ourselves out of it and we will no longer have the detailed safety information on all the chemicals that are handled and produced. Obviously, that is of great concern to my own trade union, the GMB, which represents workers in what can often be hazardous industries.

What choice is left to our constituents and companies? UK companies that want to continue to trade must set up what is called an only representative in the EU to re-register with REACH the registrations they used to have. That is absolutely absurd, and it is duplication. If those companies want to stay registered, they must set up somebody in a European Union member state and pay twice for something they have already bought. That is the height of absurdity. It is a huge duplication of costs, and it risks making UK chemicals and manufacturing uncompetitive. Companies could ask the importer to register themselves, but why would they do that? Why would they take on the cost and documentation? They will just switch to an alternative supplier, and that will be bad for British jobs, British growth and British businesses.
Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend share the concerns of businesses in my constituency? Even if the Government are able to say that existing registrations would continue to be recognised in both European and UK law under some form of deal—the Minister suggested in a letter to me that that was the Government’s preferred position—that would not offer any certainty about future registrations and might lead to businesses relocating out of the UK altogether.

Mary Creagh: I do share my hon. Friend’s concerns. UK industry is not waiting for the Government to sort this out; it is already voting with its feet on this issue, delaying investment and winding down operations. None of that is being announced. I asked one senior executive why not, and he said, “In all my years in this industry, I’ve never done a press release announcing job losses and closures. This is not something we want to talk about.” That is understandable, but we have also seen courage—in the case of the chief executive of Airbus, for example, who has talked about how manufacturing and competitiveness will be hit. Our debate goes into the detail underpinning that: what do we mean when we say that, and what will it cost in jobs?

I turn now to what was a touchstone issue during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: the issue of animals and animal testing. We might be able to stay in the registration, but will we be able to stay in the knowledge-sharing scheme? If we do not participate in European Chemicals Agency scientific committees or the forum for exchange on enforcement, we may need more animal tests to be done in this country—something that none of us would welcome. At the moment, UK companies registering chemicals within REACH must share data from animal testing. Other registrants access that data, which minimises the need to carry out and duplicate animal testing, but only participants in REACH have access to that data, so we could see an unwelcome increase in animal testing.

The REACH framework is built on co-operation between signatories. It contains obligations, oversight and control mechanisms. It requires freedom of movement of products between all signing countries. If we do not co-operate in that way, how will we ensure that human health and our environment are protected from chemical hazards, and how will we stop our country from becoming a chemical dumping ground?

As an aside, the Committee travelled to the US to see how it regulates chemicals. We were pleased to hear that the US, after 50 or 60 years of fighting the chemicals industry on the issue, has set up its Toxic Substances Control Act, although there was a question mark over its implementation with the arrival of the new regime under President Trump. We also heard that the EU’s chemical standard was seen as the global gold standard and was being used by the states of California and New York; that things such as babies’ bottles were advertised and marketed as meeting EU chemicals standards as a badge of honour and safety; and that the US chemicals industry had asked for that regulation to keep up and compete with European chemical products and articles.

We also heard that the de-regulatory lobbying and the Americans’ approach in this area had led to the absurdity of asbestos—a known carcinogen hazardous to human health—never having been banned in the United States. I am sure that the citizens of this country, whatever their thoughts when casting their vote for leave or remain, were not asking for an increase in animal testing, a decrease in jobs and the supposed freedom to follow a weaker regulatory regime.

The Government have said that they want to set up their own chemicals agency, but they really have to clarify what system of registering, monitoring and authorising chemicals will be used in the UK post exit. The clock is ticking. What is the plan? How will decisions be made after exit day? Will we be like Switzerland, which does not have access to the REACH database, or Norway, which does, through its membership of the European economic area? How does the Minister propose to protect our £14 billion export trade with the EU?

The Government’s 25-year environment plan promises a new chemicals strategy that will set out the Government’s approach as the UK leaves the EU. I hope we will not wait two and a half years for that new chemicals strategy in the way we did for the environment plan. The Government say that the new strategy will “build on existing approaches”. When will we see it? When will it be published?

Words and phrases such as “build on existing approaches”, “looking” and “monitoring” are a prime example of the “muddling through” that former Department for Exiting the European Union Minister Lord Bridges talked about in the other place on Tuesday. Although we are not clear about what will happen during the two years of the Brexit transition phase—if it is for two years; it will perhaps be longer—Lord Bridges has warned that it “will be a gang plank into thin air.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 30 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1423.]

We must not force our chemicals industry to walk down it. Will the Minister clarify whether there will be a two-year transition period during which we will remain a member of REACH? Businesses need that clarity.

Let us look at the IT aspect of setting up our own agency. The European Chemicals Agency has a budget of more than £100 million a year and 500 staff to manage its database and monitor compliance. Will we still have our own agency? The Minister’s civil servant told our Committee that a new agency would cost tens of millions of pounds. Who will pay for that extravagant bauble? Will it be industry, which already has the double burden of re-registering the stuff they have already registered with REACH, and would then have to register again in a UK system—a triple whammy—or the taxpayer?

Several witnesses expressed concerns to the Committee about the Government’s poor track record in setting up IT projects. Setting up our own database will be expensive, and we have seen the beginnings of the taxpayer footing the bill for it. The DEFRA permanent secretary wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 18 January requesting a ministerial direction to approve a spend of £5.8 million between February and July this year on the delivery of a new IT system for registering and regulating chemical substances placed on the UK market, as part of the preparations for a no-deal Brexit.

Will the Minister tell the House what that £5.8 million will pay for, the total estimated cost of the new agency, the total estimated cost of the new database and how much it will cost every year to run the system? How many staff will be needed and what happens to them if...
the Government negotiate to stay in REACH, as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), told Parliament could happen only this morning? How will we recruit the best people to a job that may not be there in a year’s time?

The UK’s chemicals sector will see its costs treble: it will re-register with REACH, thereby losing the money it spent first registering with REACH, and will also have to register with a new UK regime. However, the pain will not stop there. Leaving the customs union will compound that pain. As well as the regulatory barriers, the risks of tariffs and customs red tape on chemicals could cost companies dearly. A Chemicals Industry Association Brexit survey suggests that tariffs on imports could be in excess of £350 million, while re-exporting could cost £250 million.

Ministers often fail to understand that intra-company trade is a significant percentage of those imports and exports. We import things from the EU to make the wings of an Airbus aeroplane in Alyn and Deeside and then export them to Toulouse, where they are fixed on to an aircraft. Those are intra-company imports and exports, and customs and tariffs and paying more money to import and export such things will make British industry non-competitive.

When I first asked the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how he planned to regulate chemicals after the UK leaves the EU back in July, he said, “Better”, and sat down. However, 20 months after the referendum, things are much worse. I hope I have explained why “better” is simply not possible. Remaining close to REACH is not only unavoidable—it is desirable, pragmatic and sensible. Staying in REACH is the right thing for jobs, British growth and British investment, and the majority of our inquiry’s witnesses supported continued membership of REACH. The Green Alliance said:

“The REACH regime is the most advanced in the world, protecting citizens and the environment from tens of thousands of chemicals.”

Our Committee recommends that the UK remains in REACH. It is the passport to a global marketplace. UK companies do not care whether that passport is blue or brown, so long as it does not kill jobs and investment. Leaving REACH could mean lower environmental or safety standards than in the EU, exposing UK workers, consumers and the environment to greater risks. Leaving REACH places huge additional financial burdens on the chemicals industry and the UK taxpayer to comply with two different sets of regulations. Leaving the customs union creates the added danger of tariffs.

I look forward to the Minister’s response to colleagues’ speeches and to hearing how she will provide the certainty that our businesses and our constituents rightly crave.

1.57 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am afraid that I may have to leave early to travel back to the frozen north. I appreciate your indulgence in that.

I congratulate my colleagues on the Environmental Audit Committee on producing the report. I have become a devoted environmentalist since serving with my colleagues on the Committee. I am a farmer, and partly an organic farmer, and as I said to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) the other day, I once owned a vegan food manufacturer, of all the bizarre things. However, I am also a beef farmer. I seem to be crossing the divide.

The report was written largely before I joined the venerable Committee, which is so ably chaired by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) with her typically collegiate approach, which I very much enjoy. Not being the author of the report, I will be brief. The report recommends that the Government take a pragmatic approach to the UK’s relationship with the EU’s single market for chemicals, and in particular that it should seek to remain a participant in the registration process for those chemicals.

I represent Gordon, the constituency with the biggest oil and gas footprint, so hon. Members will see how difficult it is for me to be on the Environmental Audit Committee. However, I see oil and gas as part of the solution, not part of the problem. The oil and gas industry is clearly a massive feedstock supplier to the chemicals industry, which employs 157,000 people. To put that into perspective, the oil and gas industry employs 320,000 people, down from 460,000.

The UK could decide to follow the regulatory decisions made through REACH—the regulation on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—or to take a different approach while still allowing UK companies to sell their products in both the UK and the EU, thanks to continued data sharing. Oil and gas is an international, dollar-denominated industry; 60% of oil and gas exports are outside the EU. Oil and gas should be an example to other sectors of how there may be good things outwith the EU. UK oil and gas, a bit like the UK chemicals industry, sets EU standards and has done for the 40 years during which it has been producing. The Government indicating that they have no intention of aligning the future UK system of chemicals regulation with that of the US is welcome news. However, the experience of the US in providing consistent regulation across the country, rather than allowing variations from one state to another, could be a model for the Government should the UK decide to establish its own system. I say that because we have UK-wide frameworks and we will be maintaining the single market within the UK.

As I am not the author of the report, that is how brief I am going to be.

Mary Creagh: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has spoken on the report, and it has been fascinating to hear about the oil and gas industry, but does he agree that the experience in respect of, in particular, worker protection in that industry has been potentially much weaker outside the UK? I am thinking of the experience of Deepwater Horizon and some of the environmental degradation in the Niger delta in particular. Those are not models that we would wish to follow in our own oilfields, where we want workers and, of course, the environment to be protected.

Colin Clark: That is a very interesting point. The UK and Norway are obviously the two biggest oil and gas producers, by a long way. UK regulation has set EU regulation for the last 40 years; and interestingly, the EU is currently trying to put through regulation that
Nord will not accept, because it feels that its regulation is already higher. I am therefore very optimistic that the oil and gas industry in the UK and in Norway will continue to set standards. It will be interesting to see how the UK chemicals industry will set international standards and have an effect on the EU going forward.

I look forward to greater participation in the Environmental Audit Committee, and I hope that the next time I stand here I am a signatory to its report.

2.1 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I congratulate the EAC on its report and my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on her very clear and detailed explanation and defence of its recommendations, which I entirely endorse.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark). He had no need to justify his position as both an MP for a constituency with oil and gas interests and as someone with an interest in the environment. If we dichotomise those two very important issues, we do a disservice to the country. The oil and gas industry remains important; it will not disappear overnight. We need to work hard to reconcile those two key interests as much as we can.

This topic is critically important. I am chair of the all-party group on the chemical industry, and this report is of great interest to me and to the all-party group. I reinforce the point that the chemicals sector directly contributes £6.4 billion to the UK economy each year and employs approximately 88,000 people—in all the areas that my hon. Friend outlined but also in areas such as the south bank of the Humber, where it is a critically important employer.

As has been pointed out, 60% of our chemical exports go to the European Union, and 75% of our imports in this sector come from the bloc. We must recognise that the chemicals sector has an important impact on all manufacturing sectors—in my constituency, for instance, we have the steel sector, which is an important downstream recipient of chemical products—and therefore the knock-on effects of regulation in this sphere will be profound and felt far and wide.

Mary Creagh: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the brilliant work that she has done in chairing the APPG and ensuring that the voice of the chemicals industry is heard loud and clear in this place. Does she agree that the issue is not just upstream but downstream chemicals, affecting things as diverse as kidney dialysis chemicals and machines, artificial limbs and so on? It spreads right out into the medical industry as well. We do not want there to be unintended or unforeseen consequences, because chemicals really do network out into every nook and cranny of our lives.

Angela Smith: I agree. That is why chemicals are considered one of our key foundation industries that is of profound importance to the UK economy in every respect. On that basis, it is imperative that we get this right; on that, at least, I hope that we all agree.

The Environmental Audit Committee made several very sensible recommendations as part of its inquiry. However, in their response, the Government have given very little away about policy proposals. Nine months later, and with the Brexit date looming on the horizon, I, alongside the sector, the members of the Committee and Parliament more generally, remain deeply concerned by the lack of clarity.

What do we know and what do we not know? Against the Committee’s explicit advice, the Government are attempting to use the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to give Ministers the power potentially to create a new UK-based regulatory body to replace REACH. The industry has made it abundantly clear that replacing REACH would be costly and over-bureaucratic. It would also potentially limit important access to data, as my hon. Friend pointed out, and to scientific collaboration, a point made powerfully by the Royal Society of Chemistry.

REACH represents the gold standard in international chemical regulations, and there is no appetite at all in the industry for degrading regulatory standards. I am pleased to say. What is more, if companies are to continue trading with the EU, compliance is, in the words of the Chemical Business Association, “non-negotiable”. Failure to comply means no market access and therefore no trade, as my hon. Friend pointed out.

As I said, creating a body like the one that we are discussing risks costing the public purse and taking a huge amount of time, simply to add another layer of bureaucracy for no practical purpose whatever. After all, substances requiring evaluation or authorisation will already have achieved that status by complying with REACH by this year’s deadline of 1 May. I ask the Minister these questions directly. Will she urge the Government to reconsider their approach to chemicals regulation post Brexit? Can she assure the industry today that we will remain in full regulatory alignment, both in the transition and in the long term?

Another area causing immense concern relates to the registration process. The Committee recommended that “as a minimum” the Government should ensure that the UK retain the registration element of REACH. The Government even acknowledge that any company wanting to trade with the EU will have to engage with that element of REACH. So why leave it? In the short term, companies need assurance that REACH registrations made before May 2018 will remain valid post Brexit, because otherwise, why bother, why do it? Millions of pounds have already been spent on registrations. The Chemical Industries Association says that if companies have to re-register everything because of Brexit, the cost will be in the region of £350 million. That is not pocket money; it is a significant sum that could have a serious impact on the industry.

The uncertainty is enormously problematic for companies, which need REACH registrations to operate but are reluctant to make the payments in case they become invalid. That dilemma risks an exodus of companies from the UK to the European Union—to other member states—and has already led a number of companies to spend vast sums of money opening up offices on the continent.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant point. As she sets it out, I am struck more and more by the fact that the Government like to talk about sound finance, but actually our approach to chemicals regulation looks more like an ideological indulgence, an extravagance, with, of course, other people’s money—taxpayers’ money—and the chemicals industry’s money.
2.12 pm

Angela Smith: I agree with that latter point. On the first point that my hon. Friend made about ideological indulgence, I find it enormously frustrating that we are set not only to spend large sums of public money to achieve satisfaction and indulge ourselves ideologically, but to ignore the voice of business. I find it startlingly difficult to comprehend why what has always been itself as the party of business is ignoring those very important voices—I just find it absolutely unbelievable.

Two years after the referendum, I still find it hard to reconcile my understanding of the party of Government. I have always respected it as a party that has always listened to the voices of those who make the wealth that keeps this country going, but it is no longer doing that—all in the name of a project that will damage the country’s economy in the long term. I find it absolutely astonishing, I have to say.

I ask the Minister what she is doing to give clarity to business in this area. Should businesses continue to make REACH registrations and will these registrations remain valid post-Brexit, or at the very least during the implementation period? Have her Government colleagues broached these subjects with their European counterparts during negotiations? I think we need to know—Parliament has a right to know this.

Does the Minister acknowledge that the easiest way to resolve these issues would be to stay in the single market and, as a consequence, to remain within REACH? That is the easiest way forward. It is the way forward that the chemicals industry prefers, and it would solve the market and, as a consequence, to remain within REACH?

That is the easiest way forward. It is the way there and it is a credit to her. I think we saw that—Parliament has a right to know this.

Does the Minister acknowledge that the easiest way to resolve these issues would be to stay in the single market and, as a consequence, to remain within REACH?

That is the easiest way forward. It is the way forward that the chemicals industry prefers, and it would solve so many problems. I look forward to the Minister’s response and hope that she can provide some clarity.

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for her speech, and for the brilliant contribution she makes to the Committee. I am sure she was far more than 50% of the way there in this inquiry. If she did not feel that way, she certainly did not let on. I know that the inquiry was difficult. Does she agree that information sharing and knowledge sharing are a really important part of the REACH regime? This stuff is all around us and the evidence only builds up gradually, in bits and pieces, because we do not conduct controlled experiments on ourselves to see what gives us cancer—that would be unethical. The information emerges over time, and we are often ignorant of the damage that a chemical is doing to our body. When that gets out, there is always a vested interest that does not want it to be banned, changed or removed. That is why REACH is the global gold standard.

Kerry McCarthy: That is absolutely right. I do not think I need to add anything to that. My hon. Friend has told us, in a nutshell, why it is so important to be vigilant and on top of things—almost ahead of the game—in terms of what is being brought on to the market. If we are not, there could be quite devastating consequences that we might not discover for years. New chemicals are being manufactured continually, so we cannot rest on our laurels.

It is impossible to know what chemical regulation will look like in the future, so to transpose current standards without supplying the surrounding infrastructure would be an approach that was totally unfit for purpose. It is not a case of bringing in a law and then putting it into operation in the UK, as has been said—such a law would be out of date almost immediately. As we have heard, the infrastructure that is required to regulate
The UK has signed up to a number of sustainable development goals that bind us to regulate chemicals properly and not to support a drop in standards. They include ensuring that by 2020 we use and produce chemicals in ways that do not lead to significant adverse effects on human health and the environment; and, by 2030, reducing the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination, as well as improving water quality by minimising the release of hazardous chemicals.

That strays on to the turf of another Environmental Audit Committee report on the sustainable development goals and how we can implement them in domestic policy. Again, we were not particularly happy with the Government’s response, and I am sure we will continue to pursue the matter. Despite the obvious risks and uncertainties that face both the chemical industry and the health of the public and the natural environment, the Government’s response to the EAC report was disappointing and rather lacking. I urge the Government to commit to and implement the Committee’s recommendations, because the cost of failing to act, and of not being adequately prepared for when we leave the EU, is too great. In the Government’s election manifesto, they promised to be “the first generation to leave the environment in a better state.”
than they found it, but achieving that is incompatible with their current approach to chemicals regulation, and with any regulatory system that does not adequately protect humans, the environment and animals to the extent that REACH does.

2.24 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) for securing this crucial and topical debate. Some interesting and intriguing points and concerns have been raised. The hon. Lady has already said that she feels as though the Government are treating the chemicals industry as a Cinderella industry. Her point about zombie legislation was not lost on Members, and her detailed knowledge of this subject is admirable.

Other Members made clear their concerns about the loss of jobs and the possibility of animal testing, which raises another unnecessary problem that we would have to deal with. Many other important questions are as yet unanswered. It was good to hear that the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) might cross the divide—that intrigues me—but it was reassuring that he has already become a devotee of the EAC. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith)—

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman is one of the very few people who have got the pronunciation right.

John Mc Nally: Am I? If I can say “Auchtermuchty”, and so on, it is fairly easy.

The hon. Lady raised the importance of getting the transition right and reiterated that we need policy certainty on this issue. The modesty of the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and her understanding of the complexity of this inquiry is to be admired. She is without doubt a very able and knowledgeable MP, as I have learned.

It has been a privilege to be a member of the Committee, as it is to follow the hon. Lady. As well as benefiting from my deeply committed and knowledgeable colleagues, I have relished fighting on issues that I am passionate about. Highlighting the need to protect our precious environment against pollution on a local, national and international level has been my mission. From the scourge of plastic microbeads and nurdles on our beaches, to international level has been my mission. From the scourge of plastic fibres from clothing that poison our waterways, to

REACH is compromised. REACH has been widely described as the most complex piece of legislation ever undertaken in the EU’s history, and around 30,000 chemicals are registered under it at present. I think that in the UK something like 6,500 are registered under it at the moment. Meanwhile, as has been said, its membership is a passport to the global chemicals marketplace.

REACH standards are recognised by regulatory regimes worldwide. That enables exports worth £14 billion every year across the EU. By May this year—the looming deadline for registering chemicals under REACH—UK companies will have spent an estimated £250 million on the process over the past 10 years. If the unthinkable occurs and no agreement is hammered out between the UK and EU, are we then a UK out of EU reach? Chemical registration-related data sharing would cease to exist. That would be utterly disastrous for businesses and their investments, and they would have to reapply all over again. It would be an absolute nightmare for us to go through.

Let me turn to my homeland, Scotland. The Scots chemical industry is a truly international and invaluable part of the Scottish economy, second only to our thriving food and drink industry. It is a major exporter that delivers outstanding GVA and has shown remarkable resilience in these turbulent economic times. I believe that the most recent Office for National Statistics figures show that the Scottish sector maintained double-digit export growth between 2014 and 2015, before the recent weakening of the pound. Surely that success cannot be allowed to face uncertainty. As we know, the sector is acutely sensitive to any tariffs or barriers that would make exports less competitive. We must also think of the vast numbers of people employed in the sector, as has been said—more than 10,000 directly in Scotland and six times that figure indirectly—in an array of jobs ranging from manufacturing, sales and marketing to logistics. Chemical sciences account for 33% of all Scottish manufacturing.

The regulation system achieved through REACH allows us to protect our environment and therefore human health. Industry and the public—our constituents—cannot afford to wait for the UK Government to act on these issues. Industries will still need to meet EU regulations after we leave the EU if businesses are to continue trading, so why is the Government’s position so vague? We are painfully aware that prolonged uncertainty could cost the taxpayers of this country millions of pounds and leave our exports in disarray.

I believe wholeheartedly that membership of REACH is vital to allow unhindered movement of medicines and drugs post-Brexit. Yet when they were asked by the Environmental Audit Committee to take a pragmatic approach to the UK’s future relationship to the EU
single market for chemicals, the Government gave a meaningless response that held no answer. That is simply not good enough. As for Scotland, its continuing transition to a low-carbon energy country must be allowed to continue. It is important for everyone that that approach is seen as a way forward for the environment. Everybody here has asked questions; we now demand some answers.

2.31 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairing, Mr Evans. It is good to see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), back in her place; I fear that we may spend some time in statutory instrument Committees, including on this topic. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), Chair of the Committee, on a thoughtful presentation. I do not intend to repeat much of it, because I think that the Minister has got her train of thought and will be answering some of her points.

I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stockbridge (Angela Smith) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for their speeches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who made an intervention. The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), although he is no longer in his place, made a good contribution, and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), who spoke for the Scottish National party, also raised numerous pertinent points. The report is good and, I must say, pithy. I enjoy Select Committee findings when they can be read within a relatively short time; I always think that the shorter they are, the better the quality. That would be fine, except that the Government’s response was even shorter and, I am afraid, not as pithy, in the sense that it did not get to the point of things, except one bit, which I will ask the Minister about. The Government say:

“The government will use the Repeal Bill (The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill) to convert EU law into UK law and use the powers to amend REACH, as well as other related chemicals regulation to make them work properly in the UK.”

Can I assume from that that REACH is still the preferred methodology for dealing with chemicals? That is important. As far as I understand it, this is an interesting issue, because the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is only one part of it, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also has a strong interest. I gather that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has more or less intimated that he also wants some continuation of the relationship to REACH. Is that our starting point? That is my question for the Minister, because all other factors follow from that. The issue is important. Interestingly, this excellent paper from the House of Commons Library on Brexit and the environment uses REACH as an example of the implications, because it will have a pretty big impact on our industry, but also on how we feel safe with chemicals.

The report preceded the general election, even though the Government’s response came after it, so we must consider something a bit more recent—the 25-year environment plan, in which three pages are allocated to chemicals. It makes some clear commitments. On page 100, the Government commit to four actions. The first is:

“Publishing an overarching Chemicals Strategy to set out our approach as we leave the EU.”

When? The second is:

“Exploring options to consolidate monitoring and horizon-scan work to develop an early warning system for identifying emerging chemical issues.”

How will that be done? The third is:

“Considering how we will address tracking of chemicals in products to reduce barriers to recycling and reuse whilst preventing a risk from harmful chemicals.”

Who will do that? If not Government, will it be done in partnership? The fourth is:

“Working internationally to strengthen the standardisation of methods that assess chemical safety in support of the mutual acceptance of data to identify and share information on emerging concerns and new approaches to risk assessments.”

If not REACH, what could it possibly be?

We have already talked about double registration, the impact on jobs and investment and the possibility of relocation. All four of those actions impinge closely on how the industry will evolve, so it is important for the Minister to give us at least some way forward on how the Government are tackling them. Like my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wakefield, I read the previous Brexit impact assessment—are we allowed to call it an impact assessment now? Like everyone else, I do not know whether the Minister has seen the one on chemicals; presumably it would have been referred to in the latest documentation, which we have been debating this week. It is important to know that the industry will feature, because it is important.

In terms of where we are, it is not just a question of the chemical industry. As my hon. Friends have made clear, it is about how that locks into all sorts of other industries, such as the food chain, health and medicines and animal welfare. That is important, because every time I sit next to someone from those industries, all they say to me is, “Is there any certainty? Is there any way we can make decisions? We don’t know what we’re going to do, because we get nothing but confusion. We need some clarity.”

It is not just about the industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East discussed some of the implications when things have gone wrong. I mention organophosphates, to pick up an issue after not having been here for some time. I am dealing with a constituent who suffers from organophosphate poisoning. It has nothing to do with the Minister—it predates both her Government and mine, although it involved mine—but we all know that when regulation goes wrong, people suffer. For someone facing the repercussions of OP poisoning, it is awful. That is why we must get this right. It is a matter of human safety and, eventually, someone’s life experience, so it would be good to know that this issue is at the top of DEFRA’s agenda, and that the Department is talking to BEIS to ensure that we get it right.

I have a series of questions. I will go through them quickly, but they are important. First, the European Chemicals Agency, the current chemicals regulator, has extensive databases. Are we talking to the ECHA about how we could still access those databases after exit day? Secondly, I have already referred to the overarching chemical strategy. Is there a timetable? I know that it has been said that it will not happen until after exit day, but there must be some clear steer on what the timetable is. Thirdly, will the Department be transparent and publish what it is doing and thinking about how those procedures will be taken forward?
Chemistry World published a story — whether it was a leak or an inspired story— that said that Government had set aside £5.8 million for an IT system to look at the registration and regulation of chemicals. Can the Minister confirm that? Is that in addition to REACH or a replacement?

I have mentioned the Business Secretary’s view that REACH is something we need to build on rather than replace. It would be useful to know whether the Department is talking to BEIS about how that will happen.

The Department’s research is hopefully now focused on this issue. Does it have sufficient civil servants and sufficient expertise? Is it drawing in other outside expertise? It is very important to draw together to ensure that whatever the outcome, we get this right.

Finally, can the Minister assure me that there is no intention to lower standards? The bottom line is that it cannot be any worse, for the reasons that we have discussed: people suffered when we got it wrong, and the industry needs stability and security. The Minister has plenty of time to respond, and I look forward to hearing her answers.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that it is customary to allow a couple of minutes at the end for Mary Creagh to sum up.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate and I thank her Committee for its report.

The Government recognise that the UK chemicals sector is vital to the economy and to many other industries, often leading the way in research and innovation. Not only is it our second largest export industry, but it is a key component in almost all our other huge sectors. As the hon. Lady explained, chemicals are in many of the products and processes that we use. I am fully aware of the extent to which they can be in everyday products, and indeed in medicines and elsewhere.

The Committee’s inquiry took place nearly a year ago and we replied to it in July. I note that the Committee invited comments on our response. I have continued to meet the industry, and across Government, engagement with the industry and stakeholders will continue. I recognise that the principal concern of the industry — to ensure that existing REACH registrations remain valid — has not changed.

I also recognise that trade associations and other organisations have continued to call for the UK to stay in REACH. As I have explained elsewhere, given the principles set out by the Prime Minister in her Lancaster House speech, we will not stay in REACH per se but, through the provisions set out in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we will bring into law the regulations that put REACH into effect. That is important because the continuity will provide an effective regulatory system for the management and control of chemicals to safeguard human health and the environment. It will also minimise any market access barriers for UK companies trading with the EU.

It has been suggested that we are not listening to the voice of business, but I humbly point out that the Government are listening to the voice of the people by respecting the referendum result. It was reiterated throughout the 2016 campaign that a vote to leave was also a vote to leave the single market.

Angela Smith: I differ on the point that people voted to leave the single market. Nevertheless, I am sure the Minister just said that the Government will do their best to minimise any lack of access to the European market. Is that not an acknowledgement that there will be some damage to the industry if we leave REACH and have to set up our own regulatory regime?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise that our future relationship is still a matter for negotiation. Phase 1 has happened and we are moving into phase 2. Having exactly the same regulation the day before and the day after we leave the European Union will minimise market access barriers for UK companies trading in the EU.

We agree that ensuring the continued validity of REACH registrations is a critical issue and fully recognise the investment that UK companies have made in the REACH registration process. We are clear that we want existing registrations, authorisations and approvals to remain valid in the EU and UK markets, which is clearly in the interest of businesses operating in the UK and the EU. That recognises the complex compliance activity that takes place through supply chains. As the hon. Member for Wakefield pointed out, it is not just about sales between companies but about the movement of goods through the supply chain within a company.

We want to avoid the unnecessary duplication of compliance activities undertaken by businesses prior to exit. That was set out in the Government’s position paper, “Continuity in the availability of goods for the EU and the UK”, published in August 2017, which also set out our principles for maintaining the availability of goods after exit.

It is likely that some products will be undergoing testing, registration or authorisation processes at the point of exit. For such cases, given the ambition for a close future relationship, the body carrying out the assessment should be permitted to complete it and the results should be recognised in UK and EU markets. That would be in the best interests of businesses across Europe, and I encourage them to work together to support that pragmatic outcome.

Although it would not be appropriate to pre-judge the outcome of the negotiations, we will discuss with EU member states how best to continue co-operation on chemicals regulation in the best interests of the UK and the European Union. That extends to aspects of knowledge sharing — it would be ideal to continue that work through the negotiations. For example, the EU is highly reliant on the expertise of the Health and Safety Executive in the assessment of chemicals, particularly biocides and pesticides.

I am aware that the guidance that the European Chemicals Agency published on its website about the UK’s withdrawal from the EU has caused concern.
That guidance reflects the EU’s view of what would need to happen if there were no future relationship between the EU and the UK. It does not, of course, take into account potential negotiated outcomes and I am pleased to note that that has now been acknowledged on the ECHA website. As hon. Members may be aware, the guidance has recently been updated to reflect issues about the transfer of registrations and authorisations.

We have increased resources within my Department, in the HSE—a body sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions—and in the Environment Agency to work on chemicals policy and prepare to deliver an effective regulatory regime after we leave the EU. We have established a joint programme of work with HSE to deliver what we need to have in place for day one. I work with ministerial colleagues across Government from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the DWP, the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Department for International Trade and the Treasury.

We are also planning for a non-negotiated day one outcome to have a functioning chemicals regulatory and enforcement system. We are now scoping and designing what such a system would look like, including an IT system to replicate REACH. As the hon. Member for Wakefield pointed out, that includes the budget that has been released so far to scope that system.

On leaving the EU, our regulatory system and laws will be identical to those of the EU. There could be opportunities to consider improving the regulatory system to maintain standards in protecting the environment and human health. That is why we have considered the regulatory approaches of other countries, including those that are largely modelled on REACH.

Although we will not be part of REACH, there is an opportunity to work internationally to strengthen the standardisation of methods that assess chemical safety in support of the mutual acceptance of data to identify and share information on emerging concerns and on new approaches to risk assessments. In a global world where we share chemicals and have several existing chemicals conventions, it makes sense for our regulatory authorities increasingly to share that information to ensure that we have greater compliance and convergence in understanding and recognising the benefits and hazards that chemicals can pose. I do not see any reason why we cannot have that ambition once we leave the EU.

**Dr Drew:** After the dreadful experience of the Rural Payments Agency’s IT system, will the Minister confirm whether the IT system to replicate REACH has already been commissioned? Will it be put out to private contractors or done in-house within Government?

**Dr Coffey:** The system is at the stage where we are waiting for an aspect of the business case to be signed off. I have met the new Minister responsible for the Health and Safety Executive—the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton)—and work is ongoing between our Departments and the HSE.

The most relevant environmental principle to chemicals regulation is the precautionary principle, which is embedded in international conventions relevant to the regulation of chemicals, such as the Stockholm convention on persistent organic pollutants, to which the UK will continue to be a signatory in its own right. The Secretary of State has announced that we will consult on how we will incorporate various environmental principles and governance mechanisms and we are carefully considering our proposals at the moment.

As the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) noted, we recently published our 25-year environment plan, in which we acknowledged that chemicals provide substantial benefits to society, but their widespread use in industry, agriculture, food systems and homes has led in some cases to pollution of land, water, air and food. We will publish a new chemicals strategy to tackle chemicals of national concern. The new strategy, which will build on existing regulatory approaches, will set our priorities for action and will detail how we will achieve our goals. It is intended to support collaborative work on human biomonitoring, address the combination effects of different chemicals and improve how we track chemicals across supply chains. I am not able to set out a timeline, but I certainly do not anticipate that the strategy will be published this year, because our main focus is implementing a smooth transition and continuing existing regulations.

We also need to consider the domestic market within the United Kingdom. REACH currently gives us a consistent framework across the UK, and we would like that consistency to continue. We have already started discussions with the devolved Administrations on a future chemicals framework across the UK.

Let me tackle some other questions raised by hon. Members. Is REACH the preferred methodology for chemicals regulation? In our international discussions, as I told the Environmental Audit Committee, we are not minded to take the United States’ approach. We think that REACH has shown its worth. As has been pointed out, a lot of chemical companies were not necessarily its greatest fans when it was introduced but are now embracing it. When I discuss the matter with Ministers from Brazil and other countries, it is clear that they are trying to get the best of all worlds, which is what we need to ensure for ourselves as we go forward. I have spoken to Switzerland, and I think officials have had discussions with South Korea. A lot of countries are taking a REACH-style approach but may not be replicating it in every detail.

On early warning and horizon scanning, I hope we can set out our approach in more detail when we publish our chemicals strategy. In answer to the question about sufficient expertise, I must point out that the HSE is the responsible authority and there is no reason to doubt its expertise; I commend it for its work in support of the chemicals industry.

I fully understand hon. Members’ concerns about bureaucracy, which is why we are in negotiations. I am afraid that I cannot give hon. Members an update on where we are, because phase 2 of the negotiations is yet to start; I fully understand the uncertainty that that brings. I have engaged with stakeholders. We have seen only representatives becoming part of networks or opening branch offices in different countries or a presence in the European Union. As I told the Committee, from my experience of working in multinational companies, I fully expect them to be contingency planning, but that does not mean that they will be abandoning this country all of a sudden. Far from it: the size of the market in this country, not only for chemicals but—as has already
been explained—for many other manufacturing sectors, absolutely means that they will keep a permanent presence in the United Kingdom.

I do not anticipate any new approaches to risk assessment. The precautionary principle is well embedded in what we do. As I have articulated, we will be bringing different regulations into law, as will the devolved Administrations. We sit on committees now and we hope to retain those links in the future, but that is a matter for the negotiations.

The hon. Member for Stroud and Urmston (Kate Green) raised third-party country status. We still need to consider and negotiate elements of that. The approach set out by the Prime Minister on behalf of the Government, in which not being governed by the European Court of Justice is a guiding principle in what we do, still applies, so some assessment is still needed. Bioaccumulation is among the matters that we intend to cover in our chemicals strategy.

Let me assure hon. Members that ensuring we have a regulatory regime that continues to be effective is a very important part of my portfolio, but my top priority has been a smooth transition. As I am sure hon. Members recognise, I cannot answer questions today about exactly what our future customs arrangements with the rest of the European Union will be. However, I am highly conscious that we want to help business to continue to be successful, and I would like it to get certainty as quickly as possible. I am sure that I have disappointed hon. Members today by not being able to do that, but I will move on to the next phase of negotiations shortly.

I reiterate that we will do all we can to ensure a smooth transition and a successful industry for years to come. I saw the hon. Member for Stroud and members of the Environmental Audit Committee yesterday. I am sure that broad consideration of the environment in different ways and across different industries will continue, quite rightly, to be a key topic for debate in Parliament.

2.56 pm

Mary Creagh: I thank Environmental Audit Committee members present—the hon. Members for Gordon (Colin Clark) and for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy)—for their support, along with the Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I certainly feel that the Committee is waking up, having been a sleeping giant on the Committee Corridor; it is finally finding its voice.

I agree with the Minister that her response was very disappointing. Based on what she is offering the sector, I think the verdict is “Must try harder”. She has told us that the chemicals strategy will not be published this year, which is deeply worrying. She is not offering continuity, as she said, but rupture and multiplication of uncertainty. She is in danger of sounding complacent when she talks about only representatives setting up in other countries. These are the people through whom business flows, so if they leave, the business leaves with them.

Dr Coffey indicated dissent.

Mary Creagh: The Minister says no, but we can have a debate about that. She talks about setting up a database with £5.8 million of our money, yet she says that a business case has not yet been developed for it.

Dr Coffey: May I add some information? Clearly the system will cost more than £5.8 million. That is part of the release of money.

Mary Creagh: How much will it cost?

Dr Coffey: We do not have a final estimate for the budget, because the system is still to be finalised. That is why the business case still needs to be assessed.

Mary Creagh: This looks like a release of initial moneys to scope out and make the business case for the rest. I wonder about DEFRA’s capacity to deal with this. DEFRA has lost 5,000 civil servants in the past seven years.

The ECHA website states:
“Only a mutual agreement between the EU and UK authorities can change this date”.

meaning 30 March. It also states:
“It is the European Commission that conducts the withdrawal negotiations with the UK Government under a negotiating mandate…ECHA is not party to these negotiations.”

We face the uncertainty of whether there will be a transitional period, how long it will be and what will happen, and then the further uncertainty of what will happen afterwards. Lord Bridges said that the transition period was set to be one of “muddling through” and “a gangplank into thin air.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 30 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1423.]

The Minister says that when people voted in the referendum, they were voting to leave the single market. Daniel Hannan, her Tory MEP colleague, said that only a madman would leave the single market. Well, I am afraid the Minister’s party seems to have been taken over by the madmen. We need a sensible, rooted debate based on the reality of people’s lives and the reality for businesses in this country, not constant reassuring words that give solidity to mere wind.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Environmental Audit Committee of Session 2016-17, The Future of Chemicals Regulation after the EU Referendum, HC 912, and the Government response, HC 313.
Backbench Business

Leaving the EU: Agriculture

[MR PETER BONE in the Chair]

3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the policy framework for agriculture after the UK leaves the EU.

As ever, Mr Bone, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Before I start, I should say that I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for having allowed the House the opportunity to debate this subject today. I see a reasonable number of Members in Westminster Hall, so I shall try to keep my remarks fairly short, to ensure that everybody gets a chance to have their say.

First of all, however, it is worth noting the context for this debate. For the 40-plus years that the United Kingdom has been a member of the Common Market, the European Economic Community and ultimately the European Union, the common agricultural policy has been the dominant force in shaping agricultural policy in the United Kingdom. As is often the case when there is such a dominant force, we can get dragged down into the weeds. We can lose sight of the higher purpose—I suspect that, if pressed, any of us could come up with lots of things that we dislike about the CAP.

The moment of our leaving the European Union will be, of course, an opportunity to change much of that and to do things differently, if that is what we choose. However, it is worth reminding ourselves about the context of what has been achieved and the nature of the agricultural industries—I use the plural advisedly—that we have had for the last 40 years as a consequence of our membership of the EU.

Some would say that this is a moment for moving away from financial support for agriculture completely—the New Zealand “cold turkey” approach. That is a respectable view; it is not one that I happen to share, for reasons that I will explain. However, it is a stabilating case, and if we are sensible it is one that we should address. When the Secretary of State recently made a speech at the Oxford Farming Conference, he spoke about the CAP being a mechanism for subsidising inefficiencies. One man’s inefficiency may be another man’s lifestyle, so I listen to terms such as that being bandied about with some caution, shall we say.

What would be the consequence, though, of ending the support there has been for agriculture? The most obvious consequence, in my view, would be food price inflation. There is a cost attached to maintaining an agricultural business, and if farmers are not to get the money they need through the mix of what they get at the farm gate and financial support from Government, then of course a higher price will have to be paid by the consumer in the supermarket.

In fact, earlier today it was put to me that the most obvious victims of the end of the era of cheap food—the era in which we have lived and continue to live—would be those on the lowest and fixed incomes. That is a good point: people on low incomes spend a higher proportion of their disposable income on food than on anything else. Ending support would also have very profound implications for our countryside. Many of the things that we value most about our countryside come about because people live there—because they can work there and make a living there. The countryside is not just a glorified retirement home.

I have seen a lot of farms’ books in my time as a Member of Parliament, for a whole variety of reasons. When it comes to farmers in my constituency and throughout the highlands and islands—and doubtless those in other parts of the country—there simply would not be a living to be made without the farm subsidy payment coming into their businesses every year. We would lose the farms, then the shops and the post offices. The country schools would close, which would lead to the loss of professional support, such as the lawyers, accountants and the vets. With that loss, we would start to lose the mix that a rural community needs to sustain itself. Thereafter, it is pretty easy to see where we would go.

The alternative to food price inflation, of course, would be to import cheap food from other parts of the world. However, I caution hon. Members about that. One of the reasons why our costs of production are high in this country, relative to other parts of the world, is that we maintain very good standards of animal welfare, traceability and biosecurity. Those all come at a price. We are told that such things are valued by the consumer, and there is a price attached to that. If our farmers are to compete on a level footing, we should expect the same standards in those countries from which we would envisage importing food. At that point, one would wonder whether the price difference between food produced here and imported food would be as marked as it is now.

In that context, the CAP and support for agricultural industries have given us considerable stability in recent decades. There is then the question of what will follow the CAP. If we take away the framework that we have had since the mid-1970s—the CAP—we will inevitably have to replace it with some other sort of framework: a UK-wide one, if that is to be the extent of our regulation. I am pleased to note an emerging consensus between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations: that the creation of a UK-wide framework is a desirable and necessary event, which will have to be taken seriously.

To my mind, there are something in the region of four different objectives that such a new framework would need to have built into it. First, and most importantly, it would need to preserve the functioning and integrity of the UK internal market. That is important for consumers and producers across the length and breadth of the country. Secondly, it would need integrity, to ensure that the UK was in a position to enter into trade agreements with other countries. Thirdly, it would have to ensure that the United Kingdom could continue to meet its existing international obligations, never mind those that we may seek to take on. Fourthly, it should provide for effective management of common resources. As I say, the first of those four objectives—preserving the integrity of a UK internal market—is the most important.
As the National Farmers Union Scotland has put it in one of the many briefings that have been provided for today’s debate, “animal welfare and traceability, public health, pesticides regulation, and food labelling” should all be part of a “commonly agreed ‘framework’”. That is in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom.

Of course, once an overarching framework has been agreed, everything else that remains should be devolved to the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. For the purposes of England, that would obviously be the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh Assembly Governments would have control and responsibility for their own respective jurisdictions. The thinking that needs to be done now about how we design that framework is important. We need something that will allow each Administration to implement it as is appropriate for their area.

As one who was always a keen supporter of the idea before it happened, I think that devolution since 1999 in Scotland has been very good for Scottish farmers. They say that the administration of agricultural policy from a dedicated Department in Edinburgh has been better for them: it is closer to their needs and better able to design a system that is suitable for the farmers in our constituency.

I am sure that that is true across the whole United Kingdom, so the framework must provide a structure without tying the hands of the devolved Governments. They should be able to continue to do as they currently do: look after the less favoured areas such as the highlands and islands, and perhaps then the beef farms and dairy farms; I am thinking not only of Orkney and such places, but the north-east of England—I see the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) from the south-west of Scotland—or the south-west of England.

There are upland farms in Yorkshire and Cumbria. All the different industries have needs that are best met by devolved Administrations delivering policy in their own jurisdictions. For that reason, when the framework is constructed, it has to deal with those matters in a way that that can be commonly agreed. If the Minister has not already had representations from the NFUS, although I suspect he probably has, he should consider its proposal for the creation of a strengthened joint ministerial Committee. The mechanisms of devolution already make provision for that sort of thing, but as we move to the next phase of our constitutional change, it is pretty clear that something of that sort will be necessary.

The idea posited to get a commonly agreed mechanism is that something such as qualified majority voting, as is often used in the Council of Ministers, could be engaged. The advantage would be to create something that was genuinely a common agreement, rather than a top-down approach where control would still be vested in DEFRA and in London.

Inevitably, one comes on to the question of finances. Currently the United Kingdom remits money to Brussels, which then pays the respective Administrations money that goes in a dedicated way to farm support. Obviously, after our departure from the European Union, that supply line will be significantly shortened and we shall look to the Treasury. I do not see any other mechanism than that the money should come from the Treasury, but perhaps the Minister has other ideas about how that would work. More importantly even than that, we need to know the mechanism by which that funding will be distributed across the different parts of the United Kingdom. For most public spending purposes, we currently have the Barnett formula, but that takes into consideration a whole range of different matters that would not really be relevant, so some sort of thinking at this point will clearly have to be done.

On the brass tacks of this, when the Minister comes to reply to the debate today—I realise we are in the early stages of the thinking and we can look only for broad principles—will he confirm that the pie that we will slice up by whatever mechanism we devise will remain the same size as the one we currently have? The one thing that consistently comes through to me, from talking to farmers and crofters in my constituency and to the farming unions, is that at this stage our objective should be continuity and stability. Farmers really need to know what the future holds for them. If we do not have early confirmation of what the future holds, we cannot expect them to have the confidence to keep investing.

A whole range of imponderables will come from our decision to leave the European Union. Access to export markets, the terms on which imports will be allowed from other countries, and the availability of labour for both the production and processing of food are just a few of them. All those matters are outwith our control, but the creation of a UK-wide framework is one element entirely within our own control; more than anything else, it will give our farmers the opportunity to continue their planning for future investment.

In his speech at the Oxford Farming Conference, the Secretary of State guaranteed support payments to 2024. That was a welcome announcement and I do not want to diminish the importance of it in any way, but in doing that he prayed in aid the need for long-term certainty.

I speak as a farmer’s son. I know two things about farming. First, I knew I was never going to be one; that is partly why I am here today. Secondly, I know that six years for a farmer is nothing like the long term. The long term is what agriculture is built on and what our farmers and crofters need to hear about. I hope the Minister will at least give an indication that we have started the process of giving it to them.

3.16 pm  
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. I listened intently to his speech and he will be pleased to hear that I agreed with absolutely everything he said. However, that will not stop me saying some of it again.

Brexit is a great opportunity for us to reform the policy framework for agriculture in a way that promotes both the agriculture sector and the environment, but it is crucial that we get it right. In Scotland, a healthy agricultural sector makes for a healthy economy. Across agriculture production and the food and drink industry, Scottish farming and crofting supports more than 400,000 jobs. Scottish agriculture has functioned for decades under the EU’s regulatory framework, including
the flawed and inefficient common agricultural policy. It is no surprise, therefore, that a majority of British and Scottish farmers voted for Brexit.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us the source of his information? The National Farmers’ Union of Scotland is under the impression that most of its members voted by a narrow majority to remain, so what is his source of information?

Mr Jack: My source is the farming press. According to The Scottish Farmer, a survey revealed that 66% of Scottish farmers said they had voted for Brexit.

Many farmers will be glad to see the back of the CAP and will be looking forward to what will replace it. I am encouraged by the UK Government’s commitment to deliver the same level of farm support money until at least 2024, which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned. I am also encouraged by the plan to put in place a green Brexit that rewards good environmental stewardship. However, even more can be done.

The CAP has failed to keep up with the pace of change in agriculture, trade and the wider economy. We would be hard-pressed to find many farmers who would describe the CAP as modern, efficient, or even fit for purpose, and that assumes that they get their CAP payments on time, which I know, as a Scottish farmer, can sometimes be a bit of a luxury. We should build an agricultural policy framework fit for the 2020s and beyond that supports a healthy, profitable, diverse, innovative and sustainable sector in a global economy and that seeks to embrace the future and make the most of it, rather than shy away from the challenges it presents. But the issue goes far beyond farm support. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, it is vital that, for example, we maintain our high regulatory standards.

The EU is not a perfect regulator, and Brexit allows us to make changes to regulate better and smarter, and respond more proactively to changing circumstances. There is no case for compromising our standards, and we must make sure that standards in all parts of the United Kingdom are as high as or higher than they are at present. Animal welfare in particular is an area where we should seek to hold ourselves to even higher standards after Brexit. We must also maintain the commitment to high agricultural standards in our trade negotiations with third parties, and develop a framework that ensures that we can make such trade deals while preserving the devolution settlement. I expect that the powers over agricultural policy due to return from Brussels will in turn be devolved to Holyrood at implementation level.

The preservation of the UK internal market should underpin any future framework. If that were not to happen, it would be harder and more expensive for Scottish farmers to trade in the rest of the UK, and vice versa. We cannot allow that. That is a particular concern for farmers in my constituency. Dumfries and Galloway is near England and Northern Ireland, and trades extensively with both. We must not give our agricultural sector trouble at home when it should be seeking new opportunities around the world. We therefore need frameworks that ensure a degree of harmony between all parts of the United Kingdom, and that make sure our common resources are managed as effectively as possible.

Brexit is a challenge for Scotland’s agricultural sector, but it is also a great opportunity that can get the sector flourishing for decades to come. However, that will require the UK and Scottish Governments to work together to create an effective policy framework that can give a real boost to Scottish, and indeed British, agriculture.

3.21 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you here, Mr Bone.

The debate is very welcome. It has obviously been a long time since agriculture policy was in such a period of transition, and where there was so much up for debate and needing to be decided; as we come out of the common agricultural policy we look towards the negotiation of new trade deals, and there is an agriculture Bill on the horizon, I hope. The Environment Secretary has made some welcome statements at the Oxford Farming Conference and the Oxford Real Farming Conference—I attended the latter—which were restated in the 25-year environment plan, about trying to shift to the use of public money for public goods. That must be the backbone of the approach. I welcome his clarity about the ending of subsidy per acre, and using it to pay for public goods. It is encouraging that the direction of travel on that is so clear. Farmers want to do much more to preserve their land for future generations; the structure should be there to support that.

We need to do a much better job of internalising the external costs of the damage we do to the environment, including soil degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss and the impact on public health of the routine use of antibiotics. Those have been disregarded for too long. I am sure that we all agree on the desirability of the new regime supporting the public goods that the Environment Secretary identified, such as planting woodland and restoring habitats for endangered species, and restoring and enhancing soil. I would add other things, but the direction of travel is good.

As chair of the all-party group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming, I would also like specifically to promote the benefits of agroecological approaches. They are sometimes seen as backward-looking, because they can involve reviving some old-age systems, but I am not personally anti-innovation. I think that agroecological measures can be adopted without a reduction in productivity. As the former UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, said, the approach has been shown “to improve food production and farmers’ incomes, while at the same time protecting the soil, water, and climate”.

That is the balance we need.

I want to focus my comments on two areas about which little has been said so far. The first is post-Brexit agricultural policy, which urgently needs to address how we increase our food sustainability and, given global pressures, ensure long-term food security. The second is the growth of diet-related ill-health and widening health inequalities. As to food security, leaving the EU potentially puts UK food security at greater risk. At the moment we produce less than 60% of the food we consume and rely on the EU for almost 30% of our imports. Post-Brexit, shortages of farm labour and a more volatile market could make that situation even
worse. I am vice-chair of the all-party group on fruit and vegetable farmers. Witnesses from the sector, and the wider horticulture sector, gave evidence to the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a while ago; the sector is already starting to suffer from the Brexit effect. Last year, there were reports of produce rotting in the fields in Cornwall from a lack of EU workers to pick it, put off by poor exchange rates and uncertain future employment. I know that the Minister has attended the all-party group and the Select Committee to hear our concerns. I am sure that the Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), will mention that later.

Nothing was said about the workforce in the 25-year plan. Although the Environment Secretary has said that he recognises the need for seasonal agricultural labour, we do not have a clear indication of what he intends to do about that. We need to ensure that agricultural policy addresses the prevalence of low pay, insecure employment and the exploitation of workers in the food and farming sector. I do not think that that is too much to ask.

Mr Carmichael: The issue of labour availability is important, but it is not confined to low-paid workers. The hon. Lady should be aware that the veterinary profession relies heavily on vets who come to work in this country from other parts of the European Union, especially for meat inspection.

Kerry McCarthy: I think that I am right in saying that about 85% of the vets from overseas who work in this country have not been in the UK more than five years; so they would not be captured by the arrangements being put in place to enable people to apply for status to stay in the country. That is an important issue.

On the question of horticulture and healthy eating, we need to ensure that our agricultural policy not only maintains but widens access to healthy, nutritious food for everyone. Analysis by the Food Foundation, which was of course set up by a former Conservative MP, who is doing excellent work, shows that a British family of four could be spending up to £158 per year more on fruit and veg after Brexit, as a result of tariffs, inflation and increased labour costs. That is a huge amount of money for those already struggling to put nutritious food on the table. Ninety-two per cent. of teenagers in the UK already struggle to get five-a-day, and diets low in vegetables are linked to 20,000 premature deaths every year. We had a debate in Westminster Hall the other day about the links between junk food and childhood obesity. Cancer Research provided inspiration for that debate, and the other side of the healthy eating coin is obviously the consequences of unhealthy eating.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that produce has never been so affordable or abundant, and that it may be more of a reflection on society that teenagers do not eat enough fresh produce, rather than what she suggests?

Kerry McCarthy: It is partly due to consumer choice; but it is also a question of what is presented to people in supermarkets, and the encouragement to people to get cheap ready meals. As we saw during the horsemeat scandal, it is much easier for people with a very limited income, who are running out of money before their next pay cheque, to buy a ready meal such as a lasagne that costs 99p or a pack of 12 Tesco burgers in the Value range, than it is to buy all the separate ingredients that would enable them to cook a similar meal at home. They just do not have the resources to do that.

That is something that the Food Foundation stresses. It says that if we increase the level of UK self-sufficiency in fruit and veg, production could become more competitive in comparison to pricier imports, and that there are 16 types of fruit and veg that we could grow more of in the UK, which would increase supply and help to protect demand in the uncertain times of Brexit. Last summer there was a sudden shortage of iceberg lettuce in shops because of the situation in Spain. I am sure that the Minister has looked at the Food Foundation report “Farming for 5-A-Day”, but if he has not I urge him to do so.

I want to raise the real threats to UK food and farming from a no-deal scenario and from free trade agreements with the US and countries with lower animal and food safety standards. The most carefully structured subsidy regime could be fatally undermined by the trade arrangements we enter into post-Brexit. The all-party parliamentary group on agroecology highlighted that in our recent inquiry. We found that trade deals post-Brexit could pose the biggest peace-time threat to the UK’s food security, if current environmental and public health standards are not prioritised in the terms of the negotiations. It is vital that agriculture does not become a bargaining chip or something that can easily be traded away during negotiations. We know there is a difference of opinion between the Environment Secretary, who has sworn that he wants to uphold standards, and the Trade Secretary, who has a less acceptable stance on these issues. He does not appreciate how much the public care about protecting these things.

There is a very real danger that when faced with the threat of rising food prices post-Brexit, many will argue for cheaper food through low or no tariffs, but that will come at a cost. The US Commerce Secretary, Wilbur Ross, has made it clear that any post-Brexit trade deal will hinge on the UK ditching its higher EU-derived food safety laws. The debate on chlorinated chicken and hormone-pumped beef is very much in the public domain. That situation could drive out higher-welfare and smaller-scale UK farmers who would be unable to compete on price. It could make it more difficult for British farmers to export to EU countries, with worries that they could provide a back door to the EU for these US imports. There are food safety issues, too, with US eggs and poultry much more likely to have salmonella contamination than UK products. At a recent meeting of the EU environment committee, Which? gave evidence. It said that something like one in six Americans get food poisoning over the course of a year, compared with one in 66 in the UK. That cannot just be down to poorer hygiene standards in people’s homes.

We cannot trigger a race to the bottom on standards. Nor should we seek to compete by copying American mega-farms, cutting costs by becoming ever more industrialised and intensive. One of the recent farming Ministers was very fond of the phrase “sustainable intensification”, but I never quite got him to explain what he meant by that.
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech. It is important that our policy on food standards is evidence-based. Salmonella rates are 1.5 times higher in Europe than they are in the US. We must not proceed in any trade deals on the basis of any anti-American bigotry. I am not suggesting that the hon. Lady is guilty of that, but some who contribute to these debates are. We must proceed only on the basis of evidence.

Kerry McCarthy: I agree with that, but the Soil Association has come up with a list of 10 products that are currently banned that could enter UK markets if we enter into a trade deal with the US. Chlorinated chicken and hormone-pumped beef were banned for very good reasons.

Andrew Percy indicated dissent.

Kerry McCarthy: We have different views on EU protections, but the EU ban on chlorinated chicken was introduced in 1997. Hormone-pumped beef was banned before that. If the hon. Gentleman asked his constituents whether they wanted these products in the UK market, I think they would support his Environment Secretary’s position, whether they see these things as animal welfare concerns or food safety concerns. When he was giving evidence to the Select Committee, the Environment Secretary said that he saw that issue as a red line in negotiations and that we should not allow such things in. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can ask the Environment Secretary what evidence he has considered. On that note, I will conclude my remarks.

3.33 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone; I think it might be my first time. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. I have four points that I would like to make, and I will try to keep my remarks brief because we have got just under half an hour before the first Front Bencher is called. The four points are about subsidies, promoting agricultural jobs, migrant workers and environmental protections.

On subsidies, it is my firm belief that the common agricultural policy is fundamentally flawed and wasteful. The UK could implement a subsidy of its own that could save money and create better standards. The safeguarding of our current level of subsidies in establishing the new system was a welcome announcement from the Government, but we need to look further ahead, and we need some strategic investment in our agricultural sector. We need to offer capital grants, loans and tax incentives for investing in infrastructure. It is my firm belief that farm-led research and things to do with equipment and buildings should be implemented in collaboration with farmers.

The need to support new entrants and succession in farms is an issue that I have picked up when I have been out speaking to my farmers. There seems to be a break in people wanting to take part in agricultural work. We need to ensure that we invest in that. We also need to make things much more resilient for farmers who need protection against and compensation for unforeseen circumstances, such as crop blights. We have a step to go in that direction, but by promoting agriculture, we will see huge investment in the south-west.

Secondly, there are big opportunities for tech-based agriculture jobs. I recently met with Duchy College in my constituency. People there talked to me about how they are linking food and agriculture, and teaching young people about how the new innovation and tech of the future will benefit them. The Government also need to explore the opportunities for apprenticeships in agriculture. We have not done enough in that regard, and we owe it to our agricultural workers to do much more.

My third point is on migrant workers. We heard from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) about the challenges around crops in Cornwall. In the south-west, 57% of our workers in the meat sector and 40% of people in the egg sector are migrant workers. Leaving the EU will enable us to control the number of people entering and leaving the UK, but we must maintain the balance by ensuring that we have the right people in place to do farm work. We need that to continue.

The NFU has been keen to promote an agricultural permit scheme for a 12-month visa. We had a seasonal agricultural workers scheme that stopped in 2012 or 2013, and we should look again at that. We have a challenge that we need to address to ensure that everything in the field is brought in on time. In the short and medium term, I want our farmers to have access to labour markets and visas. In the long term, we should be looking to retrain and re-employ British people to do those jobs and to bring in EU or other workers if and when required.

My main point is about environmental protections. I see big opportunities post Brexit for us to have a British agricultural policy that shapes production and improves environmental standards. I recently went out with the Westcountry Rivers Trust on a farm visit in my constituency, and the trust talked me through its work on upstream thinking. It implements a policy with a water company to provide a 50% grant to take slurry pits away from water courses. As we move towards a British agricultural policy, our water protections, our improvements to soil quality, our ability to maintain the uplands to store water and our ability to deliver high standards of animal welfare are all vital.

In conclusion, I am firmly of the belief that we can improve our production and increase our environmental protections at the same time. We will need to shape a British agricultural policy. I am looking forward to the agriculture Bill coming to the House. I ask the Minister to consider the points I have made.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I advise Members in the Chamber that I would like to start the wind-up speeches at 4 o’clock. First, I will call the people who have notified me that they wish to speak. If we have time, I will call the others.

3.39 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate and getting Back-Bench time. It is also good to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who I know is very supportive of farming, agriculture and the countryside. It was good to hear what he had to say. I agreed with the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland when he said that the countryside
and farming are intricately linked, and that farmers are very much a part of the community. He may be a farmer’s son who is no longer a farmer, but I am a farmer’s son who is still a farmer. We have much in common, even if he is not farming now. We were both born on a farm and have farming in the blood.

As we move forward, we have to look at exactly what we want agriculture and our land to provide. We want it to provide good, wholesome food, and a good quantity of food. Let us not just play at farming; let us have proper production. The common agricultural policy has many sins, but the money that comes in through the basic payment scheme is used by the farming community—especially family farms—to keep farming going and to keep it profitable. Contrary to popular opinion, most of it, especially in the livestock sector, does not drive food prices up. I suggest it probably keeps them down, because it keeps a level of production going, which is key as we leave the EU.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry into all the commodities. Some 70% of our exports go to Europe, so we need a combination of support payments, continuing into the future, and access to that market. We cannot have a New Zealand or Australian-style policy, because when the New Zealanders and the Australians got rid of subsidies they had virtually no regulation on their farmers whatsoever. The result would be a perfect storm were we to say, “Okay, we’ll allow all the food in. Let’s not worry about tariffs. Let’s have the cheapest food we can get from South America—Argentinian and Brazilian beef. Let’s get our sheep meat from New Zealand. Let’s not worry about the cost and the price of produce in this country.” We cannot do that, for the simple reason that we want an improved environment, and our farmers will have many controls, quite rightly, on the way we control water and nitrates, and the way we help to stop flooding. All those things are great benefits, but they come at a cost.

There needs to be a real policy, and I know the Minister is very keen to see that. I welcome the support payments, but whatever period we have them for, I do not want them to stay roughly the same and then fall off the edge. Whatever we do, we change the system of payment and move farmers in another direction. Certainly, we can make farming more competitive, and we can give grants and support, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall said, to help that happen. However, when it comes to livestock and the sheep and beef sectors, it is very difficult to see, given the present pricing structure, how those industries will thrive without some support.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) rightly talked about the availability and affordability of food. That is why we need enough production. We can have a great farm shop and a great tourist attraction, and we can sell food to our tourists—that is all great stuff—but it is perhaps 1% or 2% of the total production in this country. It is no more than 5% of food. We need to make sure, as we go into our large retailers as consumers, that we get British food. Back in the ’80s, around 80% of food was produced and consumed in this country, but that has gone down to 60%. Perhaps some tastes have changed. Even though we have a bit of global warming, I do not think that we can quite grow bananas, oranges and rice yet. Seriously, though, we still have a great opportunity to produce more food.

We also have a great opportunity to keep the environment sound. Where we draw water for our reservoirs, let us look at the amount of nitrates going into that water. Such things are important; however, every time we restrict a farmer in his or her operation, there is a cost. I do not think that our consumers and the population of this country really see the opportunity that that offers to support farming. I do not believe that we should control farming so much that we stop that production and the income from it. We have to do a combination of things. I know the Minister is very keen on looking at insurance policy and how we might remove some of the fluctuations in price. All of that is right, but the policy has to be a practical one that farmers can afford to buy into.

As we go forward, we must also look not only at ways to get new entrants in, but at our tenancy laws and how we rent our land. Perhaps slightly contrary to what I have been saying, as much as we like the support that comes to farming through the basic payment scheme, there is an argument that it drives rents up and can therefore make land, particularly for young entrants and other coming in, more expensive. As we target the payments, they must end up in the pockets of those who do the farming, manage the land and look after food production and the environment. I am very keen to see that that happens.

I do not believe that coming out of the EU will be a disaster, or that it will lead us to a great sunny upland where everything will be rosy—perhaps the Minister and I may slightly disagree on that. I think we have to be realistic as we leave. Food production is necessary. I am very fond of our Secretary of State, and I know that he loves to talk about the environment, but I want to hear more about food, farming, production and how we are going to feed the nation. It is important that we keep those exports going and that we have a market that works.

The environment is great, but we need a market along with the environment. We need profitable agriculture above all things. The Minister will know as well as I do that if someone goes to the bank manager and they are not making a profit, they will not stay in business for long. I have huge confidence in the Minister, and I am sure that he will have huge influence on the Secretary of State, so that when he gets to the National Farmers Union conference in a couple of weeks, we will hear about food production and how we will keep farming and food going in this country.

3.47 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I refer hon. Members to the register of interests: I am an active farmer and a recipient of single farm payment.

Many people have referred to the speech at the Oxford conference, which was described in Farmers Weekly as “one of the most important speeches for UK farming in living memory”.

Neil Parish

I think that is testament to the vision that the Secretary of State has had. On the face of it, funds are guaranteed, but it is up to the devolved Governments to set their own policies.

I have been involved in the agri-food industry for my entire career. I believe passionately that productive agriculture and protecting the environment are mutually inclusive—having well-to-do, or economically viable, countryside is the best way to protect the environment. The vast majority of our countryside environment has been shaped by man. We should not kid ourselves that this is North America; this is not a big wildlife park. It is very important that the general public realise that the main purpose of agriculture or farmland is to produce food. Many hon. Members have spoken about the affordability and availability of food, which is what is ultimately important. It is estimated that every household contributed £400 to the CAP every year, but we have affordability, availability, and wholesomeness in food that we have never seen before. The policy framework must recognise the importance of affordability of food because, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, many people find it difficult to make budgets balance, and we cannot have wild fluctuations in the price of food. It is not good for farming.

I have been involved in produce for ever, or at least since I was in my 20s. Not quite for ever—I thank my hon. Friends for their asides. If the production goes up, the price goes down. We have to have a leveller.

I would also clarify that a support payment, not a subsidy, supports agriculture and the food industry—the biggest manufacturing industry in the country. The vast majority of payments are effectively reinvested in the business. Anybody who looks at agricultural statistics will see that farmers are not making a fortune in the islands; they are not making a fortune in Gordon and they are not making a fortune in Dumfries. It is important to recognise that.

We must bring to the debate the scale of British farming and the proportion produced in the different areas. It is important to realise that the scale of farming in the UK is, on average, bigger than in the rest of the EU. It is very productive and relatively efficient, despite the CAP. A system of payments that achieves environmental and productivity targets would allow a mix of farming. There are 19,700 claimants in Scotland alone. Some 8,000 of them claim less than £5,000, and it is obvious that there is a socio-environmental opportunity there, not just a purely agricultural one.

The National Farmers Union Scotland has its own negotiation to do with the Scottish Government, and I will not speak about Scottish policy here because that will be formed in Scotland, but I would clarify one point. There have been concerns about a DEFRA-centric approach to the devolved countries, despite Ministers being crystal clear that that is not the case. For absolute clarity, I would ask the Minister to state clearly that there will not be a DEFRA-centric policy dropped down on to Scotland.

It is clear from comments made by many Members that we want to see a common framework across the whole of the United Kingdom. That is just good practice. Farmers in Aberdeenshire have as much to do with farmers in Lincolnshire as they do in Essex; similarly up and down the west coast. It is very important that we have standards across the entire UK, and how they are policed is also important. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should be policed effectively, perhaps by some sort of super-environmental agency, as DEFRA has suggested.

There is an 80/20 rule in agriculture: 80% of all production is by 20% of farmers. It is probably nearer to 10% to 90%. It is important to recognise that the affordability of food depends on scale and productivity. Having come from the retail sector, I have seen rapacious rationalisation by the supermarket. In the long run, that does not bring us any benefit; it brings far too much dependency on one or two very big players, which makes us very vulnerable to food scares or problems.

Affordable food is every bit as much a public good as the environment. They must go hand in hand and I hope the policy framework will respect that.

3.52 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. Many of my points have been raised by other Members, so I will keep this short and sweet, and make three key points. First, I will touch lightly on the UK framework and funding; secondly, I will talk about the opportunity to do things differently; and thirdly, I will stress the importance of the environment and infrastructure in the development of UK frameworks.

In my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire, agricultural industries are a cornerstone. They are involved in land and environmental management. They create jobs. They help integrate the economies of the villages and towns that make up the constituency. Although farmers are different, whether they are arable, livestock or dairy, and face different challenges in different parts of the country, there are some common challenges throughout the UK, including price pressures from retailers, international competition and the pressure on innovation and value. It is important when we develop UK frameworks that we recognise the differences throughout the United Kingdom, but also that we, as elected Members, make sure we are reaching through each part of the United Kingdom to recognise the common challenges faced in each of our constituencies, and that we make policy that works for the entire United Kingdom.

As my hon. Friends have outlined, funding and decisions on how the spend is distributed should be devolved, as currently. However, it is very important that, whatever the UK body turns out to be, the funding should be ring-fenced. When Westminster is putting money out to the devolved Administrations around the United Kingdom, that should be ring-fenced and protected, so that devoted Administrations, which may be under some political pressure, do not shift funding from agriculture into health or transport or whatever might be the subject of political pressure at the time—maybe even things such as IT systems.

When we devolve different areas of funding, as already takes place, we still maximise the benefit of being one United Kingdom together. Central Departments such as DEFRA have central resources such as IT systems. Perhaps the devolved Administrations should have freer
access to those things, which could save money and help farmers with the receipt of payments and other administrative tasks.

My second point is about the opportunity to do things differently. The Secretary of State outlined in his Oxford speech that we have a chance to develop our own policies, shaped by our collective interests. I could not agree more. This is an opportunity to tackle the criticisms of the common agricultural policy. Anyone who studied politics or economics at Higher or A-level has been taught for many years about butter mountains and the inefficiencies of the system. This is our chance to address that. We can create a bespoke policy for our industries, not for one political party.

On the environment and infrastructure, we have stressed the importance of the protection of the environment and its preservation, but it is important to remember that my constituency and others across Scotland and the United Kingdom are not biscuit-tin communities. They are active, working, agricultural landscapes. We have to make sure that we are educating people across the UK to understand the value of the agricultural industries, which help preserve, protect and progress the environment as a working, living landscape.

This is a prime opportunity for us to start redirecting payments towards more infrastructure. In reports on broadband over the last week, rural parts of our country fall vastly behind urban parts. We have targets of 95%, reaching 100% under the devolved Administration, for superfast broadband. My constituency is at 83.3%. I hope that when forming policy we look not only at direct payments but at how we can help regenerate our towns and villages and make sure that our rural economies are as connected as our cosmopolitan ones.

It is important that in our UK framework we make sure that we devolve implementation so that we recognise the nuances, but pull together common resources where that will serve our constituents best; that we take note of the opportunity and grasp it with both hands in order to do something differently, and finally, that we recognise the importance of the environment but also the opportunity to invest in more infrastructure.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I appreciate the courtesy of Members. To give Mr Percy a little longer, the wind-ups will start slightly after 4pm.

3.37 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Thank you, Mr Bone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today. I am not a farmer—I am perhaps unique in that. I do farm votes, however, and I am pleased to say that my productivity rates in every election have improved, but it is one worthy of consideration.

In considering agricultural policy, we have to think in the broader context of the whole of food and drink in the UK and how we support that entire sector. What we do in the agricultural sector is so important in the supply chain through to the food and drink sector, which is such an important part of our exports. I am very involved in food and drink export promotion in my role as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Canada, and we need to ensure that policy is connected across Government with that in mind.

Comments have been made about labour flexibility. I am a Brexiteer, and I think we have made the right decision. Last night, I was a remainer, for staying in this place. I look forward to the second vote—obviously, we voted to leave by a very narrow margin.

I and most of my constituents fully understand that we have to maintain labour flexibility. I think most of the public will buy into an immigration system that we can trust, which matches skills to the areas of the country with shortages. Brexit gives us the opportunity to have a sensible, informed debate about immigration, as has happened in many countries, such as Canada and Australia.

I have another point here, but I cannot read my own writing—I used to be a schoolteacher—so I will ignore that. I agree with the comments that were made about animal welfare. My real reason for coming here this afternoon is that I want to talk about what we do in terms of our trade deals with the rest of the world. As I said when I intervened on the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), we must build trade deals on the basis of evidence. In the previous couple of Parliaments, I was very involved in the all-party group on transatlantic trade. It originally focused on the transatlantic trade and investment partnership negotiations, which of course are going nowhere, but eventually focused on the comprehensive economic and trade agreement.

I want to chide the Secretary of State slightly, because some of his comments about American food production and chlorinated chicken have not been helpful to our future relationship. Having access to the US market is incredibly important to British farmers post-Brexit, just as it is important for American farmers to gain access to our market. Any agreement must therefore be based on evidence. Let us look to the CETA model. In those negotiations, the language that Ministers, Secretaries of State and European Commissioners used was always modest—I will not say that it was not extreme, because that would be a terrible thing to say. The EU and Canada had big differences on standards. In particular, we had a 20-odd year dispute with Canada at the World Trade Organisation about hormones and antibiotics in beef, but it was resolved through CETA and has now ended. Of course, that beef is not coming into the European Union.

Where we have differences, it is still possible to negotiate a deal. Some of the comments that have been made about things such as chlorinated chicken have fed anti-American bigotry, which would not be accepted in any
other relationship. There is a lot of evidence out there about chlorinated chicken. I do not propose to go into it, other than to point out that a person would have to eat a full chlorinated chicken to get the same amount of chlorine as they would get from one glass of water. I do not see many people advocating drinking or importing raw water. We must do this on the basis of evidence.

Some of the differences between the EU and the US are based on trade defence, rather than science, so let us have a scientific, evidence-based trade policy. The Secretary of State should be conscious of the fact that talking down the prospect of trade deals with a market as big and important as America is not particularly helpful. That said, it would be incredibly difficult to come to such a deal—I do not underestimate this—particularly if it includes agriculture. The all-party group on transatlantic trade went out and met various American food producers, including an American beef producer—he had a Stetson on—pork people and chicken people. I am not going to pretend that it would be easy to negotiate a deal. Given the agricultural propositions in CETA, it may well be very limited, but let us not buy into this bigotry. Let us ensure that our policy on agriculture and trading relations are based on trade defence, rather than science, so let us not see many people advocating drinking or importing chlorine as they would get from one glass of water. I do not eat a full chlorinated chicken to get the same amount of chlorine as they would get from one glass of water.

There is a lot of evidence out there about any decisions that are taken in plenty of time so sudden changes without adequate warning do not help farmers. They do not all work full-time in agriculture, of course, but a lot of them do. My constituency is also home to Cameron Brig, the biggest grain distillery in Europe, and therefore perhaps the biggest customer for grain producers in Scotland—perhaps in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made a very well-informed speech, which touched on a lot of areas that other hon. Members did not mention. She reminded us that Brexit is not just about what happens to the common agricultural policy; it is also about where workers come from and what conditions they work under.

On the affordability of fresh food, I think staff at my food bank in Glenrothes would beg to differ with the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who said that food has never been more affordable. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) used a lot of his time to sing the praises of chlorinated chicken. We respect each other’s views in this place, so the hon. Gentleman is welcome to his opinion. He is also welcome to his chlorinated chicken, but I do not think many of my constituents will be too chuffed if taking back control means that someone else decides whether chicken can be chlorinated.

Andrew Percy: My point was that people should proceed on the basis of evidence. I am not an expert, but my simple point was that we should listen to what experts say about such things, rather than rely on bigotry. I trust the experts, not those who buy into anti-capitalist, anti-American bigotry.

Peter Grant: It would be nice if the Government’s approach to Brexit was based on evidence, facts and proper analysis, rather than ideology. The hon. Gentleman also welcomed the opportunity to have what he described as an informed debate about immigration. I think it would have been nice if we had had an informed debate about immigration, rather than the desperately ill-informed debate we had up to, through and since the referendum. We have not heard enough about the enormous benefit that immigration brings to these islands and will continue to bring if we allow it to do so.

The hon. Member for Gordon reminded us at Brexit questions this morning that, as far as agriculture is concerned, one size does not fit all. In fact, the danger is that one size very often does not fit anything, so nobody gets the result they need.

Anyone can work out that the needs of a hill farmer of crofter in the highlands of Scotland or in Wales are very different from the needs of a dairy farmer in the south of England, or indeed of a fruit grower in lowland Scotland or lowland Perthshire. That means that whatever framework is put together has got to be capable of
being adapted and applied flexibly to ensure that the decisions taken are those that are most suited to where they are being applied.

I do not have an issue, and neither does the Scottish National party, with recognising that in some areas of public policy there are huge benefits to having one framework and one set of rules to apply everywhere. For example, animal welfare standards are common throughout the United Kingdom—good idea. Let us face it, they are going to be common throughout the United Kingdom and the European Union, because we will still want to be able to sell our stuff across the Irish border, so Northern Ireland will have to fit in with European Union standards in the longer term.

It is essential that a decision that something will be taken on a UK framework basis is a decision by consensus. I am waiting, as are a lot of people back home in Scotland, to hear the Government confirm that no UK framework policy will be decided without the consent of the devolved Administrations, and that once it has been agreed that something needs a UK framework, the content and detail of that framework will be agreed by consensus among the four equal partners in the Union, not simply imposed on us by a Government in Whitehall—nor indeed imposed on the farmers of England by a Government in Edinburgh.

Mr Carmichael: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will give way very briefly indeed.

Mr Carmichael: What view do the hon. Gentleman and his party take of the NFUS suggestion that any decision should be taken on the basis of some form of qualified majority voting?

Peter Grant: I am not convinced that defining a specific voting system now would be particularly helpful. I would not have a problem with the system being more devolved in England, if only there were a government structure to allow that to happen, because farmers in Devon do not necessarily need the same response as the farmers of east Anglia—but that is for the people and representatives of England to sort out. If decisions are to be taken that will affect farmers in Scotland, it is essential those decisions are the right ones for Scotland. The best place for decisions affecting Scotland to be taken is in Scotland—if we want to, we can replace Scotland with Northern Ireland, Wales or even Cornwall.

Andrew Percy: Yorkshire!

Peter Grant: Yorkshire, absolutely—we could possibly even split Yorkshire into north and south, if the hon. Gentleman wants to go that far.

Decisions used to be taken by Ministers or civil servants in the ivory towers of Whitehall and imposed on communities the length and breadth of these islands, but those days have simply got to be over. Scottish farmers produce a significant amount of our food and export earnings. They often provide employment, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland pointed out, in areas where there is not a lot of alternative employment. It is important that decisions that affect our farmers are taken by the people they elect.

To pick up on a final point, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) asked for complete ring-fencing of the funding. Perhaps, but only as long as the decisions about how much funding is to be allocated and what is ring-fenced are taken by consensus—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman but I have to be fair and ensure that each party gets its allocated time, so we will have to move on.

4.13 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate and recognising the challenges that we face in Cumbria. There have been many good contributions from Members across the Chamber. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for expressing her concerns about food security and labour, which are an important part of the debate.

We have heard that British farming is critical to our economy, providing thousands of jobs and the cornerstone of our food production. It is therefore important for the Government to step up to the plate to get the best deal and maintain the high standards that we have heard about, to enable our businesses and farms to flourish and remain successful. When we negotiate our trade agreements, it is important to make sure that they work for British farming, while protecting the high standards of food safety and animal welfare that our consumers expect. As we have heard from a number of Members, it is important that any deals do not undercut British farming.

Food and farming need to be a clear strategic priority and a cornerstone of the broad industrial strategy that the Government are promoting. I agree that there is a clear need, as hon. Members have said, for a plan to enable food and farming to grow more, so that people have a greater appreciation of British food and are encouraged to buy British at every opportunity. We also need to look at the brand of Britishness to help us to export more and get others to appreciate our high standards.

It is important that we appreciate exactly what is at stake for the farming industry with Brexit. If we get it wrong, that is the nation’s food security, nutrition, environment and public health, as we have heard. Farming is an integral part of the Labour party’s vision of a fairer society—one that tackles the increasing social ills of food poverty, poor diet, environmental degradation and inequality. We believe that we must be ambitious in the creation of our new British agricultural policy, which should aim to establish a new deal and a consensus on what a modern farming industry can do for the economy, rural communities, consumers and the environment. Change cannot be left to market forces alone, as long as farming is critical to our food security and to stewardship of the natural environment.

We have to look at better food labelling, which is vital. If our farmers are to be able to compete fairly under any new trade deals, product labelling must be clear and unambiguous so that people know exactly what they are buying. Such labelling should include the country of origin and method of production.
As we have heard, the issue of farm labour is critical and immediate. Farmers and food manufacturers need to have access to a wider labour market. Without access to that labour, the agricultural sector and food manufacturers will face severe difficulties. A lack of labour will lead to consequences for UK agriculture. We could end up with product being left to waste, the movement of investment and operations out of the UK and, on top of that, price inflation for consumers.

At the moment, the profitability of many farms is too dependent on direct payments from the CAP. Because of the huge diversity in farming and the volatility in many areas, we need to consider how we can support farms to become more resilient, while mitigating the volatility. When it comes to replacing the CAP, we believe that a future payment system must broadly seek to do the following things. We need to look at how we target support to farmers who provide the most public good but may struggle to compete in the market, through no fault of their own—for example, the hill farmers in my Lakeland constituency. Any future system must be transparent as well as relevant. It must be easily accessible—we have heard about broadband—and cost-effective. It should reward environmentally sustainable practice and environmental stewardship, such as the management of habitat and natural resources. I believe strongly that we should recognise the cultural and historical landscape for the benefit of us all.

We should also support flood mitigation through land management, so we need to look at how any future programme can include that. We also need to include technological innovation, and consider how investment in it could meet the aims of improving resource efficiency and animal health and welfare, managing disease and adding value. It could also be used to encourage investment in machinery and software. It is important to support rural communities and family farms as part of any system. They, too, are central to the economy.

In short, any new system must enable profitable and sustainable farming businesses that support a vital and dynamic rural economy. Farmers tell me that their big problem at the moment is uncertainty about the future, so I am looking forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I hope that anything being developed will provide that certainty and direction for our farmers, so that they can engage in long-term planning for sustainable future prosperity.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. Like him, I am a farmer’s son. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), I am not farming now, but I did try farming for 10 years. It is a real honour to be farming Minister at an exciting time: we have an opportunity, for the first time in half a century, to design fresh thinking and coherent policy in agriculture.

As the Minister for Agriculture, I have wrestled with the common agricultural policy, and the rules and bureaucracy, for four years. It is stifling. Although there have been changes to the CAP over the years, in its current incarnation it is a bureaucratic quagmire. It attempts to regulate every single field and every feature in them. Our administrators spend their time fretting about the width of a hedge: whether it is too narrow or too wide, whether the gateway is too big and whether there are too many trees on a parcel of land. It goes on forever.

Every Administration in the UK feels deep frustration at some of the bureaucracy in the CAP. We have an opportunity as we leave the EU to do things differently and to design coherent policy. We set out our intention in the Queen’s Speech last year to bring forward an agriculture Bill later this year. Before that, we will publish further plans about our initial thinking—some time later in the spring or in early summer.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and others talked about the importance of UK frameworks. We absolutely recognise that and I think that all other parts of the UK do, too. As he pointed out, when we consider the UK framework, we will be looking predominantly at two areas: first, what is required to protect the integrity of the UK single market. Clearly, we could not have one Administration subsidising sheep farmers in a way that would be to the huge detriment of farmers in other parts of the UK. There would have to be some boundaries. Secondly, everyone accepts the need for UK frameworks when we talk about what is necessary to secure international agreements, be they on trade or other matters: things like phytosanitary, food safety and traceability issues to protect our export market. We will have to have some kind of framework and common outcomes and objectives to deliver those things.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman and others that we are engaging regularly with Ministers in all the devolved Administrations. We have regular meetings with them and in some of those meetings, different devolved Administrations lead on particular aspects. They have been updating us on some of the work that they have been doing. At official level there has been a very in-depth analysis, both to deliver what is necessary for the current European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and for the detailed work on the principles and features that a future UK framework will need.

Picking up on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) made, our critique of the CAP is that it is a one-size-fits-all policy, and it does not work for that reason. I want to ensure that leaving the EU and the CAP is liberating for everyone in this country—for all the devolved Administrations and farmers right across the UK. As he put it, it is not our intention at all to have a DEFRA-centric, top-down policy. Far from it: we want to protect maximum flexibility and ability for each individual devolved Administration to design policies that work for them.

I will give an example of the sort of thing that we have to put up with. About 18 months ago, the Welsh Government got into a legal dispute with the European Commission because the Commission did not like the size and shape of the ear tag that they used as the second tag on cattle. I would have no intention of trying to dictate to other devolved Administrations what the size, shape or colour of their ear tags should be. All I would want to know is that they had proper traceability in place.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister’s policy is all very well, but it is meaningful only if we have the money to go with it. Will the Minister address the position of the Treasury in relation to funding of it?
George Eustice: The right hon. Gentleman pre-empted me—I was about to get to that point. We were very clear in our manifesto that the budget in cash terms for agriculture policy will stay the same until 2022. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) asked the question: I reassure him and other Members that that applies to all parts of the UK. There would be no question between now and 2022 of any devolved Administration departing from that and using those funds for some other purpose—that would be a breach of the manifesto commitment.

As a Government, we have been very clear that we will keep the cash total the same until 2022, but we have given a very clear undertaking that we will seek to phase out over time the single farm payment and to replace it with the new environmental land management scheme, which will be funded. It is not the case that funding will end in 2022; at this stage we have not set out exactly what the figure will be post-2022, but we are absolutely clear that there will be a gradual transition and a funded policy to support our environmental land management scheme after 2022.

I am going to touch very briefly on a few of the areas that we are looking at in England as future policy. For a new environmental land management scheme we want to move away from the current direct payments, which are on an area basis. I do not think there is much sense for that. We want to directly reward farmers for what they do by way of delivering public goods—whether enhanced animal welfare or environmental goods. We want to move to a system where we are rewarding farmers for the goods that they provide. We are also looking at innovation and competitiveness, including the possibility of grants to support investment on farms, to help farmers prepare for a new world in agriculture.

To pick up on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) raised, we are looking at whether we can help support and foster the development of futures markets and insurance products to help farmers manage risks. We are looking at issues such as fairness in the supply chain, too.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton raised the issue of New Zealand. New Zealand is different: people often forget to take account of the fact that when it removed subsidies, it also devalued its currency by 45% and priced itself back into world markets. In doing that, New Zealand had certain problems with the environment—even today, New Zealand dairy has environmental impacts that we would not want to tolerate in this country. There are differences and there are things that we would not want to follow in the case of New Zealand. There are also things that we can learn—for instance, its support for investments on farms through grants.

I assure the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland that I regularly meet with NFU Scotland—I can see its members today in the Public Gallery, carefully watching the debate—and we are very keen to get its engagement; we are not allowing that to be something that just the Scottish Government do. As the UK Minister, I want a UK perspective. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) mentioned animal welfare. I agree with him; we have prioritised it and we are looking at ways that we can incentivise and support high animal welfare systems of husbandry. As I said, it is a public good and we recognise it as such.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) gave some positive comments on what she has heard so far. I very much look forward to her supporting us in the Division Lobbies as we try to take the Bill forward on that basis. She mentioned the issue of labour; I was formerly a strawberry farmer and I understand the challenges that fruit farmers face. We have been working with the Home Office to discuss what work permit arrangements we might put in place for when we leave. The Migration Advisory Committee has just started a big piece of work to look at the labour market in the round. I agree with what the hon. Lady said about some of the work of the Food Foundation. Horticulture often has been overlooked, and we have an opportunity to address that. I attended the launch of the project that she highlighted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton talked about some of the pressure on the uplands. We recognise that, but I had a very interesting conversation with the Uplands Alliance just last week; it pointed out that although they are financially more vulnerable, it believes that there are more things that they can deliver by way of public goods—whether peatland restoration, flood mitigation work or public access. There are many opportunities for it to do that.

Farmers are the recipients of subsidies, but they are not always the main beneficiaries. Subsidies distort all sorts of markets. We have an opportunity to do things very differently. It would be remiss of me not to mention trade with the US. It is difficult to assign the description of “anti-American bigotry” to the Secretary of State, who is quite an Atlanticist, but we recognise and value our high animal welfare standards and we are determined to protect them.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 February 2018

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

Statutory PHSE Education

9.30 am

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of statutory personal, health, social and economic education.

In March 2017 the then Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), announced her intention of putting relationships and sex education on a statutory footing, and of creating a power to make PSHE statutory in future, following further work and consultation. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 provides for it to be made statutory in all schools in England through regulations. A call for evidence is running from December 2017 up to this month. I welcome that call for evidence, which gives us a chance to explore what world-class PSHE looks like, going forward into the 2020s. I hope that this debate will be a useful part of that process.

PSHE in this country has suffered on several fronts. It has been caught up in sterile debates about the difference between knowledge and skills, and about school freedom. It has also become a battleground because of its status as the home of sex and relationships education. It has been incorrectly associated with generic and sometimes obscure pet subjects—even origami. Often, we have lost sight of the fact that PSHE at its best supports the development of skills and attributes such as managing risk and taking responsibility, and the honing of critical skills that set young people up to succeed in other areas of the curriculum and in their wider lives. Surely that is what education is about.

Despite some of the cartoon battles that I have mentioned, there is a fair level of consensus about what PSHE includes: the knowledge and skills that young people need to stay safe—online and offline—healthy, and prepared for life. There should be programmes of study such as that prepared by the PSHE Association, with a spiral curriculum that is consistent with the ethos of the school and able to take account of the specific needs of the school’s community. It can support children’s mental and physical health; reduce the risk of drug and alcohol misuse; support financial capability, develop employability skills and provide emergency life-saving skills. Many schools provide excellent PSHE education, but others struggle. The fact that the subject is not mandated in all schools does not help; if there is a tussle for timetable space, the statutory subject will always win. Figures from the Department for Education itself show that time given to PSHE fell by 32% from 2011 to 2015, and the Select Committee on Education warned that that situation could still be deteriorating.

Mandatory or not, PSHE is of course not a magic bullet, but a clear position in the school curriculum, with support from inside and outside the education community, would be a good start. Giving PSHE statutory footing and enabling schools to act within a broad framework would make it easier for the Government to deliver their stated aims of improving outcomes in safeguarding pupils against online harm, and in mental health. That is because PSHE is a complementary subject area: for example, relationships are influenced by other areas covered in PSHE and cannot be taught in isolation.

Although parents, teachers and pupils support the subject, I believe that schools would welcome clarity on its status. A Government decision to establish mandatory PSHE must be the start of the work, not its end.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a strong case and I congratulate her on securing this important debate. Does she agree that it is not appropriate for parents to be able to withdraw their children from some of the lessons? Should not the guidance and regulations make it clear that all pupils have the right to know the facts? There is a big difference between opinion and fact, and all children, regardless of faith or background, have the right to know the facts.

Teresa Pearce: I agree. Things work best when the home and the school work in partnership, not when they are in conflict. I am the mother of a teacher who often tells me about problems she has in trying to teach religious education in school. Some parents want their child removed from the lessons, because they do not want their child to be taught about other religions. That does not help. All children should be treated equally and have equal access to information, as the hon. Lady says. I completely agree.

One of the key benefits of PSHE, I believe, is that it increases academic attainment. A report by Pro Bono Economics in 2017 found that the provision of high-quality PSHE has a positive impact on young people’s academic attainment. Moreover, a study of 200 social and emotional skills programmes, predominantly delivered through PSHE lessons, demonstrated an 11% improvement in young people’s academic achievement. Encouragingly, evidence also showed that PSHE can have a positive impact on life chances, as it was the academic performance of the most disadvantaged children that improved by the greatest amount as the result of receiving high-quality PSHE.

PSHE does more than just add value to the qualifications that young people leave school with. Evidence suggests that it supports children in developing skills and characteristics such as teamwork, confidence, flexibility and resilience—all of which will enable them to achieve in their future lives and careers. I am sure that many hon. Members in the Chamber have had conversations with employers about young people leaving education with a handful of perhaps excellent qualifications, but no life skills. Many years ago when I was young I learned those life skills through such things as Saturday or holiday jobs, which are hard to get now. I learned what it was to be an adult by working with older women in Timothy Whites—whatever happened to them?—on a Saturday. Those things are not there for young people now; they need somewhere where we can teach them the life skills that they need to become the sort of employee that employers are looking for.

That is because the world of work that young people enter now is very different from the one I entered when I left school. People are not just looking for examination results; they want a candidate with the ability to adapt,
innovate and work in partnership. Key leaders in business and industry support that view. The CBI has said that there is a need to focus

“not only on knowledge and skills, but also on the key attitudes and behaviours that are needed for success in life outside the school gates”.

That is where PSHE can certainly help. There is strong evidence that it improves academic attainment and young people’s prospects. I remind the Minister that at the Education World Forum in January he said:

“Preparing pupils to compete in an ever more competitive jobs market is the core purpose of schooling”.

I agree, and if he means what he says, as I believe he does, we need to be serious about attainment and social mobility, and about making provision for high-quality PSHE as a statutory requirement in schools.

Many other Members want to speak, and I do not want to cover every aspect of the subject, but I want to talk in particular about one area that is dear to my heart. In 2015 I tried to get a private Member’s Bill through Parliament—the Compulsory Emergency First Aid Education (State-funded Secondary Schools) Bill. Unfortunately it did not succeed, and the Government and the Minister did not support it. Perhaps the Minister was right and it was not the right place for the matter to be dealt with; perhaps the place for it is in PSHE. I should be happy to know whether he thinks that that is so.

I have worked hard on the issue for a number of years, as have many other Members of Parliament. The British Red Cross, the British Heart Foundation and St John Ambulance have all welcomed the call for evidence, believing that the teaching of first aid could sit happily within PSHE. The teaching of first aid, including cardiopulmonary resuscitation, as a mandatory component of statutory PSHE in both primary and secondary school, could be done in one hour a year; each year.

It would ensure that all children and young people had the opportunity to learn that crucial life skill, building up knowledge and confidence over the course of their time in school. We know the statistics about first aid: only 5% of adults feel knowledgeable or willing to act in an emergency. Up to 59% of pre-hospital deaths from injury could have been prevented with basic first aid. More than 30,000 cardiac arrests occur out of hospital every year in the UK, and fewer than one in 10 people survive. If we could match the survival rates found in parts of Norway, where CPR is routinely taught in secondary schools, we could save around 5,000 lives per year in the UK.

As a mother of teachers, I understand that teachers are hard pressed and that their job is difficult, with long hours and little space, but I believe teachers are best placed to deliver the training, and they are not alone. They do not need specialist training to deliver it, because there are many quality, approved resources already being used in schools, such as those used by the three organisations I mentioned. The British Heart Foundation provides free CPR “watch and learn” training kits, which are in place in 66% of secondary schools. The British Red Cross provides “Life. Live it.” first aid for children and first aid learning for young people, with resources for primary and secondary schools. St John Ambulance provides free online access to its streamed sessions under the banner, “The Big First Aid Lesson”, which many of us will be aware of. The most recent session reached 125,000 students in a single sitting, in addition to more traditional teaching resources.

First aid learning must be appropriate to the development level. The optimal age to start teaching cardiac compressions is around 12, but learning the symptoms of cardiac arrest and how to call for help can begin with much younger children. When they start school, children should be taught how to dial 999 and what happens when they do. That will impart a sense of confidence and responsibility to act. In the current climate, when we all, particularly young people, go out to bars, cinemas or concerts, there is an ever-present threat of terrorism. We need to turn young people into life-savers so that they do not become bystanders.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I hesitate to intervene, because my hon. Friend is making such a powerful case, but does she agree that as well as the practical benefits she is talking about in terms of saving lives, another benefit of first aid training for young people is that it builds up their personal confidence and their employability?

Teresa Pearce: I absolutely agree; that is almost the next point I was coming on to.

The training needs to be appropriate to the developmental level, but no matter how young children are, they can start learning about things such as what to do if they get a cut, how to put somebody in the recovery position and how to ring for help. Those are important things.

Beyond the process of learning those skills, as my right hon. Friend has just said, their inclusion in PHSE could have other benefits. The International Committee of the Red Cross believes:

“First aid is not just about techniques. It is an act of humanity.”

I agree. It is a key responsibility of citizenship. Teaching those skills will help create the next generation of good, caring citizens. It will teach character, something we all want to see happen. The Red Cross is surely right about that. Empowering young people with the ability to act and potentially save a life can transform how they feel about themselves and improve their self-esteem. It could also encourage more people to go into that career area and become paramedics. I have met many young people who, after having first aid training and perhaps joining St John Ambulance, went on to become paramedics and work in the national health service, because they found that they had a key skill and they understood its importance.

First aid training has wide support: 97% of teachers think it is vital for young people to learn essential skills in school, and 89% of people think that CPR should be taught in all schools in the UK. Some 95% of parents agree that first aid should be taught in secondary school, and 97% of 11 to 16-year-olds agree that they should be taught first aid, saying that they either definitely or probably should be taught it at secondary school.

We have a world that is fast changing—very different from the one I grew up in. It is a world full of threats online and the demands of social media. We hear a lot about the pressure young people are under. We know that young people need to learn about consent and about the terrorist threat. I am from a lucky generation;
I grew up after the second world war, in a time of peace. Young children now face constant threats—things we could never have dreamed they would face—and if we are to equip them for those threats, to deal with them in their everyday lives, we have a duty to ensure that in school every child is taught PHSE. It is a place to learn life skills that will equip them for the challenges ahead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): If I am to be able to call all the hon. Members seeking to catch my eye, limiting speeches to around five minutes would be much appreciated.

9.45 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) on an excellent speech on this important subject.

When I was visiting one of my local schools a week ago, I was handed a copy of all the subjects it teaches in its PHSE syllabus. I must say that I was impressed: it is a sensible, measured group of subjects, all dealing with issues that young people need to get to grips with, which will hugely help them as they embark on adult life.

I do not intend to speak for long, but I will talk about one specific issue I would like to see addressed in PHSE education. I will do so as a result of having been visited by one of my constituents, Denise Coates from Houghton Regis, who is a cancer survivor and an ambassador on the issue for the Luton and Dunstable hospital—perhaps the best-performing hospital in the country. As a cancer survivor, Miss Coates is passionate about the early diagnosis of cancer, something that I note absolutely fits with the priorities of the Department of Health and Social Care and its new 28-day target to diagnose cancer.

On the list of PHSE subjects, which I got from one of my local upper schools, I was pleased to see that children are taught “What is cancer?” That is an excellent first step. We know that around 2 million people are living with cancer in our country; in my clinical commissioning group area, Bedfordshire, there are about 2,300 cancer cases and 960 cancer deaths per year. Denise Coates has a simple and straightforward request, which, if we are already teaching children about what cancer is in PHSE, it is possible, practical and extremely worth while to grant: that children be taught about the importance of early detection of cancer for themselves and to spread that learning within their families. That is potentially life-saving. All of us in this room will have lost family members to cancer. I lost my stepister, who had four children, at the age of 49 and my mother died of cancer when she was 66. I know I am not unusual in this room.

We know that the golden key to cancer is early detection. If we teach that to our children, both girls and boys, when they are young, they have no embarrassment about examining their own bodies and know what to look out for. If they take that message home to their families and ensure their families do likewise, we can do much better. We know there is a particular issue, for example, with many in the Asian community in this country presenting late for cancer. That is tragic, because sometimes it will be too late—the saddest words in the English language. That is something we could prevent.

I have a very simple request. I have written to the Department of Health and Social Care, as a member of the Select Committee on Health, to seek its support on the issue. I implore the Minister to listen to my representations this morning. I say to the schools in my constituency and in every constituency up and down this country, “If you are already telling children about cancer, just go that extra step. Talk to them about the incredible importance of early detection. It is life-saving. It could save their lives or their family members’ lives.” I pay tribute to my constituent Denise Coates, who first brought the issue to my attention. I am doing my part this morning to further her campaign.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did not expect to be called so early in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) on bringing this matter to the House for consideration. I will concentrate on two things in the short time I have: mental health and some of the projects undertaken back home in Northern Ireland.

I received, as did many other Members, a briefing from the Shaw Mind Foundation that outlined that mental health is currently only taught as an optional component of PHSE, despite 75% of mental illnesses starting before the age of 18 and data showing that three pupils in every classroom suffer from a diagnosable mental health condition. In addition, child suicide calls to ChildLine are at a record high, while self-harming among girls is up 68% and is getting worse every year. In her introduction, the hon. Lady referred to our needing focus. I think we need to focus on mental health—particularly children’s mental health. Despite those figures, the NHS currently spends 11% of its budget on mental health services, and we are always asking for more resources for that.

Research shows that pupils and parents strongly support further mental health education. In Northern Ireland, a scoping paper on adolescent mental health gives some shocking statistics. More than 20% of young people suffer significant mental health problems by the time they reach 18, and the demand on resources is higher than ever. Rates of mental ill health are estimated to be 25% higher in Northern Ireland than other parts of the United Kingdom, and suicide rates among those up to the age of 19 are disproportionately higher as well. The emotional wellbeing of children and young people is poor, and it takes almost 10 years between young people presenting first symptoms and getting support.

All those things tell us the story of where we are. I know Northern Ireland is not the Minister’s responsibility, but I want to state the facts, because they will hopefully add to the debate and will make other parts and regions of the United Kingdom understand where we are. There are also specific groups of children who are more likely to face discrimination in the realisation of their right to the highest attainable standards of healthcare, including those living in poverty and economically deprived areas and children in contact with the criminal justice system. All those things tell us we need to do more and to focus on this.

Research conducted by Ulster University on behalf of the Commission for Victims and Survivors found that almost 30% of Northern Ireland’s population suffer
from mental health problems. Most of that is down to the troubles. You will probably understand that better than most in the Chamber, Mr. Robertson; your past membership of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee perhaps gives you a wee bit more knowledge.

The rates of suicide among under-19s are disproportionately higher in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the UK. We need to ensure that people are trained and available to deal with that. The increase in prescribing antidepressants for under-16s is unfortunately happening in my constituency and I suspect others as well. I have spoken with teachers, youth workers, church volunteers and many parents who are concerned about children and how they handle the traumas in their lives. The overarching theme in their comments is that there is not enough support or key workers to help children in need of someone to talk to.

I will give an example of some small things we have been doing, which will perhaps add to the debate. A good friend of mine, who is not a member of my political party—I have tried many times to bring him over; I am working on it, and maybe someday I will persuade him—recently described to me a very small pilot he has going on in his local community group, of which he is chairperson. He told me he had managed to source funding to meet with six of the estate’s troubled youths. A few of them have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and others have other problems, but all are crying out for attention.

He told me that he secured funding to take them on outings after they had small group discussions or were successful in small tasks. He gave the example that some of the kids were frightening an older lady by using her fence and garden as a racing hurdle of sorts. Instead of telling the boys off, he used class time to take them to help to tidy her garden, so they were invested in the work that was done. That was followed by a trip to McDonald’s, which is usually something to look forward to. The boys discussed what they were thinking and how they felt with Big John—I will call him that, because that is what they know him as—who is trained to work with children and had the time to counsel them.

The scheme is open to only six youths at present, but the effect on their mental health and wellbeing could be the difference in how they function in their adult lives. We need more people who are trained and more funding available to allow schemes like that to run in all sectors of the community. I commend Big John and Big Catherine, who is also involved. They give up their own time to make it happen.

One in five children in Northern Ireland are suffering from mental health pain and need help as urgently as if they were bleeding. We would not withhold a bandage on the NHS and we cannot withhold this healing process either. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) on securing this important debate. PHSE is one of the most important parts of our curriculum. Yes, we need to make sure that our children are given an academic education that enables them to compete with the rest of the world, but just as vital as academic skills are life skills. I am not saying that schools should replace parents in that regard, but they undoubtedly have a role to play.

It was nearly a year ago that the Government tabled amendments to what is now the Children and Social Work Act 2017 allowing for regulations requiring PHSE to be taught in all schools in England. The new curriculum containing PHSE is expected to be taught from September 2019, and the Department for Education launched a call for evidence on the issue last December, which is due to close in about a week’s time. One question it asks those taking part is:

“Thinking about PSHE in primary schools” and secondary schools,

“what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why?”

I will put forward two things that should undoubtedly be taught as part of PSHE.

For one thing—I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead, with whom I have worked closely on this issue—first aid should be taught to all children. The statistics in this area are startling. According to the British Red Cross, only 5% of adults would feel knowledgeable, confident and willing to act in a first aid emergency. That is particularly worrying when considering that up to 59% of pre-hospital deaths from injury could have been prevented with basic first aid.

I should clarify that first aid is already on the PHSE programme of study, under the theme of health and wellbeing. However, because it is not a mandatory component of the programme, coverage is patchy. Some schools do not include it at all, so 60% of children have no first aid education whatever. When I met the Minister—I know he cares passionately about this subject—he rightly pointed out that the curriculum is full and that teachers have important things to focus on. Let me be clear: I am talking about one hour of training, once per year. That is the minimum we would need to teach children the basic first aid skills to become life savers. I do not think it is onerous to find one hour in our curriculum to give our children the knowledge to save lives.

I would suggest that teachers agree. A 2014 YouGov survey of 1,157 teachers found that 97% believed it vital for young people to learn essential first aid skills in school. Hon. Members may say that parents would surely not agree and that they would want their children to learn academic subjects. Not at all. The survey suggests that 95% of parents agree that first aid should be taught in secondary school. Nor do students think it is a waste of their time, with 97% of 11 to 16-year-olds agreeing that first aid should be taught at secondary school.

One hour of training for every child in England every year is not that much to ask. The survey of 1,157 teachers found that 97% believed it vital.

The second subject I would like to see taught in PHSE is weapons awareness education. We continue to have difficulty in tackling the scourge of knife crime,
but that is not to say that the Government are not taking action. I welcome steps such as minimum custodial sentences for repeated knife possession, but we need to do more on education so that we tackle the issue at both ends.

I have campaigned on this issue for some time now. I remember attending a weapons awareness lesson run in my constituency by a charity based in the neighbouring constituency of Clacton called Only Cowards Carry. That charity was set up by Caroline Shearer, a truly inspirational woman, in 2012 after her son, Jay, was fatally stabbed in my constituency. What is really interesting is that these hard-hitting lessons show people the danger of carrying blades and knives. They show that someone is far more likely to be the victim of a knife crime if they are carrying a knife themselves. Trust me: the lessons have a lasting impact. Students who walk into a lesson cocky and confident walk away startled at the brutality of the impact that knives can have.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good point, particularly on gang violence and knife crime, which as he knows are a real scourge. There are fantastic organisations such as Lives Not Knives in Croydon, which offers to go into schools where young people have been victims of knife violence or lost relatives and loved ones. Does my hon. Friend agree that making such education part of knife violence or not, and whether the issue is in school or not, is a good way of tackling this problem, and they are often in denial that they do have a problem. Knife crime is a problem for all teenagers in this country, particularly in our inner cities, and they all need to be made aware of it.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because he has made a point I was about to come to. Charities provide this education and awareness, often free of charge or at very low cost—it is often sponsored or funded by the local police and crime commissioner—but they have an issue getting through the door of the schools, because the headteachers and subject leaders will say, “We don’t really have an issue with knife crime” or “We don’t want to say that we have an issue with knife crime.” Whether people have an issue with knife crime or not, and whether the issue is in school or not, we know that it is affecting constituencies up and down the country. Given the growth in cases of county lines activity, cuckooing and grooming of young people, in particular, with gang violence, which brings with it the drugs, knife crime and intimidation, it is absolutely right that this education should be part of the PSHE curriculum so that we teach pupils about the danger of carrying knives.

Just as with first aid education, I have regularly been told about the great demands on our curriculum, but again, I am talking about only one 45-minute lesson in year 9 or 10. That would not be a huge burden on the national curriculum. I am therefore asking the Minister for a total of one hour and 45 minutes as part of the curriculum.

PSHE provides an important opportunity to ensure that children walk away from school not just with the knowledge that they get from academic subjects, but with those all-important life skills. First aid is an important life skill. We should commit to ensuring that every student receives training through PSHE, and not just to enable them to save lives, although that should be reason enough. By fostering self-esteem and confidence, we give students the opportunity to develop skills and we support their personal development. As I have said, the other part of their personal development on which we should focus is weapons awareness. Children should be left under no illusion whatever about the danger that comes with carrying a knife. As I said, the danger is to not just others but themselves.

I hope that the Government will commit to ensuring that children learn both subjects as part of the new curriculum, and that the Minister, who cares deeply about this issue, will be able to say that he is the Minister who made every child a lifesaver.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I express my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce). This debate is so timely. As she rightly said, the Minister is very much in listening mode at the moment, because he is doing the consultation on the content of PSHE.

I want to echo what my hon. Friend was saying. PSHE, when it is good, is about life skills, confidence and resilience. Sadly, when we look at the most recent Ofsted research on PSHE, we see that it is not of a good enough standard, with 40% of schools rated inadequate or requiring improvement in their delivery of it. With all the topics now being debated in relation to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 making PSHE—and, at a younger age, relationship education—mandatory, I hope we can ensure that all schools are able to deliver a good standard, if not an excellent standard.

The Minister will not be surprised that I want to focus on a particular area, which is what relationship education for primary school children could cover. In the work that I have been doing for the past four years with charities, academics, professionals and, indeed, parents and survivors, looking at how we prevent child abuse, the key thing everyone has said is needed—I am glad that the Minister and the Government have listened—is proper relationship education for primary school children. Why is that important? Well, we know that one in 20 children will experience sexual abuse. The most recent statistics from the Office for National Statistics, for the year ending September 2017, show that of the sexual offences reported to the police, 37% are against children. That equates to 51,000 children a year. The Sex Education Forum says that 53% of children in schools have not learned how to recognise grooming or sexual exploitation. Of course, good relationship education for primary school children does not involve talking about sex; it involves talking about respecting yourself and other people and about what are appropriate and inappropriate relationships. Then, when children get older and go to secondary school, we would of course start talking about sex and consent.

Today is Safer Internet Day, so it is appropriate for me to bring into the debate the new phenomenon of online abuse. The statutory sex and relationship guidance in place at the moment is 18 years old. I do not want to
age anyone in this Chamber, but the younger generation are growing up in an online world; we mainly grew up in the real world, for want of a better phrase. We do not really understand the 24-hour pressures that young people are under. In addition, we are only starting to recognise how abusers use the internet. I went to my local police force and watched officers trying to tackle the online grooming and then abuse of children. One in three children is now a victim of cyber-bullying. We need also to consider peer-on-peer abuse. One in five indecent images shared online was taken by the child themselves, according to the National Crime Agency, and 40% of child sex abuse is carried out by other, usually older children. That is why relationship education is important. It is not just about protecting children; it is about teaching children what is right and wrong in relation to others.

Of course, abuse is not just sexual: 82% of 13 to 17-year-olds have seen something hateful online in the past year. That means something targeting people or communities because of their gender, transgender identity, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity or religion. RSE and PSHE prevent lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender phobia. That is a big issue, particularly online. Two out of five LGBT pupils were never taught about LGBT issues, and only one in five was taught about safe sex in same-sex relationships. This education is about teaching all children to respect others, but also about teaching LGBT children about their own choices and that they are okay.

Good sex and relationship education has a protective function. According to the Sex Education Forum, children who receive such education choose to have sex later in life, have fewer unplanned pregnancies, are more likely to use protection and are less likely to have sex against their will.

There is an argument that sex education, in particular, but also relationship education and PSHE in general, should be left to parents. I see the two forms of education going hand in hand, but I also point out that one in five parents feels ill equipped to teach children about the digital age. Half of young people living at home say that their parents know only some of what they are doing online. Sadly, we also need to reflect on the fact that nine out of 10 abused children know their abuser and 80% of child abuse happens in the child’s or the abuser’s home. What I am saying is that although we must of course respect the right of parents to make their choices, the state has a statutory duty to protect all children, and this debate is showing very clearly that we want all children to have the life skills to be able to flourish.

I therefore have three specific asks for the Minister in relation to PSHE and relationship education for primary school children. One is that they follow what the debate is showing and that the content is broad ranging. The second is that the Minister make available the necessary resources so that teachers have both the time and the skills—or the ability to draw on external agencies—to deliver that broad-ranging curriculum. Thirdly, I ask that there is protected time—one hon. Member has already asked for one hour and 45 minutes—in specific lessons or a commitment to weave these life skills within all lessons. For example, in maths we could be talking about credit cards and balancing our budgets.

I thank the Minister. I know that he is in listening mode, and I hope that “listening mode” translates into the PSHE that we are all looking for.

10.10 am

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I will do my best to get the time keeping back on track, as I am conscious that there are a few speakers remaining.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce). I have been proud to support her work over the years on emergency life-saving skills in schools. I will focus on that topic briefly.

I am conscious that the Schools Minister has a list of about 150 subjects that colleagues have raised with him over the years as the single most important subject that should be added to the national curriculum in some way. On many of the occasions that I attempted to add to that list, he shared some of those subjects on there. He has an unenviable task.

Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), I want to focus specifically on the importance of emergency life-saving skills. Those who have already spoken on this subject have talked about many of the statistics, but I want to focus on a few. There are 30,000 cardiac arrests a year outside of a hospital, for which the survival chances are 12%—a disgraceful 12%, which is one of the lowest rates in the world. For every minute that passes in which somebody is not given help, their chances of survival fall by a staggering 10%. Even worse is the fact that 10,000 cardiac arrests are witnessed, but those witnesses do not have the confidence to do anything for fear they will make it worse, but they can do no worse than do nothing. I understand that, because as a young boy I found my father. I did my best, purely based on what I think I had seen on “Coronation Street”. Luckily some passers-by came. They did their best. Sadly we lost my father, but it showed me that these statistics are real.

We are simply asking for a one-hour session. As was mentioned, that one hour to create a generation of life savers could save 5,000 lives a year. Those are real people—the people that we represent. They are people of all ages, not just older people. In my constituency a couple of weeks ago, Matt Fiddes found his two-year-old son. He performed CPR and saved his two-year-old son. This captured the imagination of the public. Unsurprisingly, the good people of Swindon expect me to help deliver on this. I have lobbied the new Secretary of State for Education. I will continue to chase this. This was the subject that first secured the required 100,000 signatures for a parliamentary e-petition. Some 95% of parents support it. It is rare in politics to unite all sides of the House and 95% of parents. The British Heart Foundation, the Red Cross and St John Ambulance are poised and ready. They have the materials and videos. My constituency office has done the training sessions with the videos. They are fantastic. They are poised to go.

This is an absolute win-win situation for everybody. It would slot perfectly into PSHE. It will make a real difference. I know that the Minister understands the importance of this and he has encouraged schools to do this. Let us make that a given. Let us create that generation of life savers. Let us genuinely make a difference.
10.13 am

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) on securing this debate and setting it out in the manner in which she did.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that this is obviously an England-only debate, with education being devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so it might seem somewhat strange—despite the fact the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has contributed—to see a Scottish MP engaging in today’s debate beyond our third party responsibilities. However, this is an issue that I feel strongly about and there are undoubtedly things we can learn from each other about the content and delivery of our curriculums.

PSHE not only helps children and young adults live healthier physical lives, but it also promotes better mental health. In addition to helping youngsters gain valuable transferable skills to help prepare them for life and work, PSHE also provides pupils with the relevant skills and knowledge to ensure they are safe online. That is an extremely important skill, given how accessible the internet and social media are to the current generation of young people, as I am finding out with my 11 and seven-year-old daughters.

It is also vital to note that relationship and sex education is a fundamental component of PSHE, and one that I am particularly passionate about. If it is implemented effectively and across the board, I firmly believe that we can help create positive and respectful relationships between boys and girls, which will help to tackle and eliminate sexist attitudes before they turn more violent later.

I received a report last week from the National Education Union and UK Feminista, which conveys the extent of the problem of sexism in our classrooms. The report highlighted that sexual harassment is prevalent in schools, with over a third of female students being subjected to some form of sexual harassment. Sexist language is too often dismissed as banter, with two-thirds of female students and teachers experiencing or witnessing it on a weekly basis. Less than a quarter of our female students think that their school takes sexism seriously. Those stats present a worrying picture of what life is like for too many female students.

Education is meant to be a place where our children learn, socialise and find their way in the world. Our education system should not be a place where sexist attitudes and behaviours, often fomented at home, are born and/or reinforced. One respondent to that report spoke about the sexual harassment she is experiencing: “Some of the boys make comments on a lot of the girls in our years bodies and the girls just have to ignore it because no one thinks it’s a big deal. The boys also slap the girls butts and touch their breasts without any consent.”

It is shameful that we have allowed that sort of behaviour to go largely unchallenged in many of our schools. If we fail to educate in order to tackle and prevent sexism in classrooms, as sure as night follows day, we risk these behaviours manifesting later in life.

The Scottish Government’s “Equally Safe” strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls addresses the need to eliminate the systematic and deep-rooted inequality that women and girls face in their daily lives. The report completed by the National Education Union and UK Feminista shows that many of these deep-rooted behaviours are established very early at school. Sexism in schools is endemic, but not inevitable. The UK Government and others have made PSHE a statutory part of the curriculum to ensure that every student receives education about the importance of positive, healthy and equal relationships. We need to get serious about adopting a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment.

There is undoubtedly more that we in Scotland can do in this area, but I am proud of some of the progress that has been made by the Scottish Government and others. Through the curriculum for excellence, personal and social education is a subject that covers aspects of planning for choices and changes, substance misuse, relationships, sexual health and parenthood. Following a report completed by the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee, the Scottish Government have outlined their intention to complete a review of PSHE. I hope that the Scottish Government are ambitious in this review, meet the calls made by young people during the consultation and use the review to lead the work into creating an inclusive school environment founded on the values of respect, inclusivity and equality.

The case for PSHE is undisputed. The evidence has been provided on the benefits that PSHE has in promoting healthy living, economic wellbeing and solidifying positive relationships. The statutory status for PSHE is supported by 85% of business leaders, 88% of teachers, 92% of parents, 92% of pupils, the Children’s Commissioner for England—I could go on and on, as the list is extensive. The current system is helping to foster behaviours that can grow more violent later in life. This debate is about introducing PSHE into all classrooms. It is about equipping our students with the skills, attributes and knowledge to prepare them for later in life. However, this debate has also been about the importance of sustaining a positive relationship between boys and girls, helping to eliminate sexist attitudes from our schools and preventing these behaviours from growing more violent.

Sadly, on average two women are killed by a partner or ex-partner each week. The attitudes that lead to this murderous behaviour must be addressed. We cannot leave it to an incremental shift in societal attitudes over generations to resolve this issue. We must address this head-on through a gender-based violence prevention education framework. Statutory PSHE is the ideal vehicle for this and I urge the Minister to get on and implement it.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I am looking to call the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am, so that leaves about five minutes each for the two remaining speakers.

10.19 am

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) on securing this important debate. As I considered my contribution, I was struck by a story that was recently told by a parent of a local school in my constituency, leading me to focus specifically on the provision of first aid training in schools.
When visiting St Paul’s School for Girls, I met a student who had recently witnessed a woman collapse in the street in front of her. Rather than panic, as I fear many of us in this room may have done, the young student displayed great maturity, helping the woman into the recovery position while also applying pressure to a head wound that she had sustained. As it turned out, the woman was a refugee who did not speak any English, leaving her unable to explain what was happening to passers-by. By having the wherewithal and composure to carry out those actions, the student helped to save the life of a woman who had in fact suffered a heart attack. For her actions, the student was later given a richly deserved commendation by local emergency services.

That student was able to provide the life-saving assistance that she did only because she had studied first aid as part of her PSHE course at school, enabling her to recognise what was happening and implement vital assistance before the emergency services arrived. How many of us in this room could say that we would be able to do the same? Would we be able to step in and offer that vital first-response assistance until the professionals arrived, thinking how terrible the situation was or wishing there was someone there to help?

The “Every Child a Lifesaver” coalition, which is made up of the British Red Cross, the British Heart Foundation and the St John Ambulance, is campaigning to make first aid a mandatory component of a new statutory PSHE curriculum, and I would like to offer it my wholehearted support. This is not a big commitment. Just one hour a year over the course of their time in school could provide students with the essential skills, including CPR, that they need to save a life. The statistics are irrefutable. Only 5% of adults would feel knowledgeable, confident and willing to act in a first aid emergency. More than 30,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur in the UK every year, and fewer than one in 10 people survive, and most—around 80%—out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur in the home, while the immediate initiation of CPR can double the chances of survival in some cases. Organisations such as those I have mentioned provide all the necessary tools to teach these vital skills, and it is up to us as legislators to give them the platform that they need to impart their knowledge to today’s students.

There are more than just the obvious life-saving benefits to students of statutory first aid training. First aid training develops leadership skills, decision making, resilience and the ability to cope with adversity, supporting personal development and employment skills. It can improve young people’s life chances and empower them to step forward and take responsibility, while providing them with a sense of contributing to the community within our shared society. It will also ensure universal access to this essential knowledge and life skill, improving health inequalities across all communities and at every socioeconomic level.

The Department for Education consultation on making PSHE, including first aid, compulsory is open until only the 12th of this month, so I hope that this debate will raise the profile of this important decision and encourage as many as possible to take part in the consultation, so as to ensure that more children are able to act as my constituent did, and feel confident enough to step in and provide what could prove to be life-saving assistance to a person in need.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Mr Robertson.

I congratulate my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce), on securing this debate and the excellent case she made. I will start with the immortal words of those bards of New York City—I know you are a big fan, Mr Robertson—Salt-N-Pepa:

“Let’s talk about sex baby,
Let’s talk about you and me,
Let’s talk about all the good things and the bad things that may be.”

That was a really big song when I was growing up. I was aware that people were talking about sex all around me, and that there were good and bad things, but I never heard anything about it at school. That was where I looked to be educated about the challenges of the world, but I never heard anything about it. I could conjugate lots of Latin verbs, but I certainly did not understand this.

The point is that children are already getting a broad PSHE education. They get it from their friends and siblings, where it is no doubt patchy at best, from the television, which is no doubt worse, and—this should probably make us collectively shudder—from the internet.

The subject is out there. Children and young people hear words and research them, but goodness knows what they are shown. I feel that we have a duty to equip our young people with the facts of life and the critical reasoning skills to make good decisions when they negotiate the weird and wonderful opportunities that the world presents them. I believe that to not do so is to let them down.

Two years ago in Nottingham, thanks to the excellent work of Catherine Kirk and Councillor Sam Webster, we introduced a sex and relationship education charter. We went to our schools and got them to sign up, and 70% of them currently are. With two years’ worth of research, we can now say that staff feel more confident in delivering good lessons, pupils have shown maturity and their participation has improved, and in many schools zero parents have chosen to opt out. That context will change as we move on to a statutory footing, but some of the learning that we have in Nottingham will stand us in good stead.

We seek to equip our young people to pass what I call the “Friday night test”. When they are out and about on a Friday night, wherever they may be, we will not be with them, their teachers will not be with them and, most of the time, their parents will not be with them. In those moments of challenge, whether about money, alcohol or sex, have we equipped them to make good decisions about the different risks and benefits? If we have not, we have failed them. In researching this contribution, I saw that a Terrence Higgins Trust survey shows that 70% of young people say they that they have not learned about issues regarding consent. Deary me, what an indication; it is like sticking them in a car on the M1 but not having taught them how to drive.

We need to educate our young people about broader PSHE issues, and we need to do it well. Again, SRE is a pretty good example. That same piece of work by the Terrence Higgins Trust found that more than half of
our pupils received relationships and sex education just once a year or less, and—this is the key point—half of our young people rated the RSE that they received in school as either poor or terrible. They are judging that against the standard of what they see in the real world. They are voting, although not quite with their feet, because I suspect that they do not have much choice. We cannot kid them. There is a big, wide world out there and we have to equip them properly.

That starts with properly resourcing our teachers so that they can engage confidently on the wide range of issues. We should also be saying that schools should not be doing this on a termly drop-down day, which students miss if they are away or think is a day when they do not have to contribute as much. Instead, this subject should be woven through the curriculum. I know that the Minister has lots of asks for an hour here and an hour there, but the best way to aggregate them is to weave them through on a daily basis. Our children will be faced with these decisions every day, so let us put it in their education like that too.

Low expectations are a great challenge in my community. This is a gendered issue, and that is worth reflecting on this 100th anniversary of some women getting the vote. There is a perception—this is the sort of cod psychology that young people are exposed to on social media—that we get the love that we think we deserve. Through proper PSHE and SRE for our young people, I want our young women to understand that if they put into the world, they can get good things back. They should expect good things of how men treat them and how their friends treat them. At the moment, that does not happen enough, and I hope that this is a seminal moment to change things.

I want to finish by saying that on 28 June—the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) asked for an hour and 45 minutes of termly time, but I am just asking for half a day of the hard-pressed Minister’s time—Nottingham will celebrate our first sex and relationship education day. The schools, city council staff, statutory agencies and voluntary agencies will come together to celebrate what we have done and to encourage the whole community about their responsibilities. We will issue some of our research and guidance, and some of the things that parents could do to challenge the things that they are not comfortable with.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech with many good points. Does he favour changing the name to “relationships and sex education”—to switch those two words round—as many of us think that relationships should come before the sex?

Alex Norris: I have to say that I do not get excited about the alphabet soup. In preparing for today, I was desperately trying to work out whether it was PHSE or PSHE. As long as the context is there and our young people are getting it, you can call it whatever you want—I am very relaxed about that.

That event is on 28 June. Hopefully, Nottingham will demonstrate once again that it has been a model for what we are seeking to do as a nation, and I hope that during the consultation we can draw on some of that experience too.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I will leave two minutes at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion to wind up.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I too thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) for introducing this important debate and for her insightful opening speech. I was an English teacher for over 20 years before being elected in 2015, so I have an interest in the debate and I will contribute from that perspective.

Personal, health and social education is extremely important, as I understand because I had the opportunity to deliver that part of the curriculum. Alongside many other subjects and activities, it has its place in the curriculum in helping to prepare our young people for their future in a positive way. Its importance in Scotland is evident in Education Scotland’s national review, which my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) mentioned. We understand the importance of developing curricula to suit individual contexts and meet our young people’s needs, and of early intervention for making a big difference to the risk of young people developing mental health problems.

I listened carefully to hon. Members’ speeches and the range of areas that they would quite rightly and justifiably like to be included in PHSE education, such as cancer education, which the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned; mental health, for which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a plea; first aid, whose importance the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and for Colchester (Will Quince) talked about; weapons awareness, which the hon. Member for Colchester also mentioned; relationship education and online safety, which the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) talked about; tackling sexism and sexual violence, which my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North discussed; and the importance of relationship education, which the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) talked about.

All those areas are, of course, extremely important in our young people’s development—who could possibly disagree with any of them?—but we must guard against treating personal, social and health education as an entity all on its own. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead reminded us that it cannot be treated in isolation. The valuable lessons that we hope to impart to our young people must be built into the fabric of our schools and, we hope, of our communities and country, which is a point that the hon. Member for Nottingham North also made. Those lessons include respect for ourselves, a sense of self-worth, respect for others, the importance of understanding difference in all its forms, the value of communication and the importance of kindness. We may expect all those things to be present in our PSHE lessons, but they must also form the backbone of our schools’ ethos and be displayed by school staff every single day to set an example.

The many demands on time in the school day mean that young people are lucky if they get more than one formal PSHE lesson each week, as all hon. Members present will know. In Scotland, PSHE is woven through and embedded in the curriculum for excellence and its focus on life skills. Learning and teaching can take place in a variety of ways and contexts. The value of experiences in the home, in our leisure time and in extra-curricular activities also offer a rich seam for young people to learn life skills.
At the school where I was teaching just before being elected, every year group would have one or two days completely off-timetable once a year. They would be taken to a different part of the school and they would rotate around workshops. They would get talks and taken to a different part of the school and they would completely off-timetable once a year. They would be elected, every year group would have one or two days

We have all seen reports on television and in newspapers of all the things that people—with great justification—expect young people to be taught at school, such as internet safety, sexual health, relationship education, financial education, careers education with work and CV skills, road safety, self-awareness, positive thinking, mindfulness, gambling awareness, awareness of eating disorders, how to cultivate good mental health, cyber-bullying, strategies for coping with bullies, resilience, leadership, healthy nutrition, the importance of sleep, good study habits, and even scepticism. I could go on for about half an hour, but I will not—I think I have made my point. Nobody here would say that any of those topics is not important. They are all important, and they are all considered essential in the PSHE curriculum, but they cannot all be accommodated unless young people have a PSHE lesson every single day. As far as I am aware, no school does that.

Even if a school wanted to formally timetable PSHE every single day, what would it remove from the curriculum to do that? I suggest that we need to think of PSHE as the thread running through our entire curriculum. As an English teacher, I had the privilege of exploring important life lessons through literature, such as the importance of family and friendship; the drive for revenge; the need for reflection; the courage to battle through diversity; the importance of standing up for our beliefs, even if that sometimes means standing alone; and the power of forgiveness—all sorts of things. As an English teacher, I was in a privileged position. Other subject teachers might not have such a rich tapestry to work with, but all school staff, not just teaching staff, have an opportunity to teach by example the most basic life lessons and requirements, such as kindness, self-respect and an awareness of the needs and difficulties of others. We must not be tempted to confine those lessons to PSHE in a way that is neither sustainable nor desirable.

We are all PSHE teachers—especially parents. As the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead said, schools and homes work best when they work together, and as the hon. Member for Rotherham said, the push from the Opposition Front Bench with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) not only for eloquently introducing this debate but for all her tireless work in trying to legislate for compulsory emergency first aid education. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made valuable contributions to this debate, not just today but for a number of years—long before I became involved.

Despite being late to the debate, I was proud to lead the push from the Opposition Front Bench with my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for the Children and Social Work Act 2017 to include statutory personal health, social and economic education, including relationship and sex education. From debates in Committee and on Report, we ended up with a broad cross-party consensus—something that is rarely seen in the House, although it is reflected in this Chamber. It was also reflected in the proposals of the then Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), to make elements of PSHE mandatory in all schools and to make the new subjects—relationships education and relationships and sex education—mandatory at primary and secondary level respectively.

Hon. Members' wide-ranging contributions are testament to the breadth and scope of PSHE. They will be pleased to know that I will not focus on or rehash the pertinent points already made in this debate. As we all know, the Department's consultation is due to close on 12 February. The intention is to teach the new sex and relationships education curriculum from September 2019, but no date has been given for the roll-out of statutory PSHE, nor has any commitment been given that PSHE will include SRE.

As hon. Members have highlighted, the introduction of statutory PSHE is backed by a plethora of organisations. When it is taught well, children enjoy the lessons and it is effective in helping them to lead healthier lives, both mentally and physically. It builds resilience and gives them a better understanding of the world around them. It helps them to develop empathy skills, work with others, communicate, think critically, cope with setbacks and keep themselves and others safe, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) outlined.

The Government's commitments were made under a different Secretary of State. The new Secretary of State was chair of the all-party group on social mobility when it published a report that challenged the Government to recognise in their educational policy that “social/emotional ‘skills’ underpin academic and other success—and can be taught”.

Is he willing to rise to his own challenge, or has his thinking changed?

Will the Minister advise us whether the Department has any dates at all in mind for implementing regulations for the roll-out of statutory PSHE? I understand that he may find that difficult, because for PSHE to be taught
effectively, the Government must address the hash they have made of our education system more widely. Giving teachers and schools more to do when they are struggling with depleted budgets, ongoing recruitment and retention will not necessarily yield the right results.

Just last week, we found out that Ministers had missed their own teacher recruitment targets for five years in a row. There are 10,000 fewer secondary school teachers than needed, and nearly 35,000 teachers left the profession in 2016. Last year, 500 headteachers wrote to the Prime Minister to ask her to reverse £3 billion of cuts. Local schools are sending begging letters to parents for essentials such as paper and glue. Schools are facing cuts for the first time in 20 years. If the Minister is going to tell us—I hope he is—that the Government remain committed to statutory PSHE, will he also tell us how they intend to fix the education system that they have broken, to equip it for any statutory roll-out of SRE or PSHE?

Teachers tell me that PSHE is seen as an add-on, typically taught for an hour every fortnight by someone whose job it is not, or by an outside agency brought in to tick the box. What they tell me is backed up by evidence from the Department for Education’s own data, which shows that time spent teaching PSHE fell by 32% between 2011 and 2015. They also tell me that what statutory SRE and PSHE need is specialist teachers, that it needs to be part of the overall teacher training programme, and that any qualified teachers whose role will include teaching it need to be appropriately equipped and resourced—a view shared by the National Education Union. Will the Minister tell us what budget the Department has set aside for that?

If you will permit me, Mr Robertson, I would like to use my final few minutes to speak about what I see as absolutely the most valuable part of PSHE: sex and relationships education. I echo the powerful points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham about the subject. From my former career as a child protection social worker, the details are etched on my brain—I wish they were not—of every single child I ever worked with who suffered sexual abuse. I remember working with children who had been abused and teaching them about their personal areas—the areas that no one has a right to touch. I taught them what to do if someone did—if it happened at home or at school, if the perpetrator was an adult or if they were harmed by another child. Not a single child I worked with had ever been taught that in school or by their parents. Many of the dedicated teachers I met along the way asked me for my materials so that they could replicate that learning in their classrooms.

Time and again I have heard the argument made that it should be up to parents to take responsibility for teaching their children issues covered in SRE and PSHE, but the fact is that not all parents and carers feel able to. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), whose musical tastes we now know a little more about, pointed out that parents and carers cannot be with their children 24/7. As in all school subjects, the best results are achieved by parents and school working together, where what is taught at school is reciprocated at home and vice versa—a point made by my hon. Friends the Members for Erith and Thamesmead, and for Rotherham.

I have been out of child protection practice for four years now, but things have certainly not changed. A recent Sex Education Forum survey found that 50% of young people were not taught at primary school how to get help if they experienced unwanted touching or sexual abuse. I am not saying for one second that child sexual abuse would be eradicated if such teaching were introduced, but I am sure that some of the children I worked with might have been able to tell someone sooner, stopping the abuse from being repeated. The teenagers I worked with might have been able to spot the signs of grooming or the fact that one of their friends was at risk.

I know acutely the heartache and scars that sexual abuse can leave. Even if introducing PSHE with SRE stops that from happening to just one child, it will be totally worth it. That is the reality of our debate, above anything else. We need this provision now, not in 2019 or at some other date, and not rolled out piecemeal. Viewing the matter in that context should make the new Secretary of State treat the failure to provide statutory PSHE, including SRE, with the urgency that it deserves. I sincerely hope that the Minister will answer all my questions and those of other hon. Members, and that he will confirm that the Government are ready to show some leadership in developing this long-awaited and vital part of our children’s curriculum.

10.46 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) on securing this debate and on her powerful speech.

The teaching of high-quality personal, social, health and economic education is a very important issue, and I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government’s position on it. We believe that the education system must prepare all pupils for life in modern Britain. Schools have a key role to play in developing rounded young people who can navigate the challenges of the modern world with confidence. They should teach pupils a foundation of knowledge to use and apply in a variety of contexts, allowing them to thrive and develop and preparing them to become fully engaged citizens and contributors to society.

The context of this debate is that standards in our primary and secondary schools are rising. Some 1.9 million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools today than in 2010. The attainment gap between children from poorer and wealthier backgrounds has closed by 10% since 2011. The proportion of pupils taking at least two science GCSEs has risen from 63% in 2010 to 91%. Children’s reading is improving. I agree with one point made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson): reading literature introduces children to a range of emotional and life experiences.

We also know that high-quality PSHE and age-appropriate relationships and sex education are important in contributing to keeping pupils safe and healthy. Technological advances have brought great opportunities, but young people today face unprecedented pressures as they navigate the digital world. Effectively planned PSHE programmes can provide young people with the necessary knowledge to manage risk and build
understanding of dangers such as drug and alcohol misuse and cyber-bullying, as well as supporting them to enhance their own wellbeing. Schools are encouraged to deliver PSHE as an integral part of their duty to provide a broad and balanced curriculum. Many schools already use their curriculum and school day to support pupil wellbeing, for example through their PSHE curriculum and through a range of extracurricular activities.

We know that these subjects are important, but they also need improving, which is why we have committed to a programme of reform. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires the Secretary of State for Education to place a statutory duty on all primary schools to teach relationships education and on all secondary schools to teach relationships and sex education, or RSE. The Act also gave the Government the power to make PSHE a compulsory subject to be taught in all state-funded schools, subject to further careful consideration.

As part of our reforms, in March 2017 we set out in our policy statement key areas that we anticipate that relationships education, and relationships and sex education will focus on, for example, teaching pupils about different types of relationships, and about unhealthy and healthy relationships, both on and offline. That is likely to include consideration of issues such as boundaries, appropriate behaviour, consent and respect for others, which were powerfully raised by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). She is right about protecting young children, and I agree that relationships education at primary school should equip pupils with age-appropriate knowledge, so that they can keep themselves safe.

Teaching about friendships and family relationships in primary school forms the building blocks for RSE in secondary school. Pupils should understand their own and others’ relationships, as well as the impact that relationships have on mental health and wellbeing. This knowledge will support pupils in making informed decisions.

As part of our reforms, we are also working closely with experts to determine what PSHE should look like in the context of statutory relationships education and RSE, and we will consider age-appropriate content and guidance. PSHE is currently a non-statutory programme in maintained schools. Schools are encouraged to teach PSHE, and this is outlined in the introduction to the national curriculum framework document, which was published in 2013. PSHE can encompass many areas of study, and in considering whether it should be made compulsory, it is important to balance the need for schools to have freedom and flexibility to tailor their local PSHE programme to reflect the needs of their pupils.

As set out in the policy statement, we could expect mandatory PSHE to cover several broad pillars, for example healthy bodies and lifestyles, including issues such as cancer, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). PSHE could also include issues such as keeping safe, puberty, drugs and alcohol education, healthy minds, including emotional wellbeing and mental health, economic wellbeing and financial capability, and, lastly, careers education, preparation for the workplace and making a positive contribution to society.

Many schools already teach PSHE well, and we want to understand how they do that in a way that complements their broader curriculum. In some primary and secondary schools, sex education is also taught as part of PSHE. The teacher voice omnibus survey report, published in October last year, explored schools’ approaches to PSHE and SRE. The vast majority of senior teachers—85%—said that their school taught both PSHE and SRE. Most of the others—8%—said that they taught PSHE only.

Schools are free to use PSHE to build, where appropriate, on the statutory content already outlined in the national curriculum, the basic school curriculum and in statutory guidance on areas such as drug education, financial education, SRE, and the importance of physical activity and diet for a healthy lifestyle. Teachers have the freedom to address the areas that are most relevant to their pupils, drawing on evidence, good practice and advice from professional organisations. We encourage organisations to develop materials for schools in their area of expertise.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire and others, including the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead and my hon. Friend the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), raised the issue of first aid. There is nothing more important than keeping children and staff safe, which is why we have put in place a duty requiring schools to support all children’s medical needs, and we have set up a scheme so that schools can buy defibrillators at a reduced price. Schools can teach emergency first aid and life-saving skills in a variety of ways, for example through the wider curriculum, through assemblies or through PSHE, and we have given headteachers more freedom than ever before to shape the curriculum to the needs of their pupils.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nick Gibb:** I will not give way to the hon. Lady, if she does not mind; I want to cover other people’s contributions.

We also encourage teachers to draw upon high-quality resources in the classroom, including guidance on first aid and emergencies from the British Red Cross, St John Ambulance and the British Heart Foundation. The British Heart Foundation provides free teaching kits to secondary schools on CPR. The kits are reusable and no trained instructor is required. Similarly, St John Ambulance and the British Red Cross provide free resources to schools on first aid, and they can also provide specialist trainers to teach first aid in schools.

In the last few years, there have been calls from many organisations, including parent bodies, to make PSHE a compulsory subject, and those calls have been echoed in reports from Committees in the House. We have made it clear that we want to provide all young people with a curriculum that ensures they are prepared for adult life in modern Britain. Good schools establish an ethos, a behaviour policy and a curriculum that teach children about the importance of healthy, respectful and caring relationships. They recognise that healthy, resilient and confident pupils are better placed to achieve academically and to go on to be successful adults.

An Ofsted report in 2013 concluded that PSHE was good or better in 60% of the schools inspected for the report. However, as the hon. Member for Rotherham said in her contribution, PSHE required improvement
or was inadequate in the other 40%. The report also found that sex and relationship education required improvement in over a third of schools.

I am committed to ensuring that our programme of reform is underpinned by evidence. That is why we are currently conducting a thorough engagement process on the scope and content of relationships education, relationships and sex education, and PSHE, involving a wide range of interested stakeholders. The Department is engaging with schools and teachers, parents and pupils, experts in safeguarding and child wellbeing—

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way to the hon. Lady; I have literally one minute left.

The Department is also engaging with subject experts, voluntary organisations and other interested parties, including other Departments and public sector bodies. There are too many to list, but examples include the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo’s, the PSHE Association, the Sex Education Forum, faith organisations, secular groups, Stonewall, the Terrence Higgins Trust, Young Enterprise, parent bodies, teaching unions, academics in this field and young people.

To ensure that we retain a focus on what is deliverable in schools, the Secretary of State has asked Ian Bauckham to advise on this piece of work. Ian is chief executive officer of the Tenax Schools Trust and executive headteacher of Bennett Memorial Diocesan School in Kent. He brings over 30 years of teaching experience, including 13 as a headteacher, to this piece of work. He is working with officials to ensure that we really understand how to support schools in delivering high-quality provision.

As the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead knows, to complement the engagement process, the Department is running a call for evidence, which closes on 12 February. It aims to gather views from as wide a range of bodies as possible. The responses so far to that call have been very encouraging, including from a large number of young people and parents. In the next steps, we will consider carefully those responses and other views collected through the engagement process, to determine sensitive and age-appropriate content, including the future status of PSHE, which I know Members here are awaiting patiently. We are also aware that there is a huge interest in this matter in all parts of this House. To answer the question of the hon. Member for South Shields—she has been bursting to ask it again—the regulations and guidance will be subject to a full public consultation later this year.

The commitment we have made to making relationships education and RSE compulsory in all schools, and to considering the case for doing the same for PSHE, will further ensure that pupils’ wellbeing continues to be supported in our schools. I hope that reassures hon. Members of the Government’s commitment to this vital agenda for children and young people.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I call Teresa Pearce to respond.

10.58 am

Teresa Pearce: I thank everybody who has taken part today; this is a very important subject. I was a little concerned to hear the Minister talk about first aid in schools and only mention defibrillators. Defibrillators are very important, but first aid in school covers all sorts of things. A defibrillator will not help if somebody is having an epileptic attack. All sorts of first aid needs to be taught, not just defibrillation. The Minister also said that these things “can” be taught; I would have preferred him to say they “should” be taught.

I will finish with a quotation about the purpose of education:

“Education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it’s an essential preparation for adult life. Delivering on our commitment to social justice requires us to place these 3 objectives at the heart of our education system.”

That quote is from the Minister himself, in a speech he gave in 2015. I agree with him, and it is about time that we did that. We have all considered the importance of statutory PSHE and I look forward to seeing the results of the consultation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the matter of statutory personal, health, social and economic education.

11 am

Sitting suspended.
International Disaster Relief

2.30 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK’s contribution to international disaster relief.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. It is quite timely to be debating this issue today on the back of data released last week by the OECD showing that the UK was one of only six countries to meet its commitment to spending 0.7% of its gross national income on international aid. Of the 29 members of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, only Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Luxembourg regularly spend more than 0.7% of their national income on foreign aid. Although that is a rather depressing statistic in and of itself—given the ambition for developed countries to spend that amount was adopted by the UN General Assembly as far back as 1970 and was re-committed to at the 2005 G8 summit at Gleneagles and that, also in 2005, the 15 European Union members all agreed to reach the target by 2015—it is a figure that we as a nation should be incredibly proud of. We were the first of the G7 countries to meet the commitment.

However, in an era when tough decisions on spending have to be made in order to repair the economic damage done by the last Labour Government, and in the wake of the global financial crisis, I completely understand that this House has considered the UK’s contribution to international disaster relief.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I beg to move,

...and the expenditure of money through the Department for International Development. At the time, the OECD showed that the UK was one of only six countries to meet its commitment to spending 0.7% of its gross national income on international aid. Of the 29 members of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, only Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Luxembourg regularly spend more than 0.7% of their national income on foreign aid.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the expenditure of aid money comes under clear political leadership?

Andrew Bowie: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s generosity in giving way again. He mentions the importance of national interest in the way that we dispose of our aid. Does he agree that it is important that the expenditure of aid money comes under clear political leadership from the Foreign Office? I look forward to such a reassurance from the Minister. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether there is any concern about the decoupling of directives about national interest and the expenditure of money through the Department for International Development, and if they are permitted to make political decisions in DFID when moneys are spent or allocated.

Leo Docherty: But does my hon. Friend agree?

Andrew Bowie: I do.

It is clear to me that without a strong Navy we could not have delivered the £92 million of aid that the UK contributed to the response following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, nor could we have deployed the 2,000 UK servicemen and women who spearheaded our aid relief. Without a strong Air Force, the RAF would not have been able to deliver aid to mountainous Nepal following the 2015 earthquakes there, when the Department for International Development provided shelter support for more than 214,000 people, as well as clean drinking water, sanitation and hygiene support for more than 56,000 people.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s generosity in giving way again. He mentions the importance of national interest in the way that we dispose of our aid. Does he agree that it is important that the expenditure of aid money comes under clear political leadership from the Foreign Office? I look forward to such a reassurance from the Minister. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether there is any concern about the decoupling of directives about national interest and the expenditure of money through the Department for International Development, and if they are permitted to make political decisions in DFID when moneys are spent or allocated.

Andrew Bowie: I would suggest that that is a question for the Minister rather than me.

Leo Docherty: But does my hon. Friend agree?

Andrew Bowie: I do.

It is hard to believe that it was only five years ago, in 2013, that the World Health Organisation declared the Ebola epidemic in West Africa a public health emergency of international concern. That that status was lifted as quickly as March 2016 is due in no small part to the contribution of UK disaster relief and the actions of British, Irish and Canadian troops on the ground, as part of Operation Gritrock. In November 2013, just 13 months after the start of the operation, Sierra Leone was declared Ebola-free. Our military, especially our Navy—I would say that—deserve special mention when we talk about our contribution to disaster relief across the world.

In this place, we often speak of the bravery of our armed forces personnel in the face of adversity, but the sheer scale of the work that they do in our name, delivering disaster relief across the world, is truly astounding. During one of the worst stages of the European migrant crisis, for example, during April and July 2015, HMS Bulwark and 814 Naval Air Squadron rescued more than 2,900 migrants from drowning in the Mediterranean, as part of Operation Wealth. Those 2,900 migrants faced certain death without our intervention. Looking to the future, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales will transform the UK’s maritime capability, including in terms of providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s generosity in giving way again. He mentions the importance of national interest in the way that we dispose of our aid. Does he agree that it is important that the expenditure of aid money comes under clear political leadership from the Foreign Office? I look forward to such a reassurance from the Minister. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether there is any concern about the decoupling of directives about national interest and the expenditure of money through the Department for International Development, and if they are permitted to make political decisions in DFID when moneys are spent or allocated.

Andrew Bowie: I would suggest that that is a question for the Minister rather than me.

Leo Docherty: But does my hon. Friend agree?

Andrew Bowie: I do.

It is clear to me that without a strong Navy we could not have delivered the £92 million of aid that the UK contributed to the response following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, nor could we have deployed the 2,000 UK servicemen and women who spearheaded our aid relief. Without a strong Air Force, the RAF would not have been able to deliver aid to mountainous Nepal following the 2015 earthquakes there, when the Department for International Development provided shelter support for more than 214,000 people, as well as clean drinking water, sanitation and hygiene support for more than 56,000 people.

Although I do not support the approach that some of our European allies have taken in counting money spent for international aid purposes as defence spending, thereby making their declarations to NATO on defence spending questionable—to say the least—the huge role played by our armed forces in delivering our international humanitarian aid and disaster relief should make the
Ministry of Defence DFID’s best friend and strongest ally. At the end of the day, we would all do well to remember that in chaos fear reigns and extremism and terrorism flourish. Our contribution to disaster relief is, I believe, central to our safety and security and that of our allies overseas.

In his drive to increase US spending on combating AIDS in Africa, President George W. Bush—another one not often quoted in this place—said:

“When you have an entire generation of people being wiped out and the free world turns its back, it provides a convenient opportunity for people to spread extremism.”

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and it is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. My hon. Friend mentioned George W. Bush. It is interesting to note that, on account of the focused effort that George W. Bush and his Administration put into relief in Africa, his reputation in Africa is second to none.

Andrew Bowie: I could not add anything more. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; George W. Bush’s reputation there is almost in inverse relation to his reputation in this part of the world.

Concerns have been raised in this House and elsewhere about how our aid budget is focused on responding to disaster, rather than prioritising disaster preparedness so that countries are better equipped to help themselves. On that note, I return to the topic of Sierra Leone and the great work done there by DFID, in partnership with the armed forces.

One of the greatest achievements of the Royal Army Medical Corps 22 Field Hospital, who were deployed in Operation Gritrock, was to establish an Ebola training academy, which has trained more than 4,000 Sierra Leonean healthcare workers—a huge feat in a country with poor access to education and specialist training. Crucially, 22 Field Hospital implemented a “train the trainer” programme, ensuring local sustainability of the training in case of a fresh outbreak of the virus. The effect of that academy for the people of Sierra Leone cannot be overstated, not just on a practical level, but on a psychological one. It is a fantastic signal of this Government’s direction of travel on aid spending.

We all know that, due to their nature and usual geographical location, when natural disasters strike it can take some time for even the best prepared aid effort to get itself under way, losing precious hours. Her Majesty’s Government were criticised last September for what was perceived to be a slow response to Hurricane Irma, which caused terrible devastation to Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands, which are all, of course, British overseas territories. It is therefore right that UK aid organisations and DFID are working hard to shift the focus on disaster relief and aid from responding to pre-empting and building resilience in our programme countries, to help them to withstand the worst of natural disasters, including through the disasters and emergencies preparedness programme.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): There is a certain disparity in what my hon. Friend is saying in trying to contrast aid with disaster aid. Once the disaster aid is spent, a lot of our aid is spent on education, and that is one of the most useful things it can be spent on. Without that, we do not get the quality people in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Andrew Bowie: This is becoming a running theme—I could not agree more strongly.

It is sheer common sense that providing funding to countries at an elevated risk of natural disaster will reduce the need for British aid in the future and slow the pace at which it needs to be delivered to be effective. The people of the UK are rightly proud of this country’s tradition of responding to disasters across the globe, and of the contribution that our armed forces make to those responses. I am immensely proud, as everyone here should be, that Britain is one of only six countries to contribute 0.7% of its gross national income to overseas aid and development. It gives me an immense feeling of pride to see the Union flag-branded aid parcels and to know that this country at least is doing what it can to ease the blights of poverty, poor education and low economic growth, and to create secure countries and develop partnerships that make us all more secure.

It is a sign of who we are as a nation—outward-looking, positive and committed to meeting our responsibilities across the globe—that we deliver humanitarian aid and disaster relief across the globe when and where it is needed. We are working hard to pre-empt such disasters and make our response even more effective in the future. Those are the actions and the signs of a modern, compassionate and forward-thinking Government for a modern, compassionate and forward-thinking country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Five hon. Members have indicated they want to speak before the Front Benchers. We have got about 45 minutes before the Front Benchers, which is a reasonable amount of time. I do not want to set a time limit. That is just an indication of how long we have.

2.40 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech. I concur with what he said about the 0.7% commitment and about there being no conflict between our moral purpose and our national interest. All I would say is that it is vital that our work on international development is at all times guided by the centrality of reducing poverty and, in particular, adopting the sustainable development goals.

In 2016, the UK spent £1.2 billion on disaster relief. At roughly 15% of all overseas development assistance, that is the biggest single sector for UK aid. It was used to respond to natural disasters, disease—the hon. Gentleman gave the example of Ebola—terrorism, war and other conflicts, and mass atrocities. Our ability to react quickly to developing crises allows us to tackle serious issues before they develop. I want to draw attention to the emergency health unit, which is funded by DFID and run by Save the Children. In 2015, when there was an outbreak of measles in South Sudan, the emergency health unit was deployed quickly and provided life-saving vaccinations and medical assistance to the local population. In just three weeks, the UK’s and Save the Children’s direct action protected about 45,000 children from deadly disease.
[Stephen Twigg]

As the hon. Gentleman said, the Ebola crisis was a textbook example of effective UK action. Tragically, Ebola killed more than 11,000 people, yet that figure would have been a great deal higher but for the actions of the UK and others. The year before last, in the previous Parliament, the Select Committee on International Development concluded that DFID should be commended for the way it responded. In particular, we applauded all the staff who worked in Sierra Leone and the region to bring the epidemic under control. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the Ebola crisis is an excellent example of how DFID can work with other Departments, including the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health, and of how, by doing so, we can help those living in the affected communities and deliver value for money for the British taxpayer.

The International Development Committee has just begun an inquiry into the administration and definition of overseas development assistance. An increasing proportion of the UK’s ODA is being spent by other Departments, and we want to look at that issue to ensure that the money is going towards the primary goal of poverty reduction. We also want to look at the definition of ODA. In the Conservative manifesto last year, there was a commitment to work with the OECD to change the definition of what constitutes ODA. It is sensible for the rules that govern ODA to be reviewed. The former Secretary of State called for more of the money that is spent on, for example, UN peacekeeping missions to count as overseas development assistance. As a result, the OECD doubled the proportion that can count from 7% to 15%, and I think that change made sense.

As it stands, the British overseas territories—the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine referred to Hurricane Irma—are not able to receive funds that count towards the 0.7% target, for the simple reason that their gross national income per head is far too high to qualify for aid spending.

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware of this, but during a recent Council of Europe session I had words with the secretary-general of the OECD about redefining that definition so that it did not mean that, after the disasters that struck the Caribbean, we could not give money to those areas. Does he agree that we should still push for that?

Stephen Twigg: The International Development Committee is considering that matter, and we are still taking evidence on it. We have to tread with care, but there is a case to be made that, in some of the examples we have seen, such as in the Caribbean last year, there is a case for greater flexibility in the rules. In the evidence we have received for our inquiry, we have heard that the OECD has begun the process of examining a short-term financing mechanism, which could be made available to countries that have previously been on the recipient list for ODA but no longer are, by virtue of their current income. That would be allowed only in exceptional circumstances, but the Hurricane Irma situation could be such an exceptional circumstance.

The Development Assistance Committee at the OECD has also agreed to create a new mechanism to allow countries to go back more quickly on the list of ODA-eligible countries if their income per capita has fallen enough as a direct consequence of a natural disaster. That reform to the rules, which is quite narrowly defined, might well meet the sorts of circumstances that the hon. Gentleman describes.

My note of caution is this: it is vital that our overseas development assistance goes to those who need it most—to the poorest parts of the world. In the overseas territories, one extreme—the Cayman Islands—has a gross national income per head 86 times larger than that of Ethiopia, and even the poorest of the Caribbean overseas territories, Anguilla, has a per-capita income 20 times higher than that of Ethiopia. In the light of that, I urge the Minister to take great care as the Government proceed with the discussions with the OECD DAC. I would not rule out some of the changes I have referred to, which I know the Government are discussing with the OECD.

When a crisis strikes, it is important that basic services such as health and education continue as normally as possible. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point about education. Education Cannot Wait, which was set up with DFID’s help, is an incredibly important programme to support children living in emergency situations. It currently works with more than 3 million in 13 countries, many of whom are refugees or internally displaced people as a direct consequence of natural disasters, war or other atrocities.

Immediate and life-saving assistance is vital when crises occur, but it is important to lay the groundwork for a sustainable future as quickly as possible. The evidence that our Committee has taken over a number of years shows that the Department’s use of cash transfers can be a useful, productive and efficient way of giving support to people in some of the most vulnerable situations. Cash transfers typically have a much lower administrative cost, and give beneficiaries much more control over their own need. What scope do the Minister and the Department see for a wider use of cash transfers when disasters hit?

The central issue is climate change, which is an increasingly significant cause of humanitarian crises. In the past two decades alone, more than 1 million people have died as a consequence of weather extremes and their associated disasters. The Government’s report on building resilience and adaptation to climate change estimates that by 2030 there could be more than 300 million people trapped in poverty because of climate change. Surely it is vital that preventive measures are funded and pursued. As climate change continues to be an enormous challenge, countries will have to learn to adapt to changing conditions to prevent disasters. DFID already spends nearly £150 million a year on prevention programmes, including in South Sudan, Afghanistan and Burma, which help to build resilience to the changing environment and ensure that, when disaster strikes, locals have access to timely, appropriate and cost-effective humanitarian aid.

In conclusion, the UK has long played a positive role in disaster relief. Our Committee’s inquiry is examining in detail the Government’s case for changing the ODA rules, and we will report on that later this year. Clearly, climate change, natural disasters, conflict and mass atrocities mean that an increasing number of people are displaced as refugees or internally. Effective relief is vital, but ultimately we need to do more to address the causes of displacement so that, where possible, we prevent such disasters from happening in the first place.
2.50 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a great pleasure and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who gave a first-class speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), whom I congratulate on securing the debate. It is always timely to debate this subject. As we came through the doors into Westminster Hall, someone mentioned it was good to come to discuss good things, and this is a good subject to talk about, not because we are doing everything that can possibly be done, but because it is an opportunity for us to assess what is being done and what more can be done.

I think it is fair to say that, thanks to this country and the generosity of its people, many people around the world are helped when they suffer from natural and man-made disasters. At a time of so many needs, some of which we have heard discussed in great detail and with expert commentary, more people than ever before are on the move across the world. In many ways, the world is in commotion, and I think we are at the height of mass movement of people since the end of the second world war, and at a time of increasing population as well.

In my short contribution I will not try to match the wonderful speeches given earlier, but I will reflect on the generosity of the British people themselves and on how they respond to the disasters that we all too frequently witness. We all know the Government figures—some have been quoted—the legislative requirement to spend on humanitarian relief and the effect of military deployments in disaster zones. We should all be proud of the men and women who wear the uniform of our armed forces, in particular in the context of administering humanitarian relief. We are also all aware of what UK aid is achieving, providing food, shelter and medicine whenever and wherever a disaster presents itself.

The truly impressive thing, however, is that when asked the British people themselves are also keen to put their hand in their collective pocket. A cursory adding up of figures on the Disasters Emergency Committee website shows that it raised some £97 million in the past year for ongoing DEC appeals. The contribution of this country goes beyond finance, to people, who selflessly go or are deployed to the parts of the world where their services are most needed. That includes medical people, construction people, rescue teams from the emergency services, who are volunteers, and missionaries, volunteers and aid workers from a raft of different organisations, all putting themselves in harm’s way to care for people affected by disasters.

This debate is about the UK contribution to disaster relief, but Government action, although welcome, is not the only thing that the UK does, so we should be proud of—actually, we should be humble about—our history of philanthropy, humanitarianism and action in such areas. In my constituency, we have a citizenship award named after William “Citizen” Jaffray, who understood that more than most. He personified the values of philanthropy—I must make a note not to use that word too often, because it is one I always struggle with. In the early part of the 19th century he paid for smallpox inoculation of the population throughout Stirlingshire, saving thousands of lives. That is one example of private charity, and he put his money into it as millions of people in the UK do today—but he invested in preparing people to stop an epidemic before it happened. That is my theme in the remaining part of my speech.

I am sure Members are aware of the work of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in this field. FAO work is focused clearly on governance, information systems, spreading good practice and capacity development—that is the disaster early intervention agenda. By improving our information systems and our understanding of how and when disasters will happen, we can stop them happening in the first place—we hope. Data and information are key: for example, understanding of a river network will allow environmental interventions that can reduce the likelihood of flooding. By having detailed mapping information on settlements, we can understand where and when there are likely to be disease outbreaks. Work such as that undertaken by the Food and Agriculture Organisation to map the rivers of south-east Asia, or that of Missing Maps around the world to ensure that the humanitarian open street map is fit for the next disaster, is vital to all of that.

I understand that not all disasters can be predicted or mitigated, but many can be. It is worthwhile noting that around the world, according to the UN, 62p in every £100 spent on disaster aid was spent on preparedness; but we in the UK lag behind, investing only 42p in every £100. Yet an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The disaster early intervention agenda is about good governance, the rule of law, mapping, understanding of the natural environment, and community resilience. Those are actually strengths of the United Kingdom, so we can and must do better in that field, harnessing our great national talents and resources to make a difference around the world. If we do so, we will save people before they need to be saved.

2.56 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. These days, it is something of a rare pleasure for me to take part in a Westminster Hall debate, but I received special dispensation from the Scottish National party Whips Office to do so today. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on securing this debate. I was our party’s international development spokesperson in the previous Parliament, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute. Earlier this morning, by happy coincidence, I was meeting representatives of Scotland’s International Development Alliance. All in, it has been a bit of a time warp.

The debate is timely, as other Members have said, including the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on securing this debate. I was our party’s international development spokesperson in the previous Parliament, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute. Earlier this morning, by happy coincidence, I was meeting representatives of Scotland’s International Development Alliance. All in, it has been a bit of a time warp.

The debate is timely, as other Members have said, including the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). The need for disaster response has, sadly, never been greater. In particular, in recent years the displacement of people by hunger, conflict and climate change has put the whole international development and disaster relief system to the test.

Aid can of course be shorthand for many different things, in particular in the context of disaster relief—relief, rebuilding, resilience, root causes and our responsibilities. Relief in the immediate aftermath, again as others have said, is vital, especially in the face of a natural disaster or something unseen such as the tsunamis of recent years and, to a lesser extent, the Ebola outbreak. Like other Members, I pay tribute to the work of the DEC
and the recently established DEC in Scotland. They bring together the best of the agencies and the best of the skills and experience to avoid duplication and to ensure maximisation of the funds donated by the public. The UK Government can do the same thing through the UN agencies.

The Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), made a point about cash transfers, which are important in all such situations but particularly in immediate disaster relief. He outlined the reasons for cash transfers, which include the ability of affected individuals to spend the money to meet their own needs, and the impact that that then has in revitalising the local economy and in terms of the very basic human dignity in doing that. Rather than us as paternalistic donors deciding what is good for people, we give them the power, recognising that, even in the midst of calamity, they have the option to decide and choose for themselves.

Moving on to the rebuilding phase, that is a particular challenge. I only vaguely remember the statistic, but at one time someone might be a refugee or displaced person for three or four years; now, for a displaced person on the Syrian border, for example, or someone displaced by famine in one of the central African countries, it can be for up to 18 years—an entire generation. Therefore, rebuilding, reconstruction and investment, in particular in education—again as we have heard—are vital.

On the reaction to Hurricane Irma—the effect on UK overseas territories and their GDP, and rebuilding—it is not that we should not give them money. They are dependencies of the United Kingdom, and we would give money if—God forbid—something happened here in the United Kingdom. We have responded to tragedies that have happened on our own doorstep, but we do not try to count that as official development assistance or aid, because that is part of our global network and definition. As the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, and other speakers said, if there are to be changes to those definitions, they have to be agreed through a multilateral process. There has to be consensus among the donor countries and the change has to be driven by overriding humanitarian principles, in particular the sustainable development goals. I might come back to say something about that in a bit more detail if time allows.

One of the challenges is getting the resilience in the first place: making sure that communities that are at risk from conflict, famine or climate change have a degree of resilience so that these issues can be nipped in the bud. DFID has the challenge of delivering the remainder of the aid budget and trying to keep it as resourced. It is perfectly possible to find ways of doing that if we look at some of the big, unnecessary capital expenditure, starting with Trident, but no matter what one’s views on those things are, as far as possible, efforts should be made to keep those budgets separate, or at least properly and transparently accounted for, so that, whether in Committee, Westminster Hall or elsewhere, we can scrutinise them.

That speaks a little more widely to the mission creep of other Departments and the claims that they are starting to put on the 0.7% budget. It should not be a cover because the Foreign and Commonwealth Office struggles to meet some of its other requirements for aspects of diplomatic missions. The FCO should be resourced; the Department for International Development should be resourced; the Ministry of Defence should be resourced. It is perfectly possible to find ways of doing that if we look at some of the big, unnecessary capital expenditure, not least Trident—the Tories can tick off their bingo box. If the other Departments are to spend a greater share of the 0.7%, they have to be held to the same standards of transparency and the same levels of scrutiny as DFID has been over the years.

I conclude with a thought on the idea of aid money serving the national interest. In my previous guise I used to repeatedly ask Ministers for a definition of the national interest, because I do not see how it can be anything other than the meeting and delivery of the sustainable development goals. How is the United Kingdom’s national interest not served by building a more peaceful and sustainable world, where people are less susceptible to shocks of conflict, climate change and famine, where girls are educated, people have access to safe running water and the environment is protected? That is the national interest. If there is some other national interest that has been hinted at when Members say, “This is what aid should be,” I would be interested to know what that is. That would be useful to hear.

It is encouraging that there is usually a cross-party consensus on this kind of issue; we have managed to hear praise for both Tony Blair and George W. Bush in the debate so far. At the very least, that is an indication of our intention to come together to act not just in our
enlightened self-interest, but in the best interest of people who very often find themselves in situations that are no fault of their own in developing parts of the world.

3.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on setting the scene so well, as he always does in debates in Westminster Hall. Debates here often are used to raise issues that are important to us, which is what the hon. Gentleman has done. Other hon. Members and I are here because we share his interest and concerns.

I have been outspoken on the obligation of those who have much to those who have little. We have a duty to help and to show compassion for those in need. However, having been brought up as an Ulster Scot with some Brethren ties, let me assure hon. Members that we are called to be good stewards of our money. We need to ensure that what we send gets to where it should get to and that it helps those who we want to help. There has to be some monitoring and regulation to make sure that it happens. For that reason, although I support overseas aid, I am concerned about how it is used. It is easy to dismiss the many newspaper and media reports, but they raise some concerns about where the moneys are spent.

I am always pleased to see the Minister in his place, because we all know him to have compassion and a real deep interest in his subject matter. There will be no one in the House or outside it, I suspect, who would do anything other than support him in his work. I asked the former Secretary of State for International Development what recent estimate had made of the proportion of the Palestinian Authority’s foreign aid receipts spent on payments to convicted terrorists in Israeli prisons in the last 12 months. The response I received was excellent, and I thank the Minister for it. It stated:

“In August 2017, the International Monetary Fund estimated that external financial support to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2017 will total $666 million USD (approx. £500 million GBP). Many donors, including the UK and European Union, restrict their support to the PA for specific purposes and projects, and ensure that none of their aid is used for payments to convicted terrorists in Israeli prisons. No estimates have been made of the proportion of the PA’s external financial support which was spent on payments to convicted terrorists in Israeli prisons in the last 12 months.”

It continued:

“No UK aid is used for payments to Palestinian prisoners or their families. UK financial assistance to the PA is only used to help to pay the salaries of health and education public servants in the West Bank. Only named public servants from a pre-approved EU list are eligible and a robust verification system validates that funds are used for the intended purposes. The UK government strongly condemns all forms of violence including incitement to violence.”

That reply was exactly what I wanted. It sets the scene and puts to rest some of my concerns, and outlines where we are. I welcome that good, comprehensive response.

It is essential that we know where the relief is going, who has their hands on it and who the beneficiaries of the relief are. I always give examples from Northern Ireland and my own constituency because I want everybody inside and outside this House to know about Strangford. I recently hosted a fund-raising dinner for my branch of the Democratic Unionist party. We have a dinner every year and have done so for the past five years. The dinner has a dual purpose. The event is in a local church that provides a fantastic four-course meal for those who purchase tickets. It is in a lovely area and the proceeds raised from the price of a meal go to a charity in Swaziland, the Eden Mission. It does great work: it digs wells and provides schooling and health services. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is nodding his head. Like me, he understands that we have a close connection with what is happening.

I have hosted the dinner for the past five years and will continue to do so. I trust what the mission does and it promises to make a difference in Swaziland. I have seen the children’s choir that the mission brought to Northern Ireland. They have sung in my office and in the halls of Stormont, where the Northern Ireland Assembly functioned until a short time ago. We hope it will function again, but we must wait and see. I know that the choice I made to host my dinner in a church hall as opposed to a local restaurant that would charge roughly the same was a good decision to make. Just over £1,000 was raised for the charity. The church did the catering and we had some auctions.

My desire is to make sure that we make good decisions about how our aid is spent and who the real beneficiaries are. The project that I support sends containers out every year to Africa. The project workers tell me stories about what happens. They pack the container to within an inch of its life. Every conceivable portion of space is used. Sweets and clothes are packed into every crevice of the container. They also tell me that they have learnt the lesson of packing because they found that when they packed expensive items, such as wheelchairs and schooling aids, to the front, those would go missing during customs searches. That is a fact. It happened. It is unfortunate it happened, but it did. They have learnt to pack the expensive items in the middle of the container to make it harder to take them.

When I was told that story I wondered how much of our aid—I pose this as a question—has been siphoned off and whether we are doing all we can to protect our aid and to pack it in the middle, as it were, as my church, an Eden Church, has done in the past. This is why I asked the Secretary of State for International Development what monitoring the Department undertakes to ensure that aid granted to specific areas is used for the purposes for which it was intended; and whether it will liaise with religious missionaries in the destination country to ensure that UK aid is effectively distributed. The reply was excellent.

I do not question that the effective use of the UK aid budget is central to the Department for International Development’s work. I understand that all funding is subject to rigorous due diligence checks and that we have strict auditing and monitoring controls in place to ensure that all funding is used as it should be, and that every project is subject to an annual performance review and a project completion review to ensure that the objectives have been achieved and aid has been delivered to the intended beneficiaries. I am pleased that the Department uses multiple sources of information, including its partnerships with civil society, to be confident that UK aid reaches those intended. However, I would push for greater interaction with those on the ground who are able to distribute the aid.
I again ask the Minister whether he will outline what work is done with NGOs to see that aid reaches the mouths of the babies with bellies swollen from malnutrition, and not the custom official with a swollen belly from too much food. It may be a little harsh to say that, but it is a fact. I have seen photographs—we have all seen them—of bellies swollen because of malnutrition and a big guy across the way whose idea of a balanced meal is probably two hamburgers in each hand. He seems to indulge in food when others are starving. I feel genuinely aggrieved by that. When we see the starving children, any person with any compassion whatever would be well aware of that. Having heard at first hand the struggles that children in Africa and other areas go through to survive, and understanding that there is a limited amount that this country can afford to give, every penny must be made to count. That is why I urge the Government again to ensure that it counts on the ground and not simply on a checklist on a desk.

Should we give aid internationally, despite the pressure we face at home? Yes, we should, and I fully endorse the Minister’s and the Government’s stand. Indeed, they have cross-party support. Should we account for every penny, every blanket, every grain of rice? We must, because it is our job to be good stewards. Should we make use of on-the-ground agencies and bodies? That is wisdom and good stewardship. I thank DFID and the Minister for the leadership and stewardship that he is wisdom and good stewardship. I thank DFID and the Minister for the leadership and stewardship that he gives to the Department. That is why we have trust in him and support him. I want to make sure we are doing all that is possible to get it right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I want to start the wind-ups at 27 minutes past 3.

3.15 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on securing this excellent debate. We have a great deal of consensus in this debating Chamber, and it is important for the Minister to know that, although we can always argue about the refinement of processes, there is nevertheless an overwhelming view that the commitment to 0.7% of GDP as a national objective is one that is shared. In any case, the overriding national consensus supports what all Governments have done in this area.

However, I want to strike a marginal, discordant note. I do not think we have to begin by talking about the national interest. There is a profoundly moral case around disaster relief. I have sat with refugees in Macedonia and Albania who were fleeing the conflict in Kosovo. In Lebanon, I have seen people fleeing over the border from Syria. Most recently, in Bangladesh, we have seen refugees from Myanmar. I cannot look them in the eyes and believe that this issue is only about national interest, because it is not. The British people, generally speaking, are much bigger than that. It is important to make the moral case.

There is also a pragmatic case. At the time of the conflict in Kosovo, we saw refugees flooding into this country. I have constituents who came into this country as refugees from Kosovo—ditto Syria and so on. We know that whenever disaster arises around the world, it has repercussions. There is a profound case—hon. Members have mentioned this—for arguing that the real precursor to disaster relief is having long-term sustainability, to prevent disasters in the first place. That is not always possible. Some of the things that we anticipate are easy, but the unknown unknowns are problematic. Climate change is still producing unknown impacts, particularly in Africa. With the growing population and the capacity for climate change to disrupt whole communities, we might see disaster. That will almost certainly produce a tide of refugees who will look north to Europe for support and shelter.

Some hon. Members mentioned Ebola. We must be alive to the fact that there could be some as yet unknown pandemic that will hit this world of ours. It will be a global problem; it will not be about national interest. It will be about us working collectively together, as we did in the case of Ebola, but possibly on diseases as yet unknown that could have massively more dramatic consequences. And, of course, sadly, war on this planet is still something that we do not entirely control.

When a disaster takes place, the British are massively good-hearted. Some Members have already commented on that—the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) made that very point. We have a good-hearted nation. We see money going to charities, as well as action from our Government.

In the most recent case, of the Rohingya in Bangladesh, the British Government behaved admirably with respect to disaster relief. It was important, however, that that was co-ordinated by the Bangladeshi authorities, and particularly the Bangladeshi army, which was important in making sure that the camps were stable. There was of course also a plethora of agencies from all over the world. When I was in Bangladesh—I should point out my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, having travelled there recently—I met people from the Canadian Red Cross and aid agencies from around the world. All that immediate action requires some degree of co-ordination.

Immediate disasters are not simple to deal with—they are massively complicated—but because such action has been needed on a number of occasions over the years, there are now structures that can quite quickly get operations moving. Sometimes the challenge is what happens post-disaster. I know from exchanges on the Floor of the House that the Minister has thought about what happens next for the Rohingya in Bangladesh. It is not so much a question of transferring people back; that is a considerable way off. It is more about the fact that up to 50,000 women will give birth in the coming months and there is still not a clean water supply or sanitation system to sustain a population that may be living on a small patch of land for a considerable time to come.

The problem, of course, is that the world begins to move on. We saw that, to an extent, at the global level. Britain was a major contributor to the global efforts to provide assistance to the Rohingya in Bangladesh, but those funds are still undersubscribed. This is not about us being morally superior, but it sometimes helps to say we have played a significant part.

We do need people to stay for the long term. If we do not stabilise them into the long term, populations on the scale of the Rohingya in Bangladesh can be a
hotbed of disaster. That can mean disaster for the population itself—through criminality, child prostitution and all the evils that can take place in such a community—but there is also the capacity for radicalisation, as has happened in other parts of the world. We must deal with disasters in the long term, not just the first weeks and months.

Several hon. Members mentioned Syria. If it gets to a post-conflict situation, the reconstruction of what was once, if not a first-world country, then certainly not a disaster case, will take decades—perhaps two generations. I think it was the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) who made the point about the relative amounts spent on conflict and on post-conflict stabilisation. That applies to Iraq, Afghanistan and many different parts of the world. Even our country has not put as much into the post-conflict situations as into the creation of the conflicts.

A number of Members pointed out the need to develop local partnerships. The capacity to work with local partner agencies is fundamental for both immediate disaster relief and the second phase. Often, large international agencies, however well intentioned they are, do not have the sophistication to get down to almost street level, which makes a material difference to people on the ground. There are problems with that approach, because as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we have a duty to steward the pound that we spend. That is right and proper, but it is also important that such stewardship does not mean we miss the trick of getting the resources where they can do people maximum good. That often means working with local partner agencies.

Disasters will occur again and again around the world. It is of course right and proper to reserve resources for disaster relief, including for stabilisation after the immediate disaster period. Nepal, for example, is still not back together after the disaster of some years ago. In the longer run, we should not pit disaster relief against investment in long-term infrastructure, because investment in education, agriculture or industry will make a material difference in stabilising the parts of the world in question. It will make them less prone to war and more resilient to climate change, and it will make them better partners, even if that is seen in terms of narrow national interest. In any case, to conclude as I began, there is a moral debate to be had in the end: we share this planet, and our fellow global citizens deserve something from us. We are good at this and should not be ashamed of what we do.

3.25 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) for his excellent speech, and I thank the hon. Members for all the others that have been made in the debate. There is clearly a lot of consensus about the significance of the UK’s contribution to international disaster relief.

This is an important and timely debate. The world is facing the largest humanitarian crisis since 1945, with 20 million people at risk of starvation as a result of drought and conflict in South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Nigeria alone, according to the UN. The UK public have been among the most generous responders to emergency appeals, and they largely support action by the UK Government to respond to such disasters. However, an improved response is and will be needed to cope better with current and future humanitarian crises.

I welcome UK bilateral spending on humanitarian aid, which has steadily increased over the past seven years, and the vast majority of which has been spent on emergency response. That can only be a good thing. However, research shows that investing in disaster risk reduction prior to disasters saves life and is far more cost-effective than funding the response after a disaster has happened. It is too simplistic to assume an overarching cost-benefit ratio, but a study by the World Bank estimates that every pound spent on preparedness saves in the region of £7 in repair and recovery costs. Despite that, as has been mentioned, just 0.4% of global aid is spent on preparing for disasters. The world humanitarian summit in 2016 agreed to increase humanitarian aid spending on disaster risk reduction from 0.4% to 5%. DFID signed up to that, and I ask the Minister to provide an update on what progress has been made towards that goal. I also urge the UK Government to continue to invest in the disasters and emergency preparedness programme beyond this year, when it is scheduled to end.

It is important to note that 90% of recorded major disasters caused by natural hazards from 1995 to 2015 were linked to weather and climate change. Fragile states have been hit hardest, and have the fewest resources to cope with climate change impacts. Even the global strategic trends programme of the Ministry of Defence acknowledges that humanitarian assistance will increase by up to 1,600% in the next 20 years, and says that is “in large part due to the effects of climate change”.

The current draft of the sustainable development goals highlights the fact that to achieve goal No. 1, which is to “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”, society needs to “build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate related events and other economic, social and environmental disasters”.

The Government should follow the world-leading work of the Scottish Government by setting up a climate justice fund to support vulnerable countries in mitigating and adapting to the changing circumstances caused by climate change events. It would make much more sense, rather than dipping into the aid budget after such events, to acknowledge the risks and take action to reduce them before disaster strikes. There is a critical opportunity to do that now, while the political will exists, and I ask the Minister to look at that as soon as he can.

To give an example from last year, Hurricane Irma was not adequately prepared for and there was a lack of forward thinking and a slow response from the UK Government, despite indications that the hurricane would wreak devastation. Every year hurricanes cause on average $835 million of damage in the Caribbean and almost $200 million of damage in the Pacific, so the UK Government should have seen it coming. The climate challenge must therefore be integrated into national development plans and strategies. Coping with climate variability and attempting to anticipate future climate changes are no longer an optional extra but should be a policy imperative for the Government.
As well as investing in disaster risk reduction to make aid more effective, it is important to channel more funds as directly as possible through local and national actors on the ground in the affected area—we have heard a bit about that this afternoon. Such organisations know their local communities well and can respond to humanitarian crises in a quick and effective manner.

At the world humanitarian summit 2016, the biggest donors, including DFID, came together to recognise and agree the Grand Bargain. That was a series of changes to the way that donors and aid organisations work, and it aimed to get means into the hands of those in most need. Last September the UK Government recommitted to the full implementation of the Grand Bargain, but the UK response to the Rohingya crisis shows that there is a long way to go to meet those objectives. There is a lack of transparency regarding how much funding local organisations receive from the UK, and mechanisms for empowering the Rohingya with access to decision making and planning in the crisis remain limited, meaning that the response is less effective than it could be.

Only 0.2% of humanitarian funding is currently channelled to local and national actors—I think everybody in the room would say that that is woefully inadequate. NGOs support an increase to 25%, and the UK Government should also commit further funding to the Start Fund, which provides grants to small organisations in emergency situations.

Let us consider the changing focus of international aid. The UK is seen, without doubt, as a leader in shaping the global development agenda. Although aid effectiveness is difficult to measure, recent reports from the International Development Committee point out that foreign aid is—quite rightly—the most scrutinised part of UK Government spending. It is monitored by the Committee, the National Audit Office and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, and it scores highly on the international aid transparency index. However, there has recently been an alarming shift in the strategic focus of the UK aid strategy, and growing emphasis is now attached to the promotion of the UK’s so-called national interest. A key mechanism for achieving that, as set out in the 2015 aid strategy, has been to direct the aid budget away from DFID to other Departments, such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence.

Official figures show that, last year, roughly a quarter of the UK’s aid budget was spent by Government Ministries other than DFID—a rise of almost 50%. The direction of travel has raised serious concerns that that will reduce focus on global poverty alleviation, as well as concerns about the transparency and accountability of aid spending outside DFID. DFID has a commitment, enshrined in UK law, to reducing poverty, but it is not at all clear that other Departments have that same commitment. Will the Minister outline what steps DFID is taking to ensure that other Departments improve transparency and accountability in their ODA spending, and say how that will be measured? A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies emphasised that position, and warned that the trend towards funnelling less aid money through DFID, combined with a growing emphasis on ensuring benefit to British firms, would have a negative impact on poverty reduction in developing countries.

After an OECD meeting in November, the Government reported that reforms to the ODA rules had been agreed. Those included doubling the percentage of contributions to UN peacekeeping missions that count as aid—such as the UK troops sent to South Sudan—from 7% to 15%. That followed agreements last year that made more security and counter-extremism spending eligible. It is our view that the foreign aid budget should never be used for defence, and this change appears to be a clear attempt to dilute the fight against poverty. We are extremely concerned about such developments driven by the UK Government.

The Secretary of State recently pledged in a Telegraph article to use Britain’s foreign aid as part of “a bold new Brexit-ready proposition to boost trade and investment with developing countries”.

It is concerning to read that UK aid could be used to mitigate the negative impacts of Brexit, with the UK’s security and prosperity key factors in deciding how aid is spent. The reiteration that aid must be spent in the national interest was typically disappointing. I cannot emphasise enough that the delivery of aid must remain focused on ending extreme poverty and supporting a fairer, more sustainable future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The sitting is resumed, and I believe the SNP spokesman has three minutes to go.

Chris Law: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I must say that it is also a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, since I see the Chair has changed in the past few minutes.

I was coming to my conclusion, but I will reiterate the point I was making about the notion of the national interest, which is that it does not mean very much. I have to reflect on what the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) called the moral interest, because it is in all of our interests to serve the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable internationally.

I cannot emphasise enough that the delivery of aid must remain focused on ending extreme poverty and supporting a fairer, more sustainable future for all. Although that sounds obvious, it needs to be reiterated time and again. It is in all of our interests. It is a promise we made to the world’s poorest and most vulnerable, and that is what the UK taxpayer has the right to expect.

It is also critical to ensure that all our aid is high-impact, transparent and accountable and that it delivers real change for people living in poverty, no matter which Department it comes from. That is why I urge the Minister to commit to investing more funding to resilience and recovery for those living in the fragile nations most at risk of climate-related extreme events and economic and social disasters. Lastly, I urge him to channel more funding as directly as possible through local and national actors on the ground in the affected area, working with local communities and organisations.
Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Because of the votes, the timings of this debate have changed. The debate now finishes no later than 4.26 pm.

4 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

This is my first effort responding as a member of Labour’s Front Bench, and I am delighted to do so. It is perhaps a slight shame that today, of all days, it has been an all-male debate, but I am sure that the Minister and I can both say that our Departments are finely led by female colleagues. It gives me great pleasure to follow in the footsteps of distinguished colleagues, and even more to have managed to be here on time, which hopefully forestalls any demands for me to follow in the footsteps of Lord Bates—although I am glad to say that he has not been asked to resign as Minister of State for being 60 seconds or so late to the Dispatch Box. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who served admirably in the shadow role in DFID.

I am rapidly learning that perspective is important in politics, as is the ability to recognise when Government Departments are doing a good job, even if their Ministers are sometimes late. I am pleased to commend DFID on the hugely important work it does—work that is recognised and appreciated by the United Nations, among others. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on securing this important debate, and pay tribute to all hon. Members who have taken part. There have been some fine contributions, not least on my own side, from the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd).

When it comes to international disaster relief, the UK continues to set an enviable example, although of course we could always do more. The Organisation for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs commends Britain on the commitments it made following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. In common with us, OCHA would like to know whether the UK Government on the commitments it made following the 2016 Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. In common with us, OCHA would like to know whether the UK Government will continue to report to the platform for action, commitments and transformation on how it is meeting those commitments.

The sheer scale of the global humanitarian crisis risks making us all feel powerless bystanders. In recent weeks, upward of one quarter of a million people have fled their homes in north-west Syria, the largest single exodus in a savage civil war that has lasted seven years—taking place, by the way, at a time when we are being told that the Syrian civil war is coming nearer to its end. This year’s United Nations response plan for Yemen describes the war-torn country as “the worst man-made humanitarian crisis” in the world, with more than 22 million people—around three quarters of the total population—in need of help.

Since the escalation of violence in March 2015, when conflict broke out, Yemen, already the poorest country in the region, has been left on the verge of a humanitarian collapse. We know that in both Syria and Yemen, conflict has been inextricably linked to the fact that those countries are being used as proxies by others to further other agendas. We know, too, that because of that the demands placed on those charged with delivering disaster relief have been unrelenting. It is important to name and praise all those who struggle daily with the tide of human misery caused by these wars with no end.

I will mention one unsung hero, who in so many ways personifies what is best about the often-maligned United Nations and its agencies. Over the past few years, it has been the voice of the UN humanitarian co-ordinator, Jamie McGoldrick, that has drawn the world’s attention most loudly and most often to Yemen’s plight. He felt that he had to, as journalists had been banned from the country. He has just stepped down, having overseen one of the most difficult and challenging aid operations in the world. When asked how it felt to deliver aid to an increasingly desperate population in Yemen, Jamie McGoldrick said that there is “no point in getting angry, there’s no point in getting frustrated, the point is to get smart.”

It is high time that we in this place got smart. We owe it to people like Jamie McGoldrick and to the tens of thousands that he and his colleagues struggle to care for. Being smart means that we simply cannot tolerate a situation where the British Government sanction arms sales to Saudi Arabia, whose aerial bombardment of Yemen has caused so much death and destruction, while salvaging our collective conscience by asking people like Jamie McGoldrick to ensure that, if possible, traumatised women and children are pulled out of the rubble. The situation is simply not acceptable, nor is it sustainable.

In response to the points raised by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, I will say that the UK Navy has played an important role in international disaster relief, for example in the Caribbean hurricanes and the UK’s response to the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone. Our defence forces can and should contribute to humanitarian relief, but I want to exercise a note of caution. Whenever we spend our aid budget, it must be about getting the biggest bang for our buck for the world’s poorest. The priority must always be poverty reduction and humanitarian relief, in line with internationally agreed rules. Where the armed forces can offer real added value and where they are explicitly doing humanitarian work, then it is an option worth exploring further.

We also need to get smart by standing up to those we believe we have a special relationship with, especially when they slash funding to organisations such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the main relief lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Their displacement from their homeland has continued, in some cases, for over half a century. If we are to use our influence to ensure that funding mechanisms are found for the longer term and for development financing for refugee countries, why are we leaving it to other countries to fill the funding gap left by the Trump Administration?

Returning to the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016, I would ask the Minister what progress his Department is making to ensure that at least 25% of humanitarian funding is delivered as directly as possible. The Department is making to ensure that at least 25% of humanitarian funding is delivered as directly as possible. The Department is making to ensure that at least 25% of humanitarian funding is delivered as directly as possible to local and national actors by 2020. I also ask whether the UK is increasing the proportion of aid spent on disaster risk reduction from 0.4% to 0.5% on the timelines laid out.

Today, the world is facing the largest humanitarian crisis since 1945, with 20 million people at risk of starvation as a result of drought and conflict in South...
Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Nigeria alone. The scale of suffering is almost unimaginable and the task of reversing this tide of human misery so enormous that the temptation to simply slink away and pretend nothing is happening is too much. We can begin by at least recognising where we are getting it right and by turning our attention to what more we can do as one of the richest nations on earth.

We can also start by comprehending that a second world war that left millions dead and even more without shelter gave rise not only to the United Nations, but to a generation of people prepared to put their collective shoulder to the wheel to ensure that such conflict never happened again. With far fewer resources, and in a Europe and Asia whose cities had been flattened, that generation not only rebuilt, but strove for a better society—one without conflict. We still have much more to do to put an end to the conflict that is fuelling so much human misery today.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): After that glittering debut, I will ask the Minister to conclude his remarks no later than 4.23 pm, to allow Mr Bowie three minutes to sum up at the end.

4.9 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeen and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) for calling the debate, and all colleagues who have taken part.

To my knowledge, this is the first time I have faced an Opposition spokesman born not only after I first became a Member of Parliament but after I first joined the payroll as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Ken Baker, which was a year before the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) was born. I will think of a suitable response in due course, but I put that on the record. It is a pleasure to welcome him to his place. I am sure he will give distinguished service on his party’s Front Bench for some time to come. We appreciate what he has to say and I am pleased he has such an obvious interest in this subject.

The UK has a leading reputation in humanitarian response, as colleagues have recognised, and the Prime Minister, the International Development Secretary and other senior Ministers attach great importance to that. The national interest is very wide and it encapsulates what the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and others spoke of. It is not narrow or narrowly focused and need not be considered that way. It encompasses the values behind international development, to which all parties in the House subscribe. It is important that, in finding out what is going on, and sometimes being in a position to say tougher things than nation states can say, I appreciate Jamie’s work very much. I know where he is heading to next and he will not have a quiet life there, either. We appreciate what he does.

As a number of colleagues have mentioned, the past decade has seen the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance soar. The UN appeal for 2018 stands at $22.5 billion—five times larger than the 2007 figure. That increase has been driven largely by two trends. First, the number of people affected by conflict, particularly within states, has increased, which has driven huge numbers of internally displaced people and refugees across Asia, Africa and the middle east. Secondly, crises are becoming increasingly protracted. In 1970, conflicts lasted an average of nine and a half years; today, that figure stands at 26 years. More than 80% of refugee crises now last for more than 10 years. That is putting huge strain on the system, let alone those who endure such misery.

National and local organisations are the first responders to disasters, but there will be occasions when those systems are overwhelmed by the circumstances facing them. That is why the Government are committed to maintaining the capability to provide bigger, better and faster responses to humanitarian emergencies: bigger because they are able to cope with more crises simultaneously, better by using a broader range of expertise, technologies and equipment to deliver bespoke responses to complex emergencies, and faster by quite simply reaching the people most in need as quickly as possible.

When needs are urgent, we adopt a “no regrets” policy to respond to disasters, meaning we take actions to kick-start a response before the full impact may be known, rapidly front-loading funding, relief supplies and expertise in order to save lives. We target our humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable: women and girls, children and those with that, and indeed how we look at what other Departments spend in relation to the delivery of ODA with a DFID interest, is an important separate debate that deserves at least an hour and a half of its own at some stage. I will be very happy if colleagues in all parts of the House put that forward for debate, so we can deal with it more fully. I will also deal with a number of issues that colleagues raised, not least resilience and preparedness, which a number of colleagues spoke about and which I will deal with in a bit more detail.

Since the Asian tsunami in 2004, DFID has mounted more than 30 humanitarian responses to both natural disasters and conflicts, including earthquakes in Nepal, Haiti, Pakistan and Indonesia, floods in India and the Balkans, hurricanes in Bangladesh, Burma, the Philippines and the Caribbean, conflicts in Yemen, South Sudan and Syria, and the Ebola outbreak in west Africa. DFID responds widely across an unstable world.

All colleagues mentioned the respect they have for those who go out and work for the United Kingdom abroad in those various areas. I echo that praise. It was very good that colleagues mentioned that. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton spoke of Jamie McGoldrick, who I spoke to just this week. He has done a remarkable job for OCHA, and I pay tribute to him and his colleagues who work in international organisations and are so important to us in finding out what is going on, and sometimes being in a position to say tougher things than nation states can say. I appreciate Jamie’s work very much. I know where he is heading to next and he will not have a quiet life there, either. We appreciate what he does.

Mr Hollobone: That deserves at least an hour and a half of its own at some stage. I will be very happy if colleagues in all parts of the House put that forward for debate, so we can deal with it more fully. I will also deal with a number of issues that colleagues raised, not least resilience and preparedness, which a number of colleagues spoke about and which I will deal with in a bit more detail.

Since the Asian tsunami in 2004, DFID has mounted more than 30 humanitarian responses to both natural disasters and conflicts, including earthquakes in Nepal, Haiti, Pakistan and Indonesia, floods in India and the Balkans, hurricanes in Bangladesh, Burma, the Philippines and the Caribbean, conflicts in Yemen, South Sudan and Syria, and the Ebola outbreak in west Africa. DFID responds widely across an unstable world.

All colleagues mentioned the respect they have for those who go out and work for the United Kingdom abroad in those various areas. I echo that praise. It was very good that colleagues mentioned that. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton spoke of Jamie McGoldrick, who I spoke to just this week. He has done a remarkable job for OCHA, and I pay tribute to him and his colleagues who work in international organisations and are so important to us in finding out what is going on, and sometimes being in a position to say tougher things than nation states can say. I appreciate Jamie’s work very much. I know where he is heading to next and he will not have a quiet life there, either. We appreciate what he does.

As a number of colleagues have mentioned, the past decade has seen the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance soar. The UN appeal for 2018 stands at $22.5 billion—five times larger than the 2007 figure. That increase has been driven largely by two trends. First, the number of people affected by conflict, particularly within states, has increased, which has driven huge numbers of internally displaced people and refugees across Asia, Africa and the middle east. Secondly, crises are becoming increasingly protracted. In 1970, conflicts lasted an average of nine and a half years; today, that figure stands at 26 years. More than 80% of refugee crises now last for more than 10 years. That is putting huge strain on the system, let alone those who endure such misery.

National and local organisations are the first responders to disasters, but there will be occasions when those systems are overwhelmed by the circumstances facing them. That is why the Government are committed to maintaining the capability to provide bigger, better and faster responses to humanitarian emergencies: bigger because they are able to cope with more crises simultaneously, better by using a broader range of expertise, technologies and equipment to deliver bespoke responses to complex emergencies, and faster by quite simply reaching the people most in need as quickly as possible.

When needs are urgent, we adopt a “no regrets” policy to respond to disasters, meaning we take actions to kick-start a response before the full impact may be known, rapidly front-loading funding, relief supplies and expertise in order to save lives. We target our humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable: women and girls, children and those
with disabilities. To do that, DFID maintains a number of response capabilities, which have time and again proven their worth in responding to major disasters.

First, the emergency medical teams, which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby and other colleagues mentioned in relation to what we saw over the Christmas and holiday period of the team that went to Cox’s Bazar to assist those caught up in the camps with the outbreak of diphtheria. Through a partnership with the NHS, the fire and rescue service and the charity UK-Med, DFID is able to deploy doctors and nurses anywhere in the world to respond to humanitarian emergencies. Their expertise includes specialist surgeons, trauma experts, general medical or, in the case of the deployment to Bangladesh, public health and epidemiology. Thanks in no small part to their work, the outbreak of deadly diphtheria among the Rohingya refugees has now been curbed. I take this opportunity to thank them personally for the fantastic work they have done. They are a credit to their profession and to all of us.

Secondly, there is cross-Government work with the military. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine—indeed, my hon. and gallant Friend—rightly highlighted the crucial role of our armed forces in our disaster relief operations. We pay tribute to him and all his colleagues who serve in the forces. In September last year, a series of hurricanes hit the Caribbean; they were unprecedented. Although a certain amount can be predicted, which I will come to later, Hurricane Irma was the most powerful Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, causing devastation across the region, and hot on its heels were Hurricanes Jose and Maria, adding to the chaos and disruption.

The UK launched a massive response operation, with DFID, the Foreign Office and the military working in hand in hand to deliver assistance, repair infrastructure and get the region back on its feet. Some of that assistance was already there: humanitarian advisers were in the region 24 hours before the hurricane struck; the Mounts Bay ship already had relief supplies loaded, and within 36 hours those supplies were going from the United Kingdom. Hundreds of tonnes of relief were delivered by civilian and military means, including via the Royal Navy’s flagship HMS Ocean. Nearly 2,000 military personnel were able to deliver aid, maintain security and provide reassurance to affected communities.

The military have played a major part in responding to some of the most severe disasters of recent times. The men and women of our armed services have helped to construct Ebola treatment centres in Sierra Leone, fly aid to Nepal, rescue thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean and reach the most remote islands of the Philippines on HMS Illustrious after Typhoon Haiyan. That is perhaps an example of spending more widely that is predicted, which I will come to later. DFID itself. Again, that is something we might explore in a further debate, to reassure colleagues that this expenditure, even if it comes from different Departments, is absolutely focused on the needs that DFID takes to be the most important. That co-operation is the result of regular training and careful planning between DFID and the Ministry of Defence. The two Departments have a memorandum of understanding that provides a simple mechanism for military assets to be quickly incorporated into emergency relief efforts when disaster strikes.

The UK does not respond alone. We work with the UN, non-governmental organisations, the Red Cross and other Governments to co-ordinate and deliver responses. Without those partners we would not be able to reach those most affected. OCHA is the key player in co-ordinating the UN’s humanitarian agencies, managing activity in different response areas, such as health, shelter, water and sanitation. The hon. Member for Rochdale spoke of the problems with water in the camps in Bangladesh. I met officials this week to discuss our response to that and what more can be done in relation to the concerns about that and health. It is very much on the Department’s agenda.

In relation to the European Union, the UK works closely with the directorate-general for humanitarian aid and civil protection in the EU Commission on many areas of humanitarian aid. DFID maintains regular engagement with the Commission and member states through its participation in the EU working party on humanitarian aid and food aid. As can be imagined, I have no intention of letting that relationship be lost in the events following March 2019.

We know that humanitarian assistance should be the exception, not the norm. Investing in countries’ resilience and preparedness not only mitigates the impacts of disasters, but provides better value for money in the long term. DFID has been investing in countries’ resilience for a number of years, and it forms a core part of our humanitarian aid reform policy. I will say a little more on that, because a number of colleagues raised it, and it is important.

We believe that development and climate finance can support countries and communities to better identify risks, as well as to prepare for and recover from disasters. Also critical is building strong health, education and social protection systems in developing countries, so that they are able to cope with crises. I will mention one or two areas where we are already working to deal with that.

In 2015, the UK committed to increasing its international climate finance by 50% over the next five years to at least £5.8 billion. It helps poor countries to adapt to climate change and promote jobs and livelihoods to reduce poverty. It will help to build the resistance of people, businesses and economies to increases in weather-related disasters or changes in climate trends. That money has already helped more than 21 million people to cope with the increased risk of droughts and floods.

We are investing in risk management tools, such as the index for risk management, and in insurance mechanisms, such as African Risk Capacity. We are also investing in climate science and modelling that will help us better to understand and predict risk, including through the science for humanitarian emergencies and resilience—helpfully, SHEAR—programme, which aims to advance the monitoring, assessment and prediction of natural hazards and risks across sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. The building resilience and adaptation to climate extremes and disasters—BRACED—programme aims to benefit 5 million vulnerable people, especially women and children, in 13 developing countries. The centre for global disaster protection will build the financial resilience of developing countries to natural disasters.

In all the ways that I have described, we are recognising the truth of what hon. Members have said in relation to preparedness and we are on the ball. I thank hon.
Members who have spoken, and apologise for not being able to respond to them individually. I have outlined the world-class contribution to international disaster relief that the UK is able to make, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine for initiating this debate. Let me say two things in response. Although the debate has been on international disasters and in a way it is easy to convince the public that disaster relief is a good use of development aid, we have all recognised that development goes much further than just dealing with emergencies. We should be as proud of that as we are of dealing with the emergencies.

Yesterday, the Department said a sad farewell to Becky Dykes, with her memorial service. A DFID colleague, she lost her life in Beirut recently. Tributes were paid to her and her values and to the work in which she was engaged in Lebanon to improve the lives of those who, without her, would have had lives less well lived. Her life said so much about what all of us in this Chamber believe in, so we dedicate this debate to Becky and to all those like her, and we say thank you.

4.23 pm

Andrew Bowie: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I associate myself very much with the words spoken by the Minister just now in paying tribute to all those people in DFID who give of their best in the work they do across the world.

I thank the Minister for his comprehensive comments and pay tribute to him and the Department for the work that they do across the world. I thank everyone who has contributed to this genuinely good-natured and consensual debate. I thank the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), whom I welcome to the Front Bench and congratulate on his speech today. I also thank the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law); I apologise for not mentioning him before.

Stephen Kerr: And Stirling.

Andrew Bowie: I am coming to my hon. Friend.

I would like to concentrate on three points that were made. The first, which was made by quite a few hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Dundee West, was the huge humanitarian crisis that we face now. It is probably the biggest that we have faced since 1945 and responding to it presents challenges for every Government. The second point was made by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Strangford, who must have Aberdeenshire blood in him somewhere given how strongly he wants to account for every grain of rice that is being sent out by DFID.

I will end on the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) regarding the incredible generosity of the British people. Every year, they take our collective breath away with the amount of money and time that they are willing to give in order to send money overseas whenever crises occur. My hon. Friend pointed out that, last year alone, £97 million was donated by the British people for crises overseas and charitable works. It is on that point that I end the debate. I thank everyone very much for contributing to what has been a genuinely very good-natured and consensual debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the UK contribution to international disaster relief.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those who inexplicably are not staying for the next debate, on train services between Telford and Birmingham, please leave quickly and quietly?
Train Services: Telford and Birmingham

4.26 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered train services between Telford and Birmingham.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is also a great privilege to be able to come to this place and raise the concerns of the residents I represent, and to have a Minister come and listen to them. In this place, as we have just seen, we often debate issues of great national and global importance, and sometimes we forget to focus on the issues that have the greatest impact on the day-to-day lives of those we serve.

Telford, my constituency, is a vibrant, thriving and rapidly growing new town set in the heart of rural Shropshire, and this year it is celebrating its 50th anniversary. It has a unique identity and a proud industrial heritage as the birthplace of the industrial revolution. It is a shining example of what a successful new town can be. When Telford was designed half a century ago, it was intended to be self-sufficient, with all services, shopping and jobs provided locally. At that time, people were moving to Telford to get out of Birmingham, to live a better quality of life. However, the design of Telford in that way has meant that in many ways we are now cut off and somewhat isolated. Fifty years on, that self-sufficient model is not a model for a successful business centre, which requires excellent connectivity by both road and rail in order to thrive.

Telford has become a significant population centre and a very important business centre in the heart of the west midlands. It has inward investment, enterprise, commerce, advanced manufacturing and all sorts of hi-tech and new businesses coming to the area. Unemployment has halved and apprenticeships have doubled since 2010. With that, we should be experiencing good transport connectivity and rail networks fit for our growing new town, but sadly that is not the case.

Despite being surrounded by a rural hinterland of gorgeous Shropshire countryside, Telford is only 27 miles west of Birmingham, so we should be perfectly positioned to be able to capitalise on that opportunity, yet it takes us 47 minutes to get from Telford to Birmingham by train. We have only two trains an hour, and they are spaced so that if we miss the one at eight minutes past the hour, we have to wait 45 minutes for the next train. The issue is not just the spacing. Once we are on the train, the service is slow. It is a stopping service. The train chugs along reluctantly, stopping at every little Shropshire village that it passes along the way, and often it has only two carriages, which will inevitably be full to bursting at peak times.

As Telford has grown, more and more people have chosen to come and build their lives there, and more and more people want to travel to Birmingham for both leisure and work, so overcrowding is all too common, with people often standing for the whole of the 47-minute journey.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Allan: I shall be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour.

Mark Pritchard: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the issues of the track and the capacity of the trains. Does she agree that, in addition, companies such as West Midlands Trains, which won the new franchise, need to look at stations—in particular, Albrighton and access to it, and Wellington, which has 750,000 passengers a year but where there is leaking at platform 1 and no toilet facilities outside opening hours? Some of those basic passenger experiences also need to be looked at—experiences on platforms as well as on the tracks and in the carriages.

Lucy Allan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. There is a great deal more work to be done and I feel that we have been somewhat neglected over the years in Telford and the surrounding areas. It is important that we address this now for the future of our area. That is why I have come to this place this afternoon.

The journey to Birmingham from London is one hour and 27 minutes or thereabouts, but trying to go on to Telford is a throwback to a completely different era. There is this slow, crowded stopping service, which takes 47 minutes, as I mentioned, and that is enough to move any commuter on to the road. The infrastructure investment has lagged behind our rapid population growth and our growth as a business centre. As you can imagine, Mr Hollobone, residents are regularly in contact with me to tell me about their struggles and their frustrations on a daily basis, so I want to give a voice to their experiences.

The train service between Telford and Birmingham simply does not meet the needs of a modern, thriving new town. In fact, Telford is the fastest growing new town in the country and the fastest growing town in the west midlands, yet we have had the same train service for as long as I and many others can remember, and it is not moving forward.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I have experienced exactly the same issues in Stoke-on-Trent with the services into Birmingham, and we are seeing the same amount of growth. Would my hon. Friend agree that, if integrated properly, HS2 provides a significant opportunity to take many of the rail services from locations such as Stoke-on-Trent off that route, freeing up more paths on the route through Wolverhampton into Birmingham?

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend raises an important point, because that part of the track around Wolverhampton is the reason we have these problems in Telford. I completely agree that if we can clear that track, we will have more opportunities for additional services on the line from Telford to Birmingham.

Five years ago the train service was just slow, irritating and inconvenient, as I have described. Now it is all those things, plus it is a real battle to even get on to the train during peak times. If Telford is to fulfil its true potential as an attractive place to live and work, we must have a 21st-century link to Britain’s second largest city. It is just on our doorstep, but we cannot get there. We must have good connections to the rest of the country, and Birmingham is a gateway to do just that. That is imperative for our success to continue.
Over a number of years there has been a long debate around electrification. It has been discussed over and over. It has now been kicked into the long grass for this particular section of the track. In some ways that really is not the problem. What really matters to people who use the service is reliable peak-time trains that commuters can use to easily travel those 27 miles to Birmingham. The recent proposal to take Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs jobs from Telford to Birmingham exposed the very real challenges that commuters face daily. A 47-minute stopping service, irregularly spaced and with overcrowded carriages, makes people think twice before accepting a job in Birmingham. That is no good for people’s income and no good for our economy. It is a lost opportunity. That is why connectivity is utterly essential to Telford’s future. We do not want to be just an afterthought.

In Telford, we make a significant contribution to the west midland’s economy and we have the potential to do so much more. I would say that we are the beating heart of Shropshire and the centre of gravity for the area, with new businesses choosing to locate in Telford and people choosing to move to Telford all the time. We are not just some sleepy county town on the way to Wales. We are a centre of innovation, enterprise and growth, but without the ability to easily get to Birmingham, we are cut off and it is holding us back.

Another aspect that I have not mentioned is trying to get back from Birmingham after a night out. That in itself is a massive struggle that puts people off going to Birmingham for the evening at all, because if the preceding train has just gone, they can be stranded at New Street station for up to an hour. Once on the train, it is back to the sluggish chugging along, stopping at every Shropshire village, and so on. That is not the 21st century. We should be able to go to Birmingham and enjoy a night out without thinking of the ordeal of getting back home.

I know that the Government are committed to improving rail services and delivering a rail service fit for the 21st century. We have had a change of provider in Telford—that happened last December—and the Minister will be glad to hear that we have experienced some improvements to our service, and many more are promised. We will have an additional train per hour with effect from December this year, and that is very welcome indeed. However, there is much more to do if our train service is to keep up with the needs of our town—as my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who is not now in his place, mentioned.

We need more carriages. We need at least one fast train per hour, missing out those little Shropshire villages, for which there is no demand at all—I never see anyone getting on and off at these little stops between Telford and Birmingham. We also need sensible spacing of trains running in any one hour, to avoid lengthy periods between trains. It seems almost thoughtless to have two trains an hour running with a very short space between them.

As I have mentioned, our train service has failed to keep pace with Telford’s development and growth. This is impacting on the everyday lives of ordinary people trying to go about their jobs and get to work. It inevitably impacts on the success of our town. One thing that I am absolutely delighted about—I am keen to raise this—is our fantastic new footbridge linking the station to the town centre. I am grateful to the Government for the £10 million of funding for this wonderful, new bridge, which will transform the gateway to Telford and really change the way people perceive it as they enter into our town. The construction of the bridge from the station is well under way. People’s experience of using the station will be totally transformed.

I know that the Minister has responsibility for roads, but I would be delighted if he could ask his colleague, the Minister with responsibility for rail, to find time in his diary to come to Telford and open our railway station footbridge later in the year. I urge the Minister and the train operators—both West Midlands Trains Ltd and Arriva Trains Wales—to please not forget about Telford. We are doing great things for the economy locally and nationally. We must have the connectivity to keep on doing what we are doing, to keep on bringing in jobs and to keep on growing the region.

When thousands of people’s everyday lives are impacted by small issues that could be changed, we have to think seriously about why we are not doing it. There are some recommendations I would make today to our train operators—I hope they are listening, as well as the Minister. We need to drop some of the stops along the route to Birmingham. We are a business centre and we need to be able to go faster. This service is not a tourist stopping service to admire the attractions of Shropshire; we are talking about a function of business, and we must have that there. We must have enough carriages, because we cannot have only two carriages that are constantly overflowing. It is perfectly obvious that having an extra carriage would make all the difference. We must also have sensible spacing, particularly with the new train per hour, which is due in December. Trains need to be spaced sensibly around the whole hour, so that they do not all come at once. We must ensure that we do not have that 47-minute journey with a 45-minute wait between services.

Telford is an exciting place to live. Without doubt, it is one of the most successful towns in the midlands, economically and in terms of quality of life. As we celebrate our 50th anniversary in Telford and look to our future, we must ensure that our rail services match our economic growth and our huge ambitions for the future. That is essential if we are to continue to be the shining success story of what a new town should be. I will be grateful to hear what the Minister has to say.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate may last until 4.56 pm. I call the Minister.

4.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Hollobone. It is a positive delight to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a delight to speak in a debate that falls 100 years after the granting of the vote to women and the successes of suffragism and the suffragettes, and 50 years after the founding of Telford as a new town. I can think of no better way of unifying those two ideas than in my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan).

Lucy Allan: I am absolutely delighted that the Minister has raised that point. I have not had the opportunity to put on record that a relative of mine called Janie Allan was a militant, socialist suffragette and was in Holloway,
where she was force-fed. It is thanks to her that so many of us are here today. I hope that you will forgive me, Mr Hollobone, for bringing that to a train debate.

Jesse Norman: I am honoured to be intervened on so early. I do not think I have ever been intervened on during the beginning of my introduction, but it was for such an honourable and honest cause. What a fantastic thing to say—I very much thank my hon. Friend for that.

It says more about my hon. Friend than I can that she has brought this debate at this juncture, and I congratulate her on it. It gives us an excellent opportunity to discuss rail services between Telford and Birmingham. She has built a formidable reputation as a vigorously campaigning and hard-working constituency MP on behalf of her local people, and it is easy to see why. I would not, judging by the gravamen of her speech, wish to live in one of those small villages that sit between Telford and Birmingham, but, with that small exception, her speech was very well made.

As the Chamber will know, I am responding on behalf of my colleague the Minister of State, Department for Transport, who is the rail Minister. Until very recently, he was steering the Space Industry Bill through the Commons on the Floor of the House, and he has therefore been unavoidably detained. I am sure that this is a debate that not merely colleagues and officials, but train operators, and West Midlands Trains in particular, are learning from and enjoying.

Let me pick up many of the themes that my hon. Friend has described. As she knows, and as she put well herself, the train came relatively late to Telford, because Telford itself was a new town. Since then, the town’s Central station has become one of the biggest success stories in the west midlands. Since opening in 1986, the station has grown beyond all expectations and now caters for something like 1 million passenger journeys every year. As my hon. Friend said, that has created a degree of growing pains; in some respects the station is, in the best sense—to the extent that these things can have a best sense—a victim of its own tremendous success. In fact, those numbers make the station busier than some of the region’s more established rail centres, including such storied names as Worcester Shrub Hill, Stratford-upon-Avon and Tamworth, to name but a few. It is a far cry from the days when the town’s rail needs were met by the likes of New Hadley Halt and Wellington station, which was once even renamed “Wellington-Telford West” to indicate that it served the neighbouring new town.

As my hon. Friend knows, on 10 December last year West Midlands Trains took over the operation of the West Midlands franchise from the previous incumbent, London Midland. The new company, whose responsibilities include operating both of the stations in her constituency, has committed to £1 billion of investment across the west midlands to deliver better journeys for all.

With her characteristic focus on the here and now, my hon. Friend has pointed out that the issue is not, at this point, electrification, but the bread-and-butter matters of capacity and service. I think that is widely recognised. The new franchise, which will run until 2026, will see passengers in the west midlands benefit from £700 million of investment in new and refurbished trains, including 400 brand-new carriages. That will increase the size of the fleet to 709 carriages from 563, and create space for an additional 85,000 passengers on rush-hour services, the majority of which will be in the west midlands.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) will be thrilled to hear that a further £60 million is to be spent on improving facilities at stations, including providing over 1,000 new car parking spaces, as well as more room for people to park—I am delighted to say this as the roads and cycling Minister—their bicycles. Every station in the franchise will also benefit from new information screens, more than 800 of which will be installed by spring 2021. Passengers will be able to see real-time journey information, including on train loading, so that they can work out where to board and what to do during any disruption, although I am sure that is a remote possibility. Passengers will also benefit from ambitious targets for the roll-out of smarter and more convenient forms of ticketing, which should be available on 50% of all passenger journeys by 2020 and 90% by the end of the franchise term.

Should delays and cancellations occur, and they inevitably do from time to time, passengers’ rights have also been strengthened. Compensation will now be available after delays of just 15 minutes or more, which is a marked improvement—of 50%, 100% or 200%, however it is counted—on the 30-minute threshold offered under the previous franchise. Eventually passengers will be able to make and receive compensation claims directly from an app, which will go hand in hand with the provision of free wi-fi on practically all trains.

The new franchise also plans to make great strides to break down the barriers to rail travel for those people who have restricted mobility. From 2020 the amount of notice required for passenger assistance will be halved to 12 hours, before falling to just four hours by 2021. By that date a trial of a turn-up-and-go service will also be undertaken. Other initiatives to recognise the railway as a community asset include an investment of £1.25 million to develop community rail initiatives, and a sustainability strategy to deliver a 49% reduction in carbon emissions and support the local supply chain.

As well as looking forward to better stations and more services, the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Telford will soon be able to enjoy more comfortable journeys on new trains. From 2020, 80 modern diesel carriages will be introduced to operate on services in and around Birmingham, including on the Telford line. In addition to offering a higher quality environment, these vehicles will have more seats than the carriages they are replacing, which should help to alleviate the rush-hour overcrowding that, as she mentioned, has resulted from the line’s growing popularity.

I have spoken so far about the franchise-wide improvements, but the line from Telford to Birmingham will also be transformed thanks to changes to the timetable, enhancements to station facilities and additional rolling stock. In December 2018, West Midlands Trains will create a regular all-day half-hourly service between Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury, calling at Telford. It will run from Monday to Saturday, and will complement the existing hourly service provided by the Wales and Borders franchisee, Arriva Trains Wales, making three trains per hour overall. I hope my hon. Friend will agree that that is a significant improvement, and it may go some way towards dealing with the dreadful situation she described of being stranded after an evening
on the town. At the same time, West Midlands Trains will introduce a regular hourly local service to Birmingham on Sundays, in place of the current irregular Wales and Borders service. Then, in May 2021, that will be increased to two local trains per hour, which when combined with the hourly long-distance service from Wales, will mean three trains an hour all week. All of that will be achieved while maintaining similar journey times to today.

A better service deserves a better station, and Telford Central station is set to benefit from a range of improvements over the next few years. By the summer of this year—again, I rejoice in this as the Minister concerned—a bike hire facility will be installed. This will allow locals and visitors alike to find out for themselves why the area is known as “the birthplace of industry” by taking a trip to the Ironbridge UNESCO world heritage site and its surroundings. This work will be complemented by an expansion in the number of cycle parking spaces at Telford Central, due to be completed in 2021, and the development of station travel plans for both Telford and Oakengates. Those are designed to help promote sustainable travel to and from the stations by bringing together initiatives into a co-ordinated package that is delivered through partnership between the rail industry, the local authority and other stakeholders. Car users will benefit from an expanded and modernised car park. One hundred new spaces are to be created, and an automatic number plate recognition system will be installed to make it easier for passengers to pay for their car parking.

My hon. Friend mentioned apprenticeships. She will be pleased to know that the new West Midlands franchise will create 900 new apprenticeships over its course, and that the ambition is that at least 20 of those engineering and driving apprentices—I hope that the engineering apprenticeships will, in part, be at the new university in Herefordshire—will be female.

Smarter payment solutions will not, however, be exclusive to the car park. New ticket machines equipped with smart ticket readers are to be installed at both Telford Central and Oakengates stations. That will complement the introduction of the other smart ticket products that I have already outlined.

We know that change has to meet passengers’ needs and that modernisation must reflect the reality of people’s lives. That is why, as part of improving the ticketing arrangements, we have listened to what passengers have asked for and are introducing flexible carnet products from 2020. These will enable passengers to purchase a set number of journeys, and then redeem them as and when required.

Another common area of passenger feedback relates to the upkeep and repair of stations. Telford Central and Oakengates will be subject to a service quality regime that is designed to drive up station and customer service standards. The regime will be linked to cash penalties for the franchisee, and poor performance will result in money having to be reinvested in improving the customer experience. The same is true for Wellington station, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin would be grateful to hear if he were here.

The service quality regime will be overseen by West Midlands Rail, a consortium of 16 local authorities from across the region that has been created to lead rail transformation locally. Through a novel partnership arrangement, my Department and West Midlands Rail will jointly manage the new franchise, with West Midlands Rail taking the lead for services across the region, including those provided in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin.

The benefits of that collective but local focus can be seen right now, as a scheme is being delivered at Telford Central to better connect the station to the town and to create step-free access to all station platforms. That scheme, funded by my Department and delivered by Telford and Wrekin Council, is an excellent example of how partnership working between central Government and local government can enhance the lives of local people. That Telford and Wrekin Council is a member of West Midlands Rail is further cause for optimism for the town and its rail users.

Rail users in my hon. Friend’s constituency have much to look forward to. In the next few years, they will enjoy better and more frequent services all week on more comfortable trains and from more pleasant stations. Their rights will be defended not only by the tireless efforts of my hon. Friend, but by West Midlands Rail, which, as a devolved body, will be responsible for delivering local leadership for local services. The west midlands deserves the best possible rail service, and that is what my Department, my ministerial colleagues and my hon. Friend are determined to provide.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered train services between Telford and Birmingham.

4.51 pm

Sitting suspended.
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered future eligibility for free school meals and the pupil premium.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. With the support of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George), I called this debate because of our serious concerns about the Department for Education’s consultation, “Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit”. Those concerns arose following my oral question on universal credit and free school meals to the new Secretary of State last week, when, unfortunately, he completely missed my point.

The Government are disregarding the concerns of many in this House and outside it that their actions will push more children into poverty. Labour Members know that poverty is not an inevitability, but a symptom of failure to harness political will, think innovatively and take bold steps forward. This whole issue encapsulates that neatly. In my contribution, I will focus on the concerns flagged up by the consultation’s proposals and discuss what should be done to mitigate those concerns and why.

In my letter to the consultation, I said that I am a huge supporter of rolling out hot and healthy universal free school meals for all children—I always have. That will be no surprise to hon. Members, who know that I have banged on about my support for wider access and the provision of free school meals for more than a decade now, and I will continue to do so until all children receive a hot and healthy meal in the dinner hall.

In the current transition to universal credit, all families claiming the new benefit are entitled to free school meals, which is great, but the Department’s consultation aims to roll forward that reform by rolling back one of its most progressive measures. By removing the universal entitlement to free school meals under universal credit and introducing a £7,400 threshold for eligibility for free school meals, the Government are forcibly creating a cliff edge that will be detrimental to families, especially children. That seems utterly ludicrous.

As the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), wrote when the White Paper on universal credit was published in 2010: “At its heart, Universal Credit is very simple and will ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay. Universal Credit will mean that people will be consistently, better off for each hour they work and every pound they earn.”

The Opposition do not disagree at all with the principles that he set out, but sadly, the reality has failed to live up to the promise made eight years ago. We all know lots of the reasons behind that, which ultimately led to him resigning, but that is a whole other story.

The proposals set out in the consultation are diametrically opposed to that 2010 vision and what it was meant to achieve, especially around making work pay. To give one example of how the proposal will be detrimental: someone with three children in their family who earns just below the £7,400 threshold is set to lose out on £1,200 in free school meals if they work only a few hours more or get a pay rise. The family’s annual wages would have to increase from £7,400 to almost £11,000 to make up for what they lost by rising above the eligibility cliff edge—a problem that would not occur under the working tax credit system because the legacy benefits system provides an offsetting income boost at the point that free school meals are withdrawn. Under universal credit, however, there is no equivalent mitigation.

Another example, provided to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak and me by the fabulous Dr Sam Royston of the Children’s Society, is that a single parent with no housing costs and one child would be £26 better off per week under the old working tax credit system than under universal credit. The Minister may think £26 per week a meagre amount, but for many outside this place it can determine whether or not they can eat or heat their home. The child of the single parent in Dr Royston’s example is not entitled to free school meals either under working tax credits or under the proposed universal credit rules, so it may seem that they will be no worse off, but the only way they can be so entitled is if the transitional plans are made permanent, so that all children in a family that claims universal credit receive free school meals.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will be aware—as I am, since I represent a rural area—that one of the problems with free school meals is how many parents will not claim them because of stigma. Does she agree that changing to universal credit will only make that worse?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes. One of my reasons for supporting universal free school meals is that the stigma would be removed. It was proved in the excellent school food plan commissioned under the former Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), that that was one of the benefits of universal free school meals. The poorest kids, who are entitled to them anyway, are the ones who benefit the most.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): As a teenager, I was entitled to free school meals, but because of the stigma I did not take them. I used to refuse to queue up for my token, so I went without, which resulted in my developing a very controlling relationship with food and a lot of problems at home. I totally support my hon. Friend’s proposal, because free school meals for all children will mean that they all get a healthy meal and the stigma will disappear.

Mrs Hodgson: I totally agree. The same system should apply for all children who are entitled to universal credit, although wider access is another debate.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I completely agree about the stigma; I raised the same point with the Minister the other day in the Chamber. However, does the hon. Lady agree that there is another way? Instead of enfranchising everybody, we could have an auto-enrolment scheme that was linked to the benefits system, rather than a system of people self-declaring as eligible.
Mrs Hodgson: I agree about auto-enrolment: parents should not have to apply. However, the point that I am trying to make is that any family eligible for universal credit should automatically get free school meals through auto-enrolment. If the cliff edge is brought in, it would be detrimental to that vision that we probably all share.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the more we spend on the administration costs of the proposed system, the less money will go towards the pupils? Having an easier system would mean we could spend more of the money on what it should be spent on: the meals that we want children to have.

Mrs Hodgson: I absolutely agree. Administering the cliff edge will mean huge costs. We should learn from the current system for free school meals for infants.

I am aware that many hon. Members wish to speak in the debate, so I had better get back to setting out my concerns. What we want to prevent is families avoiding pay rises or working more hours for fear that they will lose out. That is not making work pay, and it is not what the system was intended to do when it was set up. If the Minister and his Department, alongside the Department for Work and Pensions, were truly in favour of making work pay, they would at the very least have made provision to avoid that issue—even keeping the status quo would work. They have known about the problem for seven years; I have banged on about it for years, and so have my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and other hon. Members. Sadly, it seems that the Government are keen on power on without even considering the impact of their policies on a child’s life. It would be welcome if the Minister set out how he believes the threshold and its implications are consistent with the Government’s aim to make work pay.

Another concern about the consultation is the figure of 50,000 more children who we keep hearing will benefit from free school meals by 2022. On the surface, it is welcome that the Government have estimated that more children will be receiving free school meals under their plans, but it is deeply concerning that analysis by the Children’s Society has found that more than 1 million children living in poverty would miss out on a free school meal because of the cliff edge. In the consultation document, the Government say that 50,000 children will benefit by the end of the roll-out, when the transitional protections are at their capacity. Herein lies the crux of the problem: the document also states that 10% of children—113,000—will lose out on free school meal entitlement. That is because children will fall off once the transitional protections come to an end, as they move from primary school, where they will have the protection when it comes in, to secondary school, where their entitlement will end.

I would therefore welcome clarity from the Minister about how he will protect children who risk losing their free school meals when they move from one stage of their education to the next. If he cannot give us answers in this debate, that would be a shame, but I am aware that time will be an issue—I would be more than happy to take him up on his offer to meet me if he is still happy to do so. I am very grateful that he made that commitment.
receipt of a free school meal in the pilot areas on average two months ahead of their peers outside the pilot areas and 2% more children reaching their target levels in maths and English at key stage 1, while at key stage 2 the impact was between 3% and 5%. If we want to close the attainment gap, there is nothing better than to start by making sure that the kids are all fed.

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Lady says “there is nothing better”, but potentially there is: breakfast. All the studies show that disadvantaged children perform a lot better once they have had a breakfast, and in fact children in middle-class families and higher-earning families, where the parents are busy and going off to work, often suffer as well, because they are not getting that important breakfast, which is, after all, the most important meal of the day.

Mrs Hodgson: Absolutely—the hon. Lady will not be surprised to learn that I totally agree with what she just said. However, I do not see it as an either/or situation, as I want both those things; I want children to be getting their breakfasts and then getting their lunches. When there were the pilots for universal free school meals, lots of schools could manage to provide both, because even when there was an offer of universal free breakfasts, not all of the children had them; only about 18% to 20% of the children took up that offer. It is very affordable to provide such breakfasts and usually it is the children who really need them who take them, whether they are from busy working families or from poor families. It is a very good policy.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes—for the last time.

Alex Cunningham: I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree with me that instead of cutting back breakfast clubs we should be developing them. However, there is also the issue of “holiday hunger” throughout the summer period, the Christmas period, Easter and everything else, and we really should look to develop policies in that regard rather than cutting back.

Mrs Hodgson: Yes. My hon. Friend might not have realised what I was referring to before; it was to the private Member’s Bill promoted by our right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead on holiday meal provision, which the Minister has committed to running some pilots on. Hopefully, they will prove that point.

On the benefits of universal free school meals, I will just add that when they were piloted, the most marked academic improvements were among children from less affluent backgrounds. That is a very important point to make.

I think the Minister is a common-sense kind of guy; I have found that in my dealings with him in all-party groups that we have worked in together over the years. So I am sure that, on hearing the figures that I have cited, he will agree that the reason for all of this work is that children are more attentive and ready to learn, because they have a healthy meal in their tummies that is fuelling their learning.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Hodgson: I am just about to finish.

The proposals in the consultation would jeopardise all of that, because those children would have to go back to bringing in packed lunches and only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional requirements that our fabulous school food does now. It has been improved beyond recognition.

I will give way to the hon. Lady very quickly.

Helen Whately: I know that the hon. Lady is just coming to the end of her remarks, but I just wanted to pick her up on one thing. She is making compelling arguments for the benefits of free school meals and breakfasts. I think that many of us would support her in wanting to make sure that children are well fed at school. However, she has not touched on the costs of doing those things, the trade-offs, and the choices that might have to be made to ensure that a generous supply of free school meals is available.

Mrs Hodgson: The hon. Lady might not be aware, because I do not think that she was a Member at the time, but after the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath commissioned the school food plan, he agreed with all 17 of its recommendations. He put money to 16 of them straight away and the 17th one was for universal free school meals; he accepted the arguments for that recommendation and said he would provide money for it when it could be found. Money was found for universal infant free school meals, under the coalition agreement with Nick Clegg, and those meals were introduced.

The point has already been made; it has been proved. The money can be found, because universal free school meals more than pay for themselves, and the benefits that we get from them outweigh the initial costs, including the amount saved on administration because they are universal. There are a whole host of arguments around this issue, but in a sense I am detracting from what this debate is about, so I will conclude.

I hope that the Minister has been listening intently; in fact, I am sure he has, because he has looking at me and I have seen he is. I hope he will do the same with other speakers. The new system was presented as a way to eradicate poverty, but instead the introduction of the measure that we have been discussing could cement poverty in our society, and at worst there could even be a rise in poverty among “working poor” families. If that happens, we would go through all these changes for naught, and children would be just as badly off in the future—maybe even worse off—and that would be at the behest of the Government. I am sure that is not what they want, so I hope that the Minister will look at this issue seriously and perhaps think again, for the sake of the children out there who we are all here to support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I have to call the first of the Front-Bench speakers no later than 5.36 pm. Eight Members are seeking to catch my eye, one of whom had not informed the Speaker’s Office beforehand that they wished to speak in this debate. If we are going to get everyone in, I am afraid that there will have to be a short limit on speeches of two minutes and thirty seconds.
5.16 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this debate and for eloquently and forcefully putting across the reasons for it and the flaws in how things are processed.

I want to discuss this issue in context of my region. The Greater Manchester area has the highest rate of child poverty in the country. I have three concerns about the Government’s proposed changes to the eligibility criteria for free school meals. First, and from a regional perspective, the areas worst affected by child poverty stand to lose the most from the proposed changes. Places with among the highest rates of child poverty, such as my constituency of Manchester, Gorton, will have a high number of children who are no longer eligible for free school meals. The effects of this will need to be picked up by already-stretched local councils and charities.

Secondly, the Government are turning their back on the 10% of pupils from poor households who would not be eligible for free school meals under the proposed changes. In the city of Manchester, there are 5,000 children eligible for free school meals under universal credit who would not be eligible under the proposed criteria. Thirdly, the Government are undermining their own principle that universal credit should make work pay. In some cases, taking on additional work would mean families ending up on a lower overall income, instead of people being rewarded for working harder.

Changes to universal credit are already projected to push a million more children into poverty by 2022. We must not additionally take away the right for children in poverty to access free school meals.

5.18 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate. She is a very strong advocate for helping children in our schools, and although I do not agree with everything she said, I support the direction she is moving in.

One thing that we can agree on is that the legacy system is not fit for purpose. It has many peculiarities, one of the most perverse of which is that the children of those on working tax credits do not receive free school meals. That means that somebody working 16 hours a week on the national minimum wage might have a take-home pay of £120, but they might live next door to a family in which somebody is working 15 hours a week on the national minimum wage might have a take-home pay of £120, but they might live next door to a family in which somebody is working 15 hours a week on the minimum wage might have a take-home pay of £120, but they might live next door to a family in which somebody is working 15 hours a week on the national minimum wage might have a take-home pay of £120, but they might live next door to a family in which somebody is working 15 hours a week on the national minimum wage might have a take-home pay of £120, but they might live next door to a family in which somebody is working 15 hours a week on the national minimum wage might have a take-home pay of £120, but they might live next door to a family in which somebody is the Old Man of Hoy—there is a cliff edge in every direction. There is a cliff edge at the end of universal credit or when someone moves on to working tax credits or at £7,400. The line must be drawn somewhere, and it is best drawn where more children will be on free school meals after the reform than there were before. In the long term, there may be a technological solution, whereby every child has a charge card. That would get over the problem of stigma, as everyone would pay in the same way. No one would know how much money the state was putting in, and it could be tapered. We could create a genuine universal credit.

Finally, I very much respect the hon. Lady’s position, and I look forward to hearing from the Labour Front Bench whether the Opposition support it. If so, where will they find the £600 million that the Resolution Foundation has said the meals will cost, or the £6.2 billion that would be required to give everybody the pupil premium, because it is a passporting benefit? Given the fiscal responsibility rule, that would have to come from additional taxation. The millions watching on parliamentlive.tv deserve to know where that taxation will come from.

5.21 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has done great work on child poverty and school meals. I am proud to be standing here on the anniversary of women’s suffrage. This debate is on exactly the sort of issue that women were given the vote for and to stand in Parliament to speak on. The issue hits children most of all, but women primarily and in particular single parents.

I was shocked to read the consultation document, having worked on universal credit for many years. One of the best things about universal credit was the fact that all children on universal credit were entitled to a free school meal. I applaud the fact that the coalition Government legislated for that. It would be a backwards step to look to take that away and introduce a cliff edge at just £7,400 a year of earnings, which is equivalent to just 18 hours a week on the minimum wage. Under universal credit, someone loses 63% of everything they earn. If someone on a low wage is only getting 37% of what they earn back into their pocket and is losing free school meals for their children—those are worth on average £429 for one child and £858 for two children—that is a huge disincentive to work.

I urge the Minister to look into the work of the Children’s Society. It has calculated that a single parent with two children would need to earn £11,000—that is, £4,000 more—to overcome that cliff edge under universal credit. That is no incentive to work, and a million children in poverty will not gain the free school meals that they need. A family in poverty cannot afford to feed their children to the best nutritional standards, as they would want to do. A free school breakfast would help.

Michelle Donelan: I agree with the hon. Lady about those in poverty, but those moving from working tax benefits on to universal credit could be earning up to £40,000 as a household, if not more. Is it appropriate that we give those households free school meals, or is that a misuse of resource?

Ruth George: The vast majority of parents moving from tax credits on to...

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Stephen Lloyd.
Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I greatly appreciate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). The frustration with this issue is that the whole concept behind universal credit is about making work pay. It was defenestrated in 2015 by George Osborne removing the £3 billion and doing it per annum from the work allowance, so it does not make work pay an awful lot. There are lots of clunky bits within universal credit, which I have talked about ad nauseam and which just seem to get worse and worse, which is rather frustrating. Then there are free school meals, which are a tremendous success, yet the Government may well be laying a statutory instrument that will fundamentally not make work pay.

The estimated cost that parents will be paying for a child is £400 if their income is beyond the income floor of £7,400. Imagine I have an income of just over £7,500 and three children. That makes £1,200 before I even get out of bed. Does that make work pay? No, it does not. The rational decision by the parent or parents will be: “What’s the point? There’s no point me doing that extra bit of work and going over £7,500.” That is totally counterproductive.

Unusually for me, I ask the Minister on behalf of the Government to go swinging back to the Treasury and to say to his esteemed colleague, “Government, do nothing.” I know that there are various erroneous, scurrilous rumourings going around Parliament and Westminster these days that the Government are not doing an awful lot, but in this case I urge the Minister to do nothing at all. He should not introduce the statutory instrument. The Government should let all children who will be going on to universal credit receive free school meals. I know that would cost £500 million to £600 million, but under the old system things remained the same, because when people went beyond 16 hours the working tax credit made up the difference. I urge the Minister to go back to the Treasury and say, “Do nothing. Let all children on universal credit receive free school meals.”

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I, too, want to refer to the work incentive, because improving it was supposed to be the fundamental advantage of universal credit. That was set out fully and ably by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) from 2010 onwards. For example, the document “21st Century Welfare”, which was published in July 2010, states in chapter 2 that “someone at the National Minimum Wage would be less than £7 per week better off if they worked 16 extra hours...A system that produces this result cannot be right.”

We all agreed with the right hon. Gentleman about that, yet the universal credit system, which is supposed to remove all these problems, will introduce a benefit trap far worse than anything in the legacy system. There is nothing in the legacy system under which someone earning a few hours of extra work will end up hundreds of pounds worse off because they have lost their free school meals.

Alex Burghart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Timms: I do not think I can, given the time limit, but I want to comment on the point that the hon. Gentleman made in his speech. He suggested that the answer could be an electronic card system and the contribution to school meals could be tapered away with the universal credit taper. I made that proposal in the Welfare Reform Bill Committee on 13 June 2011, when I moved new clause 3. I was making exactly the point that a fixed-income threshold for entitlement to free school meals is disastrous for work incentives. There is some merit in his suggestion that that would be a long-term solution, but I suggested it seven years ago, which I am afraid is a reflection of the failure of Ministers. Seven years on, they have not come up with a solution to this very serious problem.

The difficulty is that universal credit was never seen as a whole-of-Government initiative. When the Government that many now on the Opposition Benches supported introduced tax credits, it was a whole-of-Government initiative. Gordon Brown made sure of that. Under this Government, universal credit is a matter for the DWP, so the Minister present no doubt feels that it is not for him to worry about work incentives in the social security system. However, he should be worried about this issue, and I hope he will change his policy.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing the debate.

This Government have presided over a total failure to address this country’s economic flaws, to the extent that food banks are now a major food supplier in Britain. Free school meal eligibility is linked to the pupil premium, which is a valuable source of school funding for the most deprived schoolchildren, so it would be a casualty of the proposal. The free school meal consultation, which would see the earnings threshold for free school meals eligibility lowered to £7,400 per year, is a result of a flaw in the design of universal credit. The legacy benefit system contained an in-built trigger for free school meal eligibility. All children whose families are on universal credit receive free school meals, so the Government are trying to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Has the Minister not considered that such a low threshold for free school meal eligibility is, in fact, a disincentive for parents to seek additional work? With school meals costing £437 per year, per child, undertaking an extra two hours of low-income work is not financially prudent for any parent. I urge the Minister to consider the human consequences of Government plans, in terms of physical and mental health and quality of life. Will he commit to maintaining free school meals eligibility for all children whose families are on universal credit?

Universal credit was a noble ambition, and Labour did not question the principle of it, but it has been executed so poorly that it has impoverished many people in the communities where it has been rolled out, to the extent that the use of food banks has risen by 50% six months on. It is a sad indictment of the Government that food poverty is having such a profound impact on children. In 2017, some food banks reported that more than 40% of their beneficiaries were children.
I point the Minister to the 2015 autumn statement, which committed the Government to maintaining pupil premium spending at current rates until 2020. Will he guarantee that spend, should this policy be implemented?

5.31 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, am proud of the work done by my north-east colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). This policy means that the Government expect families that are already struggling to find around £10 per week for each of their children to enjoy a school meal, or resort to cheap sandwiches and other rubbish to ensure that they are fed. I ask the Minister: which element of the universal credit payment will cover that cost, which runs to £800 for a family with two school-age children for a school year? No wonder we cannot find a charity that supports the policy. I ask the Minister whether the Government really think that successive Governments enhanced free school meal provision just for the fun of it. Do the Government truly believe that there was not strong evidence to back such a policy? Do they not understand that these changes will mean hungry children on their watch?

I am not one to be kindly towards the Government, who are responsible for the escalating number of children in poverty in the UK, but today I am prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps, as with many other policies related to children, the Government have just not understood the consequences of their proposals. They need to act now, before we have a hunger crisis in our schools. I know that the Minister will say that no child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?

This morning, I met with the British Association of Social Workers. Its new research shows that poverty can result in parents being judged unable to care for their children and seen to be neglecting them. That in turn can lead to more children ending up in care, and possibly even adopted, because there was insufficient food on the table. How, in the 21st century, can it be right that a child currently on free school meals will be taken off them, but it is about the future and the next group of children, whose parents are public sector workers—cleaners, car park attendants, shop workers and so on. All of them have seen little growth in their income for nearly 10 years. Does he not agree that it would be bizarre to have two children in the same class, one who is getting fed, and one who is not, despite their families having the same income?
I welcome the Minister and wish him well as he takes on his new role in the Department. Summing up, we have had excellent speeches from the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the hon. Members for Manchester, Gorton (Alf Dubs), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), for High Peak (Ruth George), for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin).

As probably the youngest Member currently in the Chamber, when I saw that the debate was on free school meals it conjured up images of the mince and tatties and the custard that we had at Milncroft Primary in Glasgow. I should declare an interest, as I am married to a teacher, so I have first-hand experience of my wife coming home and telling me about the importance of free school meals and breakfast clubs. I pay tribute to my colleague on Glasgow City Council, Councillor Norman MacLeod, who has passionately argued for free school meals, and I echo what the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said in that regard.

Before touching on a couple of things relating to Scotland—I know at this stage hon. Members normally groan, but unfortunately the third party summing-up rights mean that we have to take part in these debates, which is why I will try to keep my remarks brief—I will touch on three particular issues. The hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) made the point about money, and I think the same point was made by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). I took part in last night’s debate about the orders introduced by the Government, particularly on social security and pensions. In my time in the House I have already seen the Government pursue a benefits freeze, the 1% public sector pay cap, the barbaric rape clause and the medieval two-child policy. A number of hon. Members in today’s debate made the point that we should be looking after people on the lowest rungs of society, and the most vulnerable in society.

I am conscious of time, but I want to draw attention to the fact that in Scotland, with cross-party support, we have introduced legislation that enshrines a target for reducing child poverty by 2030. Would like to see we have introduced legislation that enshrines a target to the fact that in Scotland, with cross-party support, society, and the most vulnerable in society. Should be looking after people on the lowest rungs of

I say to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West to keep going on with this. It has been a good debate, but we need cross-party consensus. Today is the beginning of that, not the end.

5.39 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place in his new Department. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). She is a tireless campaigner as the chair of the all-party group on school food and she has shone a light for many years on this issue. She is also the first Sharon in the 100 years of women being elected to this place, so I congratulate her on that. Too. I heard her on Radio 4 a few weeks ago when she was campaigning on secondary ticketing. Unfortunately, the grammar school and private school-educated kids could not get around the fact they were talking to a Sharon. Anybody who was in the Chamber on Friday when she gave her personal testimony in the debate on the registration of stillborn children will know that I have heard nothing more powerful in this place for many years. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate.

I doubt that anyone would dispute the importance of a benefit as wholesome as school meals. As a former primary school teacher, I saw the difference between those kids who got a full school meal and those who brought the rubbish in the packs—the chocolate and the drinks. I actually saw the impact on the difference in attainment during the afternoon. Governments have worked—together with Jamie Oliver—to improve nutritional values in school meals. We know that the provision of free school meals helps to reduce health inequalities, focuses attention in the classroom and brings benefits to attainment. As I said, I have seen it in my own experience.

The Government cannot deny that 1 million children living in poverty in working families are on these benefits. Those both in and beyond this place have outlined the conundrum carefully. By setting a net earnings threshold of £7,400 per annum to determine eligibility for free school meals under universal credit, the Government are contradicting their own stated aim of universal credit, which is to make work pay. If a household is earning just under £7,400 and has the chance to earn slightly more money, the Government are presenting working families with a cliff edge. There are clear questions the Minister needs to answer.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that the example in the consultation document of a parent gaining free school meal eligibility is misleading? When they transfer from tax credits to universal credit, they will lose £1,600 a year. Those are not the children who should not be getting free school meals.

Mike Kane: I cannot agree more with my hon. Friend. We talked about cliff edges. What assessment has the Minister made of the cliff edge issues? In particular, how many children will be affected and how much will it cost families to make up the shortfall?

A second and connected issue has been flagged in the debate: the pupil premium. Pupil premium is additional funding targeted at raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. It is currently targeted at children registered as eligible for free school meals, looked-after children and children who have had a parent in the regular armed forces at any point since 2012. Since the introduction of universal infant free school meals, schools have been missing out on that vital additional resource, as parents do not need to register for free school meals, which is the basis on which pupil premium is calculated. For schools already experiencing real-terms cuts to their funding, that is a vital additional resource that they can ill afford to miss out on.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is time we broke the link between free school meals and the pupil premium and broadened the calculations for the pupil premium, so that it also includes social disadvantages such as bereavement, mental health problems, divorce and so on, which can affect attainment?

Mike Kane: We will broaden it out and should have more, not fewer, children on free school meals. That was clearly our policy in our manifesto in June.
Alex Burghart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Kane: I am not giving way to the hon. Gentleman, although I would say that only a former policy adviser would frame a question in the way that he did.

We know that for disadvantaged pupils having a full belly helps them perform. We had a fully costed manifesto at the general election, unlike the Conservative party, which—on its insult and injury tour—was taking away free school meals and making sure that it had no costed proposals for it. Labour would reintroduce free school meals as a universal benefit across the system so that we get proper learning and attainment in our school system. We cannot afford not to do it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will the Minister conclude his remarks no later than 5.54 pm, so that Sharon Hodgson has two minutes to sum up the debate? I call the Minister.

5.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this important debate. I thank all colleagues who have spoken today, including the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the hon. Members for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). I worked closely with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West on the all-party parliamentary group on water safety and drowning prevention. I hope we can continue to work closely today. May I also say how moved I was by her heartfelt speech in the debate on the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill last week? It really moved the whole House, and people beyond.

Today’s debate is timely, as we have considered the responses to our public consultation on changing the entitlement criteria for free school meals and the early years pupil premium. I will be publishing the Government response shortly. It is all part of the drive to ensure every child has the opportunity to make the most of their life, no matter where they live or their background.

Let me start by restating the importance this Government attached to providing hot, nutritious free school meals to the most disadvantaged children. We are committed to continuing to provide those meals to families in need. Last year, about 1.1 million disadvantaged children in our communities were eligible for and were claiming a hot free meal, which saves families around £400 per year, as we have already heard today.

Under the existing benefits-based criteria, children whose parents or guardians receive one or more of the qualifying benefits, such as income support, jobseeker’s allowance and child tax credits, can make a claim to a school and are entitled to receive a hot meal. However, the simplification of the welfare system through the introduction of universal credit means that a number of the benefits that currently entitle families to free school meals will cease to exist.

To ensure that any families moving on to universal credit in the early stages of roll-out in the pilot areas, which we have heard much about today, did not lose out on their entitlement in 2013 universal credit was added temporarily to the list of qualifying benefits for free school meals pending the introduction of the eligibility criteria. The same temporary measure was introduced for the early years pupil premium when that additional funding for disadvantaged three and four-year-olds was first introduced in 2015, and for the free early years entitlement for two-year-olds, which my Department has consulted on separately. As planned, we now need to replace the temporary measure with clear eligibility criteria under universal credit as its national roll-out accelerates.

In setting the new criteria we have followed five clear principles. First, our approach must protect children from a sudden loss of a hot meal as a result of the changes. Secondly, our approach must be fair in how it treats children and families, and target our support most effectively to those on very low incomes. Thirdly, it must enable more children to benefit from these entitlements. Fourthly, it should be as straightforward as possible, both for parents to understand and for schools to deliver. Last, but by no means least, it must be consistent with the approach the Government have taken to determining eligibility for other passported benefits as universal credit is rolled out.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have a lot to say. Forgive me—I will try to address some of the issues that hon. Members have brought up in the debate. I will make some headway and see where we are on time.

Based on those principles, the proposal we have consulted on is to introduce an earnings threshold for free school meals and the early years pupil premium of £7,400. That is equivalent, depending on a family’s circumstances, to an income of £18,000 to £24,000, once benefits are taken into account. We will publish our response to the consultation shortly. I will briefly set out our thinking on the proposals in more detail.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me just set out the thinking, and then I will address some of the issues that colleagues raised.

First, to ensure our proposals do not result in any child losing out on a hot meal from one day to the next as a result of these changes, we propose to offer generous protections. We propose to protect the status of every child currently eligible for free school meals at the point at which the threshold is introduced, and every child who gains eligibility under the new arrangements during the roll-out of universal credit until the end of the roll-out. Following that period, we will protect all pupils who were protected and are still of school age until the end of their phase of education—for example, primary or secondary school.

Those protections will apply to those on universal credit and the legacy benefits that qualify a family for free school meals. We are not proposing to make any changes for those eligible for free school meals because...
they are in receipt of asylum support or pensions credits. Those households will therefore remain entitled to free school meals for a long as they retain those benefits.

**Alex Cunningham:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Let me make some progress. I want to share a lot of information with colleagues.

The proposals will not affect the criteria for universal infant free school meals, which will continue to be available to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2, regardless of income. I am sure the hon. Member for North East Edinburgh (Mr Alex Rowley) will want to do that, but he has got about a minute left, because Sharon Hodgson has to sum up at the end of the debate.

Once roll-out of universal credit is complete, we will move to an earnings-based system, similar to the one introduced in Scotland. Any household earning below that earnings threshold and claiming universal credit will be entitled to claim free school meals for their children. We estimate that, as a result of the threshold, by 2022 about 50,000 more—not fewer—children will benefit from a free school meal, compared with the previous benefits system. That means we will be targeting our support more effectively towards low-income families and the most disadvantaged children.

It is only right that we set a threshold and do not allow every family on universal credit to be eligible. Let me explain why. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) said, some families can earn more than £40,000 a year and still receive a small amount of universal credit. I think that is a good thing, because it ensures that they are incentivised to continue to work. Although it is right that those families receive some universal credit, free school meals should continue, in my and many people’s opinion, to be targeted at the most disadvantaged families and those on much lower incomes.

**Stephen Timms:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Let me share this with hon. Members. If we do not set new criteria, the effect would be that about half of all school-age children would be eligible for free school meals. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar said, the additional cost would be £600 million for free school meals, or £6.2 billion if we include the pupil premium, which follows that. In contrast, about 14% of children are eligible for free school meals today. That would not be a good deal for the taxpayer, in my opinion, and nor would it be targeting public funding at those in the most need. We have to remember that we want to target money at the frontline of teaching in our schools.

**Steph Henry:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I am just going to address some of the issues colleagues talked about.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. The Minister might want to do that, but he has got about a minute left, because Sharon Hodgson has to sum up at the end of the debate.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Fair enough. I will write to colleagues about the issues I do not address.

The one issue I want to address, because it was picked up by many colleagues, is the cliff edge. First, universal credit removes the major cliff edges in the legacy system, such as 16 hours, so we are moving to a system that is better overall in that respect.

Secondly, the protections we outlined during the roll-out period will ensure that no child loses out on eligibility until after the end of universal credit roll-out. If their parents move over the income threshold, they will continue to be eligible. In the longer term, however, we need to set a threshold to ensure our support is targeted at those who need it most.

Let me pick up the point about the Labour manifesto, which the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) mentioned. The Labour manifesto contained a commitment to free school meals for primary school pupils and said that it will be paid for by a VAT rise on private schools. That is illegal until we leave the European Union. Universal free school meals, which the hon. Gentleman is suggesting now, requires a much bigger number—up to £6.2 billion—so I would like to hear from Labour where that massive increase will come from. It must come from massive tax rises. I think I shall end there, Mr Hollobone.

**Mrs Hodgson:** I thank the Minister for leaving me time to make some closing remarks.

This has been an excellent debate, although in my opinion it was far too short—it was over-subscribed, which is a good thing, but in the time allocated we obviously had too many speakers. I encourage my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) to seek a Backbench Business debate, as she was unable to set out fully her expert knowledge in this area. Indeed, all my hon. Friends had to curtail their speeches.

I am very happy that the Minister agreed to meet me—as I think he did—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I did.

**Mrs Hodgson:** Excellent. Will the Minister also extend that invitation to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, who as he knows is a member of the Work and Pensions Committee? She has considerable expertise in the area.

I again encourage the Minister to read the school food plan—in particular, chapter 11, on the benefits of free school meals. The School Food Plan Alliance would happily meet him and become his new best friends if he wanted to take them up on that.

The cliff edge needs addressing—it is far too low. If there needs to be a cliff edge for all the reasons the Minister set out, it needs to be substantially higher: £7,400 is too low.

**Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).**
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 February 2018

[Mike Gapes in the Chair]

European Free Trade Association

9.30 am

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the European Free Trade Association.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and to see so many colleagues from across the House here so early on a Wednesday morning, when there are so many Select Committees and other things going on.

We all know that this country voted to leave the European Union, and we accept that result. However, what that referendum did not say was how we should leave the European Union. That is what today’s debate is about. One of the great myths of that referendum was that this country also voted to leave the single market and the customs union. It did not. Leaving the European Union was the only option on the ballot paper. How we leave the European Union is the most difficult challenge facing this country, and it is up to us, the Parliament of this country, to decide how we do it.

I think both sides of the House agree that we need an exit and a deal that allow us to trade freely with our former partners and to sign new free trade agreements, and that provide a level of economic certainty to businesses and economic and security certainty to our citizens. I want to discuss an option I think should have wide appeal across the whole House—indeed, it was consistently supported by Brexiteers prior to and during the referendum debate.

There are a number of misconceptions about the European Free Trade Association that need to be addressed. Those misconceptions, I say frankly to those on my Front Bench, were repeated by one Minister last week. It was not the Minister who is answering the debate, but the level of misconception in evidence was concerning.

Crucially, EFTA membership gives the opportunity to have, but does not automatically entail, membership of the single market. It does not envisage political integration. It is economically motivated. EFTA does not issue legislation or establish a customs union, and decisions are made by unanimity.

If we examine EFTA, there are three distinct benefits to the UK as we leave the European Union. It brings significant free trade benefits. On joining EFTA, we would automatically become part of the free trade area between the current EFTA four—Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Iceland—which covers trade in most goods and services and eliminates tariff barriers. In addition, we would be able to benefit from the free trade agreements they have already signed with third countries.

We should not underestimate that; EFTA has 27 free trade agreements covering 38 countries and 900 million customers.

In text and context, many of those agreements are more modern than some of the deals the EU is signing with third countries now. Some of the analysis, certainly around services, would suggest that some of the free trade agreements being signed by EFTA and some of its existing free trade agreements are a much better fit for the UK economy than some of the EU’s, and are more comprehensive. For example, EFTA has a free trade agreement with Singapore and Hong Kong—two incredibly important markets for the United Kingdom, and areas without a completed EU deal.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Did he see the recent coverage in The Daily Telegraph noting that South Korea, and possibly other nations with which we have trade deals through the EU, would be looking to use our exit to potentially renegotiate the terms? Does he agree that, were we in EFTA, it would surely be in our favour that EFTA has trade deals with those countries, which would make the process far simpler for us?

Stephen Hammond: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I want to make a point in a moment about some of the Government’s ambitions regarding their Trade Bill.

Joining EFTA would be a significant help when it comes to making up for the loss of EU free trade agreements. It would demonstrate to the world that the United Kingdom is not leaving Europe as it leaves the EU, and it would highlight our commitment to global trade. Joining EFTA does not in any way stop the Government’s plan to negotiate a deep and special bespoke arrangement with the EU. Indeed, if that is the Government’s ambition and they wish to achieve it, they should consider joining EFTA, because it would greatly assist that goal by framing it within an institutional set-up that the EU is familiar with.

The negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement show how difficult and time-consuming a UK-EU deal could be. CETA took seven years. It was the most ambitious EU free trade agreement so far negotiated, and the Government’s stated ambition is to go some way beyond it. The chances that they will be able to fulfil that ambition without a framework that the EU is familiar with strikes me as laudable but potentially difficult to achieve.

The EFTA court, the surveillance authority, the council and secretariat are all institutions understood and trusted by the EU, with well-established systems for information access and consultation. They can be used as part of any future UK-EU deal, to strengthen our commitment and avoid creating new institutions.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As a fellow London MP, I am sure the hon. Gentleman receives numerous representations from constituents on EU citizens and financial passporting rights. Those people probably think the best course of action would be not to leave at all. Since that is not realistic, will he do all he can to exert pressure on the high command of his party and his namesake the Chancellor—sadly, he is not in the high command anymore—to ensure we have a pragmatic, not a purist Brexit? That way, if the arrangements are ready-made, some of the bumps can be avoided.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) rose—

Stephen Hammond: I see the hon. Gentleman also wishes to intervene. If he does so at this stage, maybe I could answer both points.
Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and he is making a powerful speech. Is it not the case that the European economic area option ticks many of the leave boxes—no European Court of Justice jurisdiction, the ability to control the inward flow of immigration and the ability to strike trade deals with third countries—but also delivers the certainty that business is so desperately calling out for, because it is a well-established, well-understood agreement that has existed since 1993, but with no ever closer union built into it? Is it not by definition the form of Brexit that ticks the boxes in line with what the vast majority—we might call it the silent majority—of the British people want in this debate?

Stephen Hammond: In response to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), it is, of course, not my decision who is in the high command, but I understand her sentiments. I absolutely hear her point about financial services. That is why I was very pleased to see the Government taking the initiative and offering unilateral passporting to financial services. Of course, that will work to the greater benefit only if we are able to ensure that the European Union agrees the terms as well, but it was a good start. I wholeheartedly agree with her that the Government’s commitment on EU citizens must be made real and be part of the deal.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) is absolutely right. In terms of my hon. Friends who are Brexiteers—a few of them are in the Chamber today—I was discussing with one of them last night that the EFTA arrangements are something we can build a consensus around in this country. That is a sensible option, suiting both sides of the argument, and I would welcome any of the pragmatic leavers, including a number who advanced this case during the referendum, joining the cause and arguing for EFTA.

John Stevenson: (Carlisle) (Con): This is a really important debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing it. I completely agree with his point that EFTA is understood by all parties; that is one of its great strengths. Does he agree that its true strength, and the one that could be the basis for our negotiations and unite all parts of the debate, is the fact that it has great flexibility within it?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it has great flexibility. That is why I am putting it forward. There is not only one option. I had a chunk in my speech about what one colleague said in response to the question last week from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), which cited the Switzerland option. Of course, that still allows for bilateral, and some of those are still available, but there is a panoply of options within the EFTA arrangements.

There is some misconception about whether we would be welcomed back into EFTA, and I make the point that it is not only a flexible arrangement but one we would be welcomed back into.

Dame Caroline Spelman: (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. Is it not the case with EFTA that it does not have the pooling of sovereignty that is currently a big issue in our relationship with the European Union? Most importantly, it affords the flexibility of excluding agriculture and fisheries. We all know that the CAP does not fit well with our large farm structures and that the common fisheries policy has proved very contentious. Those two important industries would benefit from greater flexibility.

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend is completely right. I am grateful to her for making that point, because such points need to be heard loud and clear so that the misconceptions can be fought off.

Peter Grant: (Glenrothes) (SNP): I was a bit concerned when the hon. Gentleman referred to pragmatic Brexiteers and pointed at me; I may be pragmatic, but I would certainly not call myself a Brexiteer. I am interested in his suggestion that the UK would be welcomed into EFTA. Can he give us his basis for that? Three expert witnesses appeared before the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday—I understand three more will appear today—and all of them thought it extremely unlikely that the four EFTA members would want the UK to join, partly because the UK’s population is about four times bigger than the current total population of EFTA, and there would be significant concerns about upsetting the balance of EFTA. What indications has he had from the four Governments of the current EFTA countries that they wait with open arms to welcome the United Kingdom in?

Stephen Hammond: I apologise if I, with a sweeping hand gesture, put the hon. Gentleman into the Brexit camp, which he does not wish to be in; that was certainly not my intention. I had lunch with the president of the EFTA court, and I had lunch with the ambassador to the United Kingdom of one of those countries yesterday, but let me quote the Norwegian ambassador to the EU: “We would maintain an open-minded stance in the event of an application for EFTA membership. Overall, it is in Norway’s interest to maintain as close trade policy cooperation with the UK as possible.”

There is a lot of scaremongering about this point, yet it is clear from speaking to any of the ambassadors that the reality is that they would welcome our application.

Kevin Hollinrake: (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he propose EFTA membership as a transitional or a permanent state?

Stephen Hammond: I certainly see EFTA more as a potentially permanent state, rather than transitional. I know a number of my Brexiteer friends would probably see it as more of a transitional arrangement, but I see it as potentially long term, partly because of the point I have been making—that membership in no way undermines the Government’s ambition to secure a long-term, bespoke deal with the European Union. There is nothing within the EFTA structure that would prevent that. Given that our ambition is to be global Britain, we should take every opportunity we can to be so, and EFTA will fulfill those ambitions and objectives.

Jeremy Lefroy: (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is, as I think he alluded to, a cultural element to this as well? The UK is making it quite clear...
that, while we may be leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe. This would send an absolutely clear statement of that, and that we are still very much European and very much committed to our friends and neighbours in Europe.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend and I must be of the same mind, or he must have read or have had foresight of my speech. I was going to make the same point in a few moments’ time, but given he has made it for me, I shall cut my speech down. He is, of course, absolutely correct.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting and strong case for EFTA and the EEA. Does he agree that there is a fundamental issue at stake: that the kind of potential end state he talks about, and indeed many of the others we have debated, show that there are many options for how we leave the EU? There is not just one way. That is the real issue at stake. Unfortunately, there are some in this place who would like to close the debate down and say there is only one alternative and no others. In fact, there are many ways in which we could go forward, and it is up to us as a country and as a Parliament to choose.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman knows that I do not always agree with him, but he is absolutely right on this matter. That is why it is important that there is a consensus from us, as a Parliament, when speaking to the British people, pointing out that there are a range of options. We should not close any of them down as we look for the best solution for this country.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is implicit in what my hon. Friend says that he is against our remaining in a customs union. Switzerland, which is in EFTA, is outside a customs union and has the freedoms that go with that. Do I take it from my hon. Friend’s speech that he accepts that we should leave the customs union?

Stephen Hammond: First of all, nothing in EFTA implies a customs union; there is no customs union with EFTA. That myth is being perpetrated. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Switzerland is not in a customs union, and nor are any of the other EFTA members. I accept that we are likely to leave the customs union, but as he will know, it is the Government’s stated policy, in the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House and Florence speeches, that the possibility of a customs union is left open. Nothing has changed in terms of Government policy, so I am entirely in line with Government policy on that.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): On that point, it is also clear that the first-stage agreement that we reached in December, concerning the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, must imply the maintenance of a form of customs union. What form that might take is clearly open to some level of debate, but as my hon. Friend may agree, it is quite explicit that it must follow that there is regulatory alignment to prevent the need for customs checks.

Stephen Hammond: As ever, my right hon. and learned Friend makes the point rather better than I can. It is absolutely clear that that is implicit and, based on the evidence we heard in the Treasury Committee, explicit in what the Government signed or agreed to at the end of phase 1 of the negotiations in December.

EFTA provides a great deal of flexibility, as we have explored in a number of interventions. It keeps open the option of joining the EEA agreement, which I think would be the right thing to do. However, it must be right that, as we leave the EU, we keep our options open. I say to the Minister in all sincerity that there is a lack of clarity over exactly what type of deal the Government want. We talked about CETA and beyond, and as I said a moment ago, CETA is the most advanced trade agreement that the EU has yet signed with a third country. I understand that the Government want to go beyond that, but the clock is ticking, and in trying to spend a huge amount of time carving out a middle ground between CETA and the EEA, the chances are that we may end up with nothing at all, or with something well below the Government’s ambitions.

It seems to me that an EFTA-style EEA relationship—the Norway option—could be achieved rapidly and will go much further than CETA goes at the moment. That is a route we could pursue for the UK’s best interest, and it must not be allowed to be dismissed without proper analysis and consideration.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. First, with regard to CETA, one reason why that kind of relationship would not be appropriate for the UK is that CETA substantially covers goods, whereas 80% of our economy is services. Secondly, as he may come on to, one of the objections raised to our being part of EFTA, and using that as a way of accessing and being part of the EEA, is that we would be a rule receiver as opposed to a rule maker. Does he agree that it is wrong to say that EEA and EFTA members have no influence on the rules that apply? Does he also agree that if we want to access the single market, we will have to comply with its rules, and that we are more likely to be able to frame those rules if we are part of the EEA, through EFTA, than if we are sitting outside and simply accessing the single market through a free trade agreement?

Stephen Hammond: I of course agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am about to make exactly those points, because it is important that they are made loud and clear. As he will know and will have observed, I have spent a lot of time in the Chamber over the last two years making the case for services, which is one of our biggest tax generators. The public services that we all enjoy will not be able to be funded in the same way if we do not protect those services. As he will have wanted to point out, the EFTA arrangement covers services in many cases, whereas CETA, for instance, does not. That is a clear issue that the Government will have to confront.

The EFTA-EEA framework is motivated purely by the economy and not the pursuit of a political objective such as ever closer union. It is crucial that people remember that. The EEA would give the UK the same access to the single market as it has now for most goods and services. It is an off-the-shelf, already tested model that would provide businesses and our citizens with the most certainty that we can give them as we leave the EU. Yes, we would be subject to EEA regulation, but as
my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) pointed out, it does not cover the controversial common agricultural and common fisheries policies or justice and home affairs. From the outset—to allay the concerns of some of my hon. Friends—we would have control of those policy areas.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Hammond: I will just finish the point, because it is relevant to what the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) said. He is of course right: regardless of any deal with the EU that we choose to do, domestic businesses hoping to trade with the EU and the rest of the world will have to comply with what are often called laws but in reality are trading standards, and most of those are international trading standards, so there would be no change there.

Daniel Zeichner: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a further advantage of the EEA-EFTA arrangements is access to EU programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus, which is of crucial importance to science and research and the universities sector?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has clearly read the EFTA arrangements correctly. I concur with him.

Kevin Hollinrake: Can my hon. Friend also confirm that EFTA/EEA does not cover taxation, so we would have an independent VAT policy, for example, if we joined EFTA/EEA?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend has clearly also read the EFTA agreement and arrangements, and he is of course correct. There is no principle of direct effect with EEA-EFTA membership. As he has pointed out, that means that all laws must be approved by domestic legislatures. The UK would participate in drawing up proposed EEA legislation by serving on relevant committees. That is more of an input than is currently planned by the proposed EEA legislation by serving on relevant committees. That is more of an input than is currently planned by the Government for their transition or implementation period—call it what you will. And certainly EFTA would have more of an influence collectively over the process with the United Kingdom as a member. We would regain our seats on global regulatory standard-setting organisations, on which much of EEA law is based, and ultimately we would retain a right of reservation.

This would all be supervised by the EFTA Surveillance Authority and the EFTA court, not the EU institutions. That would preserve for the Government the red line of avoiding ECJ jurisdiction.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent speech. I am sorry that I cannot stay for the full duration of what I anticipate will be an equally excellent debate. Has he explored whether it is possible for any arrangement that we come to with the European Union by way of a free trade agreement to be in effect docked? If we join EFTA, it could be docked in EFTA and therefore the EFTA court could have some role in relation to that agreement, which, again, gets away from any of the concerns that many right hon. and hon. Members have about the ECJ.

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend is of course a lawyer and I am not, but I have had conversations with the president of the EFTA court, Mr Baudenbacher, and he would agree that her interpretation is correct and what she describes would be possible. That is only one opinion, but it is that of the president of the EFTA court and therefore it clearly carries some weight and some merit.

The EFTA court has made divergent decisions from the ECJ on numerous occasions. In fact, because the EFTA court deals with cases more quickly, it often hears the novel cases first, and in some cases the ECJ follows the EFTA court. The EFTA court’s rulings are only advisory domestically, so it cannot overrule our sovereign court, the Supreme Court. Again, the point is that we would be heavily involved in influencing.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. Does he agree that one reason why many people voted to leave the European Union was that they wanted the UK to take back control? He has just brought up the very important word “sovereignty”, which for many people in the debate is at the heart of why they voted the way they did in June 2016; many people wanted to go back. Of course, the UK was a founding member of EFTA in 1960, so does he agree that the EFTA-EEA arrangement would meet the test of looking back to a day when we were happy with our relationship with the European Union and, of course, the UK would take back control?

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, is right. One great virtue of what we are talking about today is that we are looking at where the UK is at its best, in that we are looking at the economics rather than becoming obsessed with ideology about some of the political points. This proposal solves many of the legal arguments and gives economic certainty to businesses and citizens, which is clearly what the House wants.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, and I thank him for his generosity in taking so many interventions. Can he clarify that his position is to join EFTA in order to remain or be part of the EEA, or does he contemplate being part of EFTA without EEA membership?

Stephen Hammond: One point that I am making is that there is a range of options for us as a Government and a country to consider. Personally, I would argue for the EFTA-EEA arrangement, which I think gives us a huge number of advantages. It gives some certainty to British business. It allows us to do what the Government want to do in having a bespoke EU-UK deal and would allow that to be negotiated in a timely way. It would give us advantages in relation to free trade. We will not be in the customs union. If we chose to do so, we could establish “a” customs union. It seems to me that the EFTA-EEA arrangement is absolutely a good place for the United Kingdom to start as we leave the EU.
Whether that is the choice of the House, if it comes to be discussed on the Floor of the House of Commons, is another matter. My point is that there is a range of options. Personally, I will argue for the EFTA-EEA arrangement; I think that is the best arrangement.

Let me deal with the point that the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) may have wished to come on to—I am getting close to the end of my remarks, Mr Gapes, but you will have noticed that I have taken a fair number of interventions so that colleagues can be heard.

Understandably, free movement of people will be a concern for many, notwithstanding the fact that EU migrants are net contributors to our economy and that the last set of figures available—official statistics—showed that net EU immigration was down to about 9,000 a year. It is true that, under protocol 15 and articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement, EFTA states can suspend free movement of people on a reciprocal basis. It is important to remember that. Some will say that that is only theoretical, but it is important to remember that the European Commission agreed, during the pre-referendum negotiation, that the UK would be justified in applying the proposed emergency brake for similar reasons. Therefore, the protections enshrined in articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement would undoubtedly apply should we choose to join EFTA, because the precedent has already been set.

As for EU budget contributions, which would be another concern, they would of course be subject to negotiation, and we have already conceded the concept of paying for access if we deem that to be in our interest. The EFTA-EEA countries make a financial contribution to the EU in two ways. They contribute, first, towards European cohesion efforts and, secondly, towards the programmes in which they participate. The House of Commons Library has been frequently quoted by hon. Members on both sides of the House to justify their position, so I would guide people to the Library’s estimate that if the UK were to join the EFTA-EEA arrangement, the contributions to the EU would be 25% less than any contribution that we make now or would make during any transition period.

The concern has been expressed that the current EFTA members might have reservations about one of the big G8 economies joining. However, as I said in response to an intervention, the indications that I have had, from quite powerful authorities, are that we would be welcome in EFTA. It would be a chance for EFTA to be renewed and revitalised, with better prospects and new aspirations for arrangements with other countries. The argument that the EU is trying to tell Norway not to move forward—as we have seen from what the Norwegian ambassador to the EU has said—may be a bit of a game and role play, but the reality is that the United Kingdom would be welcomed back into EFTA.

I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government keep open the option of re-joining EFTA. I see no reason why it would not fulfil the Government’s ambition. It provides the Government with the flexibility they say they require—and I agree—in negotiating to get the best deal for Britain, but I remind hon. Members that there is nothing in EFTA membership that seems to go against any of the plans the Government have set out so far.

Finally, in a national crisis—and this is a national crisis—the British political class has always had the ability to put aside ideology, reach a national consensus and act in the national interest. Surely that is in the ability of this generation’s political class. We must be able to stand up and show that we can match our forefathers. We should be seeking to build that national consensus and achieve the best outcome for Britain. It is abundantly clear to me that there is no model that will satisfy all sections of the British public. I believe—I have said this many times—a no-deal scenario would be bad for our economy. However, this approach would fulfil the result of the referendum. It would satisfy a large—I think overwhelming—majority of the British public and perhaps, importantly, this House of Commons, and go a long way to healing the divisions that were there. I recognise that EFTA is not a universal panacea, nor does it have all the benefits of membership of the single market and the customs union, but I believe, and I hope this whole House believes, that Britain’s negotiating position and its economic position post-Brexit will be improved by joining EFTA.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Before I call Back Benchers, I would like to make clear that I have to call the Front Benchers at 10.30 am. We have very limited time if all three Front Benchers are to get their full time and we are to give Mr Hammond time to make a brief comment at the end. I implore you to be brief, minimise your interventions, and if you have already intervened, please do not intervene again if you can avoid it. Hopefully, I will be able to call all those who are indicating they wish to speak.

10.2 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Gapes. We normally sit side by side on the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, so the roles are slightly changed this morning. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) for bringing this timely debate to the Chamber.

I say to the Government, at this time of national crisis and debate, it should not really be for Back-Bench Members of Parliament to have to bring debates to Westminster Hall on so critical a matter. If it is about taking back control, Parliament should be debating this every single day of every single week, so that the public can have a real view about where we are heading as a country in exiting the European Union. We are clearly no longer in a debate about staying in the EU; instead, we are talking about the least worst option when we leave.

The hon. Gentleman’s arguments clearly demonstrate that EFTA is one of the options the Government could choose to ensure we have the least worse exit from the EU. Whether it is leaked, not leaked, written, not published or whatever, the Government’s analysis shows that this is the least worse option, so why would they not take it? I have consistently said in the main Chamber, in Westminster Hall, and indeed in newspaper articles, that whether one agrees with these arguments or not, the fact that the Government have taken them off the table shows that their direction is towards a place that will fundamentally
[Ian Murray]

damage the UK economy for generations to come. It is also clear to anyone who follows this debate in any kind of detail that the goals, aims and objectives the Government have set themselves when leaving the European Union are completely and utterly incompatible—incoherent—with the red lines they have set themselves.

A trade deal with the European Union. Maintaining tariff-free, frictionless access. Ensuring the issues around Northern Ireland are resolved. Achieving regulatory harmonisation. Staying in European programmes such as Erasmus and Horizon 2020—Edinburgh University has issued its annual report, the back pages of which show where it gets its research funding from, and there is page after page showing tens of millions of pounds that come from the European Union. If the Government want to achieve all of those objectives—I have no doubt that they do—I suggest they reach out, keep everything on the table and say to Parliament, when taking back control, that the best way to achieve all of those objectives is through EFTA, the EEA, a single market or a customs union. Whichever way we want to look at it, let us keep those options on the table and have those arguments.

EFTA is important because it is about economic integration between its members. The EEA allows that economic integration between the EFTA members and the European Union. That seems to me to be very similar to the Prime Minister’s goals and objectives in both her Lancaster House and Florence speeches. We want free, frictionless trade. We want regulatory harmonisation. We want goods and services to be included, as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) said. As the hon. Member for Wimbledon said, this is not CETA, but is it CETA plus plus plus, which the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union mentioned a few weeks ago?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the problem the Government have got themselves into is that instead of keeping all the options open, the Prime Minister is having to respond to the extremists in her own party on a reactionery basis and close off options, exactly when we should be exploring the possibilities of all the options and the best way forward for the country?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. This Government are not looking at the best possible option for exiting the European Union. They are trying to resolve a decades-long problem in their own party, which is now raising its ugly head again, as we have seen in the newspapers in the last few weeks. I firmly believe that many senior members of the Government and influential Members on the Government Back Benches would rather see the UK fall off a cliff, to achieve their ideological goals and take control of their own party, than do what is in the best interest of the country.

I will wrap up, because I am aware others want to speak. EFTA is the ninth largest trading partner in the world in goods and the seventh largest in services. It is the third largest trading partner with the EU in goods and the second largest in services. If that deal was put on the table to the United Kingdom by Michel Barnier today, we should bite his hand off to take it. It is on the table, it is here and it is ready made. The Government would be committing a massive dereliction of duty if they did not at least consider the option of staying in EFTA.

10.8 am

Antoinette Sandbach (Edgeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. Last week at DExEU questions, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), challenged me to table a debate on EFTA. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) for having the considerable foresight to have already done so. I know that he and others have been at the forefront of the push to get EFTA onto the Government’s agenda. I listened carefully to his contribution and share most—in fact all—of his perspective. His timing could not have been better, because it is vital that we have an evidence-led debate on this subject and on the broader subject of the UK’s relationship with the EU.

The main focus of my remarks will be the transition and how best to manage our departure, should a deal not be achieved before Brexit day. At the end I will address EFTA membership in the longer term and how this can be in our national interest. I will be brief, because I have discussed this recently. If hon. Members wish to know my thoughts in more detail, they can check the Hansard record of the debate on 22 January.

The Government do not have much time left to strike a deal, as Michel Barnier reminded us all yesterday. The time is coming when the Government must make tough choices, and those need to be based on evidence rather than on ideology—particularly an ideology that can be seen at the fringes of our party. The Government are also delaying several key pieces of work that will prepare us for the world post being in the EU. The road haulage Bill has been delayed, and the immigration White Paper has been delayed and may not be published until the end of the year.

I have consistently called for Ministers to be given the time that they need to think through their decisions. This is, as others have said, one of the most complex tasks the country and its Administration have faced in decades, and the timeframe for making decisions should reflect that, but under the current arrangements, we will have to restructure our entire relationship with the world in just a couple of years. Roy Jenkins once compared Tony Blair’s approach to winning high office to that of a museum curator carrying a Ming vase across a polished marble floor. I cannot help but think that Ministers may sympathise with that image as they hold on to something as prestigious as the democratic choice of the public while having to deliver Brexit in a manner that does not harm the economy, wear away at the social fabric of this country or damage our standing abroad. To do that, I ask Ministers to make up their minds on all the best available options, and to respect the wishes of all our constituents, not just either the 52% or the 48%.

There are considerable merits of EFTA for a longer transition period. I support the Government’s ambition for a deep and enduring partnership with the EU. Given our shared history and geography, it would be wrong to adopt CETA wholesale. To propose an entirely new arrangement is ambitious, but I welcome that ambition.
Our partnership must be deeper than the EU has with any other third party, and it must include a deal on services, which make up almost 80% of our economy and are therefore essential to our prosperity.

I am aware of the pressure that the Government are under to strike a deal soon, and this is where the first benefit of EFTA should become apparent. If we were able to expedite rejoining EFTA it would provide a soft landing should the Government fail to strike a deal before the deadline. Currently, failing to strike a deal would see us ejected from the EU with no alternative to WTO terms. EFTA should be that alternative. Last week’s Treasury estimates, which are the best data we have at this point, suggest that WTO terms would cost us 8% of GDP growth over the next 15 years.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. To take her back to her earlier comments on a transition: is she proposing this scenario as a transition or a permanent state?

Antoinette Sandbach: It is the option that gives us the leeway to negotiate. It is an important staging post. Given the severe impacts that the WTO alternative would have, it is a safe harbour, if I can put it that way, with all the benefits that my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon has already outlined.

The reality is that if we do not take advantage of the opportunity that EFTA membership would give us, we are facing a cost of 8% growth in our GDP. That is a very significant cost that will have a significant impact on tax revenues and employment prospects in this country. By comparison, EEA membership through EFTA would allow us to recoup 6% of that lost growth, which is important for the Government to consider. I note that this month the UK Trade Policy Observatory has published an important briefing paper on the sectors most vulnerable to Brexit, looking at the different options. Perhaps those who are not convinced by the Treasury analysis can look at independent analysis—although I think the Treasury analysis is independent—published by a third source.

EFTA also allows the Government to meet their existing commitments, particularly around having no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It seems to me, from the provisions in paragraphs 49 and 50 of the agreement made in December, that that is a crucial ambition that we need to step up and achieve. We need to examine whether EEA membership and continuing membership of the customs union is the only way to deliver that promise. Even if it is not, it gives us the time to look at what other options are available.

I listened with interest to the concerns expressed by the noble Lord Bridges in the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill last week that transition needed to be a bridge to the future, not a gangplank into thin air. EFTA offers that bridge: a graduated transition that sees us leaving the EU, regaining control of swathes of policy areas, but retaining the vital trading and economic links that have built up between the UK and Europe, until a better deal can be struck. I know that some Members are concerned that this is a route to allow mischievous remainers to get back into the EU, but that is not correct: it is not the intention. Leave won; some leavers still need to get used to that. Those who have fought for decades to secure our departure from the EU have far more to fear from a badly executed Brexit than they do from using EFTA to bridge any potential gaps.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon, I think that the long-term benefits of EFTA will become clear should we apply to rejoin, as I hope we will. He has already outlined the potential market access to more than 900 million people. From a sovereignty perspective, EFTA decisions require unanimity; we would still have the power of our veto. We would take back control of farming and fisheries. We would be rid of ever closer union and there would be no prospect of the single currency. EFTA would address a huge part of the public and political concern about the EU, while still allowing the UK to benefit from the single market.

I do not want to revisit the details I discussed a fortnight ago, but I do want to add two points. I have faith in the Prime Minister’s ability to strike a deal, but if we do not reach agreement with the EU regarding the Irish border, EFTA would allow us to extend the existing commitment we have made into the longer term. The breathing room that EFTA arrangements provided would strengthen the Prime Minister’s hand in negotiations. In the event of no deal, the UK faces significant detriment from WTO terms.

EFTA offers a route that will allow Ministers to respect the referendum result, our commitments on the Irish border and the needs of our economy. In a number of areas, it would allow considerably greater freedom of action than we currently enjoy. It would ensure that the most complex parts of our negotiation with Brussels—the issue of the Irish border—is resolved in the short term, and it would provide more time to create a bespoke solution. It allows us to minimise the risks of no deal and strengthen our hand in negotiations. If Ministers disagree so vehemently with the Treasury analysis, what are their own assessments of the impact of no deal? What deficiencies do they identify in not only the Treasury analysis, but much of the analysis by independent think-tanks that are external to the UK civil service?

EFTA constitutes the best arrangement for a plan B in the unlikely event the plan A fails. I believe that it is a good deal for Britain in the longer term, and ask that colleagues rethink this issue and recognise how EFTA can offer us a safer, more secure route out of the EU and into the world.

10.19 am

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I will be very brief so the other two speakers have a chance to get in.

From the conversations I have had across East Renfrewshire in recent months, people are increasingly fed up. They do not want to hear any more about a hard Brexit, a soft Brexit, a red, white and blue Brexit, a “Brexit means Brexit” Brexit or even a “Brexit means Breakfast” Brexit. It is time for practical, workable solutions to be put forward in the national interest. They do not want ideology. If we have to give it a name, they want a “smart Brexit”, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) put it in a recent article.
[Paul Masterton]

We must be pragmatic, sensible and honest about the situation that faces us. Should we be optimistic? Yes, we can be and we should be, but that optimism has to be grounded in reality. It is far too simple an argument to say that the Germans need us to buy their cars and the French need us to buy their brie so it will all be great.

Just as Government contingency planning for all scenarios must cover a no deal, it must also cover us entering EFTA with the EEA bolt-on. I simply ask that that option is not taken off the table. Let me be clear, that is not necessarily a final destination—although we should not rule that out—but a safe harbour or staging post that would give us a suitable and workable framework from which to work while the free trade agreement is thrashed out and formalised.

EFTA guarantees to people who voted leave that we are implementing their democratic will to leave the European Union. If anything, it finds that sweet spot in reflecting that the EU referendum result, although decisive, was not overwhelming. We will be in the single market but not members of the EU. We will leave the EU sensibly—even conservatively—if we recognise that trade is only one part of our integrated and co-operative relationship that needs to be unpicked.

In EFTA, from day one, we will be outside the broken CAP system and the hated common fisheries policy, which are totemic issues that lie behind the largely ignored but sizeable minority leave vote in Scotland. Any question of ever closer union would be gone; we would not be under the direct jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, as there is no direct effect and no supremacy of EEA law, and our membership dues would be significantly reduced. Freedom of movement can be dealt with flexibly within the EFTA system because, contrary to what is commonly asserted, Schengen is not part of the EEA agreement.

EFTA will also give us scope to form trade deals across the world from day one and to take advantage of the bloc’s existing FTAs while we create those bilateral agreements. Preferential access to EFTAs markets while we finalise our new global trading relationships would provide a good basis for British business. Arguably, EFTAs suite of trade agreements are a better fit for the UK than the EU’s, given our trading patterns, and they are more comprehensive. EFTAs size and nimbleness as a bloc has allowed it to adapt its approach to free trade agreements to cover trade in services. EFTA would ultimately allow us to start our journey to our destination, while giving us the flexibility to ready ourselves for what may lie ahead.

If the referendum was not just about the economy but about increasing national sovereignty, I believe EFTA would tick that box too. That is why it is an option that also finds favour among many moderate leavers and it should not be dismissed out of hand by the Government. When we look back in 10 years’ time, we will not regret taking the time to get what was needed, but we will regret rushing to leave the European Union as quickly as possible to meet an arbitrary, self-imposed hard deadline.

10.22 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I will follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) in being as brief as I can.

To my hon. Friend the Minister, I say that I, like most of my hon. Friends, want the Prime Minister to achieve a successful, bespoke deal, but the clock is ticking. To put it bluntly, levels of agreement are not optimal on the internal flank. I hope he can answer one question: if EFTA-EEA is such a bad idea, why are its four constituent countries among the richest and most successful on the face of the planet?

This is not project fear. We talk about hypothetical scenarios, such as what would happen if we left without a deal or under a soft or hard Brexit, but those countries are out there in the real world, not gazing at their navels, but negotiating trade deals and making a success of a trade bloc that we created with them in 1960. They have found a way to be sovereign countries, to deal with the huge behemoth of the European Union on their borders and to somehow retain that combination of prosperity, security and, yes, sovereignty.

Back in Westminster, we are in a hypothetical realm where we keep talking about all the possibilities that may emerge. If one were to be hypothetical and ask, “What deal could we possibly construct on which we could conceivably unite as a country?” it would have to do the following. It would have to please those on the Brexit wing by enabling us to negotiate our own trade deals from day one of leaving. EFTA does just that. For the Mayor of London, who wants us to stay in the single market, for the Scottish Parliament, which also wants us to stay in the single market, and for the many of us who think that that would be right for the City of London and services, we would have to stay in the single market. In EFTA-EEA, we stay in the single market. For everyone, there would have to be a control on unsustainable migration. In EFTA-EEA, we have the control that should migration surge again, article 112 and, importantly, article 113, which guarantees our right to negotiate free movement, would apply and have applied in practice in the real world.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The free movement issue is very sensitive. In the EFTA relationship, Liechtenstein has a cap on the total number of EU citizens it allows in each year. It is a much smaller country, but the principle is there.

James Cartlidge: Yes, the principle is there. The powers are there in black and white and they can be used unilaterally. There is simply no way to dispute that.

To return to the hypotheticals, from a Brexiteer point of view, we would want something that gives us visible signs of power back on day one. We would be out of fisheries, which is why Fishing for Leave supports membership of EFTA—it knows that next year, it could get power back for fisheries. We would be out of the common agricultural policy. We would be out of the serfdom of the ECJ and under the EFTA court.

I will finish by referring to the transition. Even as someone who campaigned for remain, I think the Government’s current proposal would mean a vassal transition where we had absolutely no control. To people in the Brexit camp, I say that surely the proposed transition, where we have literally no say in future laws, is far inferior to one where we go into EFTA next April, have powers back, and have the security of staying in the single market. That is the best transition, which would enable us to have a safe harbour to secure our long-term future, as other hon. Members have said.
A range of continental lagers are available, but if Carlsberg did an off-the-shelf, last-minute Brexit deal that pleased everybody, it would probably look an awful lot like EFTA-EEA.

10.26 am

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is nice for a leaver to make just a brief contribution—perhaps you have heard enough from leavers, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) on securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who made a powerful case from his point of view in relation to EFTA.

My view is that we should get behind the Government. We on this side of the Chamber should certainly be supporting the Prime Minister and the Government. To say that this is a Brexit-dominated Government, when the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, and the excellent Minister were remainers, paints an unfair picture. I think the Government are working in the interests of all the British people.

The Government decided to delegate the decision about whether we remain in or out of the European Union to the British people. There was a massive democratic process and we had the leave result. We are leaving in 413 days, so as my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk said, the clock is ticking.

In the referendum, the British people voted to end free movement, not to spend billions and billions of pounds each year with the EU, and to make our own laws in our own country that will be judged by our own judges. Within all that, Parliament should debate what Brexit looks like—quite rightly—and this debate is part of that.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bone: I cannot, because I have very little time.

It is right that the Government are saying, “Hang on. We’re the fifth biggest economy in the world. We want to make a bespoke deal.” The Brexit Secretary has described the deal as Canada plus plus plus, but he is really saying that it is a bespoke model. From that point of view, how can people object? We are in a unique situation. We already have a free trade arrangement with the European Union. It sells us £80 billion more of goods than we buy from it, so it is in its interest to have a deep and special relationship.

In conclusion, I hope the whole House will get behind the Government to achieve what must be in the British interest: a bespoke deal and a special relationship with the European Union. I urge my Conservative colleagues to stop carping at the Prime Minister, to get behind her and to support the Government, not vote against them. They should argue their case and let the Government take us out of the European Union in the best possible way in 413 days’ time.

10.30 am

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to begin the winding-up speeches. Scotland’s preferred option was not to leave the European Union at all. It is dangerous to conduct this debate on the basis that all the arguments have been lost. I sympathise with a great deal of what hon. Members have said today, but their starting point seems to be, “We have now lost the argument—we are in for a hard Brexit and for coming out of the customs union and the single market, but let’s see how much we can salvage.” It is not too late for the Government to come to their senses and decide not to leave the single market or the customs union.

It is important that we continue to compare the benefits and disadvantages of EFTA membership not with the hard Brexit that we are heading for, but with where we are now. As hon. Members have said, we had a referendum over membership of the European Union but nobody in the United Kingdom has ever voted in a referendum on the single market or the customs union, so none of us has the right to say that we know how people feel about our membership of them.

I must remind hon. Members of the likely economic impact. Some have decided that the economic forecasts are not worth the paper that they are written on. Presumably they think the billions of pounds it costs to run the Department that produces those forecasts are not worth it either, so I look forward to the Estimates debate in a few weeks’ time—I can think of a big saving to our spending on the Treasury. The Scottish Government’s paper “Scotland’s Place in Europe” indicates that over the 10 years after Brexit, GDP in Scotland is likely to fall by £11 billion a year and public spending is likely to fall by £3.7 billion a year, on top of any reduction imposed from Westminster. That is twice Scotland’s total expenditure on further and higher education, which demonstrates the scale of economic damage that we face.

The UK Government say that they have not done any impact analysis, but they have done analysis of the impact, which is not the same thing. I have not yet seen those papers in their Fort Knox establishment on Parliament Street, so I can only quote from what has already been put in the public domain. The Buzzfeed papers show that the Treasury think that at best we will see a 2% reduction in economic growth, even if we remain in the single market, and at worst we could face an 8% reduction, which would be a recession like none that we have ever seen or ever want to see. We are talking about a serious threat to the economic and social wellbeing of these islands.

I recognise that membership of EFTA—if we are allowed in, although it is still not guaranteed that the four existing members will want us to join—would not be as bad for us as falling off the cliff edge, but it would still be significantly worse than where we are now. I hope that all hon. Members who have argued for EFTA today will not accept that the argument about full membership of the single market or the customs union has been lost. EFTA countries are not in the customs union; we heard evidence from several witnesses in the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday about what that means for Switzerland. In some ways, the Swiss position appears to be closest to what the Government want, because officially it does not include free movement of people, although in practice it pretty much does.

Heidi Alexander rose—

Peter Grant: I will give way once, but I am conscious of time.
Heidi Alexander: I understand the note of caution that the hon. Gentleman articulates about EFTA, but I also understand that Scottish National party policy is to remain in the single market. If his party does not favour remaining in the European economic area by staying in EFTA, how does it propose to remain in the single market?

Peter Grant: As I said, our best option is to respect the wishes of the 62% not to be dragged out of the European Union, but if that option is taken off the table—

Paul Masterton indicated dissent.

Peter Grant: I note that Scottish Conservatives want to pooh-pooh the idea that 62% of the population of Scotland can just be ignored. My concern about EFTA is not that I do not like what it offers, but that it does not offer nearly as much as we have now. In particular, it does not involve membership of the customs union.

Switzerland does not have what it regards as a hard border with the European Union. Apart from its border with Liechtenstein, it is completely surrounded by land borders with EU countries, but most people travelling in and out do not notice anything like a hard border. Nevertheless, it estimates that approximately 2% of vehicle traffic is stopped and searched. Applying that model to the only land border that the United Kingdom will have with the European Union would result in 200 stop-and-searches a day near the border on the island of Ireland. That is simply not acceptable, and it cannot be allowed to happen.

Even the most favourable—or least unfavourable—scenario for leaving the customs union is likely to create significant security problems in Ireland. It is not just about having a hard border. We have an agreement on all sides that there will be no infrastructure on the Irish border, but it is very difficult for somewhere inside the customs union to have a border with no infrastructure whatever with somewhere outside it. There will be significant repercussions for the whole of Ireland if the United Kingdom leaves the customs union.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Peter Grant: I really do not have time.

Those repercussions are among the reasons—they are possibly the single most pressing reason—why we have to persuade the Government that they have got it wrong. The unilateral and politically motivated decision to leave the customs union was a mistake, but there is still time for it to be rectified. There is still time for the Government to accept that they got it wrong and that they do not have a referendum mandate to take us out of the customs union or the single market.

I was interested in the point made by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartidge) that the four EFTA countries are among the wealthiest in the world by GDP per capita. It is not only EFTA countries that are in the top 15 or 16, and certainly above the United Kingdom; so are Luxembourg, Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, Finland and Denmark, none of which are in EFTA but all of which are in the single market. Membership of the single market and the customs union may be a factor, or it may be that all the countries I mentioned and all four EFTA countries have the status of being small, independent, modern European nations—perhaps that is what we should be looking at, but that is an argument for another day.

I must sound a final word of caution. Although hon. Members have referred favourably to the Norwegian and Swiss situations, we were told yesterday in the Exiting the European Union Committee about the Swiss People’s party, which is a bit like UKIP with a Swiss accent but is the biggest single party in the Swiss Parliament. It has initiated the process of calling a referendum—a popular initiative, as the Swiss constitution describes it—to extricate Switzerland from EFTA and pull out from agreements with the European Union. Although a lot of countries originally saw EFTA or the European economic area as part of an accession process to get from nowhere to full membership of the European Union, it appears that there is a big danger of the hard right in Switzerland treating EFTA as a way of cutting its links with the European Union. So let us be careful: we may think that the minority in this House who want a hard Brexit will be satisfied and let things lie if we somehow persuade the Government to go for EFTA, but it will not be long before they seek to follow the Swiss example. They will agitate for a referendum as they did before, not on leaving the European Union this time but on the hardest of all hard Brexits.

As I have said before, and as I think the vast majority of hon. Members believe, a hard Brexit would be economically and socially calamitous for the people of these islands. It is still not too late for the Government to give a guarantee that they will not go for that kind of Brexit. They should not simply say that they want to join EFTA, but go further and say that they want to remain in the single market and the customs union—not for two or three years after we leave the European Union, but for as long as we possibly can.

10.39 am

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition and to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) on securing this debate and on the considered way in which he framed the issue.

The Labour party has continually made clear that we want to seek a deal with the European Union that secures all the benefits of the single market and the customs union and that involves no diminution of the EU-derived rights—employment rights and equality rights—health and safety standards, and environmental protections and standards that we currently enjoy.

Jobs and the economy must be the Government’s priorities in the next phase of the negotiations, so it is absolutely right that Parliament debates in detail the pros and cons of any and every means of potentially securing a departure from the EU that protects both. I echo what many hon. Members have said in the debate this morning: every option must be kept on the table.

It reflects poorly on the Government that Back Benchers have to bring Ministers to Westminster Hall and have only an hour to speak on issues of this importance. We should be debating the pros and cons of European Free Trade Association arrangements and other arrangements in great detail on the Floor of the main Chamber; that we are not doing so is a missed opportunity.
I very much welcome the attempt by the hon. Member for Wimbledon to convince the Conservative party to ditch the ideological baggage, and to drag with him the Government and the small group on the Government Benches who favour—for ideological reasons—the hardest of departures from the European Union.

There are misconceptions about EFTA, and they need to be challenged. We need to have an honest debate about what the trade-offs and the compromises involved in an EFTA arrangement, or other arrangements, would be. However, all options must be considered and, as other hon. Members have said, nothing should be taken off the table.

In the brief time I have available to me, I will sound a few notes of caution about the trade-offs when it comes to EFTA, or at least examine some of them. I will start with the transition period, because a number of different views have been expressed this morning about whether EFTA would apply in the transition or afterwards and about the variants that it might cover.

I fail to see how EFTA could work in terms of a transitional arrangement, and that is for two reasons. The first is that, as we have argued for some time, the Government must pursue transitional arrangements on the same basic terms as those that apply now, which includes membership of the single market and the customs union, and would involve the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is supported by businesses and trade unions, and—if people pay any attention to what the European Commission has been saying on the EU27, they will know this—it is also the only option that is available. I cannot see how EFTA, as a transitional vehicle, could be realistically negotiated.

Even more importantly, an EFTA transition would in a sense entail what the Government—and we agree with them on this—have explicitly sought to avoid. Businesses and individuals do not want two points of transition towards the end state. They do not want a situation whereby they would depart the EU and go on to EFTA terms, and then go on from EFTA terms to the final end state of a bespoke deal.

James Cartlidge: What the hon. Gentleman talks about as a transition is not really a transition; it is an extension of existing membership, and there is no point in trying to deny that. EFTA can be a transition in this sense—that we go into it, as others have said, as a safe harbour. However, he seems to be ruling out the idea that, once we are in EFTA, there would ever be any further change, when it would clearly be in our national interest to look at how we might, for example, strengthen co-decision making or consider divergence within parts of the single market. The point is getting to a safe position to do that. That is what a transition is—not an extension of our existing membership.

Matthew Pennycook: I disagree, because I do not see a transitional arrangement on those terms as an extension of membership; we would lose our voting rights and our representation in the European Parliament. However, that is the only transitional arrangement on offer, and the one that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting is not a serious possibility. Also, as I have said, it would involve two points of disruption for businesses and individuals. For that reason, we favour a transition on the same basic terms as now. However, if we are talking realistically, and we are talking about a post-transitional arrangement, EFTA membership is clearly something that the Government should consider.

I will just probe a bit of the argument that the hon. Member for Wimbledon made in terms of there being a range of viable options open to the UK within EFTA, each of which warrants consideration. It is difficult to see what would be gained by EFTA membership alone. I take the point that obtaining it would secure for us access to the EFTA free trade area and the four EFTA states, as well as participation in trade agreements with the 27 countries in the EU, but in no way would that make up for the loss of trade that would come from losing the 50 preferential trade deals that the EU has with third countries or the many other trade deals that it is negotiating. Moreover, EFTA membership alone would not secure for the UK preferential access to the EU internal market.

In the same way, it is difficult to see how the Swiss model, or a variant of it, would work for the UK. As hon. Members will know, Switzerland has only partial access to the EU’s internal market. We must also consider services, the future of which is integral to our country. I know that the hon. Gentleman has real concerns about them, and we both do, because of our constituencies. Services are covered only to a limited extent by the Swiss model. Crucially, Swiss bilateral agreements do not provide for cross-border access in financial services. So it is difficult to see how the Swiss arrangement would work for the UK, notwithstanding the issues that it has in terms of its sustainability or the length of time that it has taken to negotiate.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, laying out the range of options I said were available and making the point about all their pros and cons. However, I think it was pretty clear from my speech that I think that the EFTA/EEA arrangement, which is what I argued for consistently throughout my speech, is the option, one, that I prefer and, two, that the Government should look at.

Matthew Pennycook: In a sense, the hon. Gentleman reinforces my point, which is that the realistic debate that we should be having is about the EEA/EFTA option. I do not think that the other options are particularly practical or desirable, for a variety of reasons, so that option—the EEA/EFTA one—is what we should concentrate on.

When it comes to the EEA/EFTA model, the Opposition recognise that it undoubtedly has a range of advantages.

Kevin Hollinrake: Earlier in his remarks, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the customs union. Is it the Opposition’s policy that we must remain in the customs union?

Matthew Pennycook: The Opposition’s policy is that a full customs union with the EU remains on the table; it should be an option that we explore, and I will come to the reasons why.

Despite the advantages that EFTA provides, it also has some inherent limitations. One of the most serious, which we have to grapple with if we are going to seriously consider and debate the advantages of the EEA/EFTA model, is what it would mean for the border
in Northern Ireland. Unless that model is complemented with a customs union or customs arrangement of some kind, I do not necessarily think that EFTA alone would solve the problem in Northern Ireland.

That is because the agreements that the EFTA members have struck with third countries involve the collective dropping of tariffs. I do not think that those agreements can be supplemented with a customs union or customs arrangement in a way that would solve the problem in Northern Ireland. Earlier, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) mentioned agriculture. There are issues within EFTA where there is explicit freedom to diverge, which I think makes the Northern Ireland border situation complicated, and it is certainly not clear that it would be solved by straight-up EFTA membership.

In addition, there are the concerns that have been raised about freedom of movement and payments into the EU budget. Neither of those issues is insurmountable, but we need to have a really honest debate about how we would reconcile the concerns that were raised in the referendum, and that undoubtedly lay behind the vote in the referendum, and the economic conditions that are required in the country going forward.

There are also very practical reasons why the EEA/EFTA option could be challenging. It is clear to me that the majority of the legal opinion on this shows—Professor Baudenbacher would say this himself—that the UK ceases to be a member of the EEA when we leave the EU. We cease to be a contracting party; article 1.26 of the EEA agreement says that very clearly. It is not clear—that needs further explanation—whether we could seamlessly join EFTA in a way that allows us to remain a member of the EEA agreement continuously. As a number of hon. Members have said, there are also real questions about whether the EFTA states—in particular, Norway—would be happy to have us join.

**Stephen Hammond:** They would.

**Chuka Umunna:** They would.

**Matthew Pennycook:** Well, they might be. I think there is a range of opinion out there about it; I have spoken to a number of different people with different views. The hon. Member for Wimbledon said that he had spoken to the ambassador and the professor himself. I note the comments of the Norwegian Prime Minister in August last year, when she said that the UK joining EFTA, even for a temporary period, would be a “challenging and costly” undertaking. Again, those concerns are not insurmountable, but we need to grapple with how realistic this option is and, in particular, with whether EFTAs institutions—especially its court—could cope with the volume of cases that would land in them if the UK was to join EFTA.

All of that speaks to a wider point, which is that the four EFTA economies are very different from the UK economy. The size of the EFTA countries and the nature of their economies make UK membership of EFTA a challenging prospect.

All of that needs to be debated, and it cannot be debated in an hour and a half in Westminster Hall. The EFTA option should not be taken off the table, but there are real reasons why the Labour party believes that a bespoke deal following a transitional arrangement on basic terms should be what we are aiming for, and therefore EEA/EFTA would not be our first preference. However, as I say, the key point is that that option should not be taken off the table. In the end, it is up to Parliament to decide, which is why it is so important that we have a meaningful vote—

**Mike Gapes (in the Chair):** Is the hon. Member bringing his remarks to a conclusion?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am.

The issue should be for Parliament to decide, and this option should not be taken off the table. The Government need to give serious consideration to it or at least to provide time for debates about the pros and cons to allow us to explore why—if they have—they have ruled it out.

10.49 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) on securing this important debate on the European Free Trade Association, to which I am delighted to respond. I note that he beat our hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) in securing this debate, but as my hon. Friend and colleague at DExEU, the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), said in the House on 1 February, a number of colleagues have suggested EFTA membership as a possible option, and it is important that we debate it.

Although we recognise the benefits of ensuring continuity in our relationships with the EFTA states, we do not plan to seek membership of EFTA, for four key reasons. First, EFTA membership in and of itself does not deliver any market access to the EU. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon pointed out, there are some misconceptions. It is important to delineate the difference between the EFTA agreement and the EEA. EFTA is a trading bloc between four European countries: Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Three of them participate in the EU’s single market through the EEA agreement, while Switzerland participates in some areas through a series of bilateral arrangements with the EU. As such, joining EFTA does not say anything about our future economic partnership with the EU.

Those calling for us to join the EFTA need to be more specific, as my hon. Friend was, about whether they mean joining the EEA, or attempting to copy the Swiss agreement, or negotiating a different bespoke agreement. The Prime Minister has been clear that participation in the EEA agreement would not work for the UK because it would not deliver on the British people’s desire to have more direct control over the decisions that affect their daily lives, and it would mean accepting the continued free movement of people, which both the Conservative and Labour manifestos pledged to end at the last election. Switzerland, on the other hand, has a patchwork of agreements with the EU that fall short of the ambitious economic partnership we are seeking. Neither model strikes the balance of democratic control and mutual market access we want for our future partnership with the EU.
Secondly, our ambition as a global trading nation goes beyond the scope of EFTA's existing free trade agreements with third countries. Leaving the EU offers us an opportunity to forge a new role for ourselves in the world, to negotiate our own trade agreements and to be a positive and powerful force for free trade. Alongside new FTAs, we are also committed to achieving continuity in our existing trade and investment relationships with third countries by transitioning the EU's free trade agreements. It is worth noting that EFTA's network of preferential trading arrangements falls short of our ambitions.

Thirdly, EFTA membership means accepting free movement between EFTA members—that principle is underpinned through the legal framework of the EFTA convention. While we do not regard the referendum result as a vote to pull up the drawbridge, it must be a priority to gain control of the numbers of people who come here from Europe.

Finally, while we want to maintain our deep and historic relationships with EFTA states, the UK is in many ways different from those countries, as the hon. Members for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) pointed out. Our population is around 65 million, while the EFTA states together make up roughly 14 million people. In 2015, the EFTA bloc's collective GDP amounted to £710 billion as compared with the UK's £1.9 trillion. The UK's participation in EFTA would fundamentally change the nature of that group and would not be an appropriate model for our future relationship with the EU or those countries.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** Some have proposed that EFTA should be a plan B in the event that the Government do not achieve the ambitions they are outlining, instead of WTO rules. What does the Minister say to that?

**Mr Walker:** We are absolutely focused on achieving a deep partnership between the UK and EU. Of course we need to look at our contingency plans, and I am sure Ministers will take note of this debate in that regard, but we want to focus on achieving a partnership that in many ways goes beyond the EFTA arrangements we have discussed.

**James Cartlidge:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** No. I need to make a little progress because I have got quite a lot to try to cover.

Membership of EFTA alone does not automatically guarantee UK access to the EU single market, and EFTA states have the different trading relationships I have described. In this debate, most people have spoken about the EEA and EFTA. The EEA, which is sometimes referred to as the Norway model, would mean the UK having to adopt automatically and in their entirety new EU rules over which we would have little influence and no vote. As the Prime Minister has said, such a loss of democratic control could not work for the British people. It would also involve continuing to pay substantially into the EU budget.

**Chuka Umunna:** Does the Minister not accept that if we are to do the free trade agreement that he and his colleagues in government keep talking about, we are going to have to comply with European standards anyway? We have much more chance of having some influence—albeit, I accept, not a vote—if we do so through EFTA and EEA membership. The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) has been clear he is arguing for that.

**Mr Walker:** The Government are ambitious about the extent of the trade agreement we can do with the EU. The EU has a number of trade agreements with other countries where there is mutual recognition and regulatory alignment, but not the absolute harmonisation of rules. I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's argument.

I will not be able to cover all the comments, so I want to focus a little more on international trade. Members have asked why we do not plan to rejoin EFTA as a way of continuing our trading relationships with its members and trading with the wider world through the adoption of its existing free trade agreements. As I have already stated, EFTA has a network of 27 free trade agreements as compared with the EU's 40 FTAs. While many of those agreements significantly overlap, EFTA agreements still focus on traditional areas of market access and therefore tend to be less comprehensive and more goods-focused than those of the EU. It is also notable that some EFTA FTAs specifically exclude trade remedies that the UK may seek to have as part of our independent trade policy. The UK is in many ways different from those countries.

**Paul Masterton:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** I will give way for the last time.

**Paul Masterton:** Is the point not that by joining EFTA, we can roll into the existing EFTA trade agreements and agree a new bilateral trade deal at the same time? We would be protected while striking out our own trade deal.

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. It is certainly true that a number of the EFTA states have those bilateral arrangements, but it is important to note that even if EFTA members were to welcome us back—as the hon. Member for Glenrothes pointed out, that is not a certainty—we would not have immediate or automatic access to their 27 FTAs. Our entry into each one would need to be negotiated individually with the third countries involved. That process would take time, with no guarantee of success. EFTA is not an off-the-shelf model that would deliver ready-made trade deals, as some have suggested. Instead, as I said earlier, leaving the EU offers us an opportunity to forge a new role for ourselves in the world: to negotiate our own trade agreements and to be a positive and powerful force for free trade. As Members know, we are committed to delivering continuity in the EU's existing trade relationships with third countries.

**Ian Murray:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** I will not right now. We want continuity, rather than the replacing of agreements with their mostly shallower EFTA counterparts. We are already in discussions with third countries over how to put the arrangements in place upon exit, and I will come back to that point.

**Ian Murray:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** I cannot give way right now because I have to cover a few more points.
Another important drawback of EFTA membership is that it requires free movement between its members. A number of Members have touched on that. It is true that Liechtenstein has a derogation from the principle of free movement of people under the EEA, but Members will agree that the UK is in many respects different from Liechtenstein, which is a country with a population numbering less than most of our constituencies—in 2016, the population totalled some 37,000. It is also worth noting that in 2016 more than a third of Liechtenstein’s population were not Liechtenstein citizens.

We of course want the UK to remain an open and tolerant country. It is important to note that the Prime Minister has written to EFTA citizens and EU citizens to assure them that we want to reach agreements that protect their right to achieve settled status in the UK.

Finally, I reiterate that there can be no question of our ties of friendship with our EFTA friends and neighbours, nor of our commitment to them. Taken together, the EFTA bloc of states is our third largest export partner in goods and services after the EU and the USA—that is larger than India and China combined. We receive 5% of our imports by value from them, making EFTA our fourth largest import partner. Norway and Iceland were also founding members of NATO. I reassure Members that we are seeking to maintain our excellent relations with EFTA states, with whom we have long-standing cultural and economic ties, as well as crucial trading relations. The Prime Minister wrote specifically to EFTA nations.

I do not have a great deal of time to go into the implementation period, but it is important to note, as the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich said, that we are seeking only one set of changes. It is crucial that business does not face two sets of changes. With that, I give my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon the floor for a chance to respond.

10.59 am

Stephen Hammond: I thank the Minister for his response. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), I of course support the Government’s ambition to have a bespoke deal. Nothing I have set out this morning would in any way prevent that. The Minister, whom I regard as a thoughtful politician, will understand that I am disappointed by his response. Although this Chamber has had the chance to consider the motion, the feeling I detect from the Chamber is that the whole House would like to have a chance to reflect on the matter. I therefore say to the Minister that I have decided to provide that by tabling later today a number of amendments to the Trade Bill to be debated on Report. That will give the whole House the opportunity to discuss EFTA on the Floor of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the European Free Trade Association.

Agriculture GCSE

11.1 am

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the introduction of an agriculture GCSE.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, I think for the first time. As Members may recall from previous debates, my professional background is in agriculture; I draw Members’ attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. My background and experience have naturally made me a passionate advocate for UK farming. British agriculture is the essential foundation of the UK food and drink industry, which as our largest single manufacturing sector employs one in eight people and contributes more than £100 billion to the economy each year, including through a growing volume of exports. Farming also plays a vital role in protecting our environment, maintaining and conserving the land, soil and landscapes that make up our precious natural heritage.

So why a GCSE in agriculture? One of the foremost functions of our education system is to equip young people with the necessary skills to contribute to the social and economic life of our country. I firmly believe that, given the significance of agriculture to our economy, environment and society, the education system should ensure that the younger generation are able to flourish in the sector, and should give them the option of doing so at the earliest possible opportunity by offering an agricultural GCSE in schools across England and Wales.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Bearing in mind that the average age of farmers in the UK is approaching 60, does he agree that a new lease of life is needed and that the GCSE will give those who are perhaps not from a farming background but who have a love of the land the opportunity to gain an understanding and to get involved in farming? We in Northern Ireland have done that so far.

Julian Sturdy: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have not quite reached the farmer’s average age yet, which is around 59 at the moment. I was going on to mention that Northern Ireland already has a GCSE in agriculture, which started in 2013.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I really hope the Minister will answer this when she responds later: why is it good enough for GCSEs to be provided to young people in Northern Ireland, but not in North Herefordshire?

Julian Sturdy: It is up to the Minister to respond to that, and I hope she does, but I do not want to see a GCSE in agriculture only in North Herefordshire. I want to see it in England and Wales and perhaps Scotland as well.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): We do not have a national 5 in agriculture in Scotland, so it would be a positive move to introduce it there and to get further behind apprenticeships as well, so that students have room to develop from national 5 into an apprenticeship when they leave school.


Julian Sturdy: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a valuable point.

My support for the agriculture GCSE is based on two central arguments: first, the course would offer great benefits to GCSE pupils in helping to equip them for a skilled and fulfilling career that agriculture can offer; and secondly, it would support the farming sector by providing a better and larger pool of educated and skilled workers. I have already mentioned Northern Ireland. It is important to re-emphasise that Northern Ireland has had a GCSE in agriculture since 2013. I could not get the figures, but I would be interested to know what the take-up has been in Northern Ireland.

Bill Wiggin: My hon. Friend will find that 17 schools already offer the GCSE in Northern Ireland, with an average of 10 students per class. Agriculture, horticulture and animal care is the fastest growing degree subject, with an increase in applications of 117%, so clearly the demand is there.

Julian Sturdy: I am glad my hon. Friend has brought those figures to this debate. I can always rely on him to bring facts to the table. It is also worth mentioning that there is an opportunity for those who are privileged enough to have the advantage of taking an IGCS qualification in agriculture offered by Cambridge Assessment, but it is clear that opportunities are limited to a small cohort of students in the UK, so I do not think that that really qualifies. We have to make sure that it is offered right across the board.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does he envisage the GCSE being provided in secondary schools or will he broaden his remit to encourage organisations such as the Duchy College in my constituency to provide the GCSE, so that the college can broaden its remit?

Julian Sturdy: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. It is important to ensure that all education facilities have the opportunity to offer a GCSE in agriculture. It should be available to all—that is the premise of the argument—and not a limited few.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way very briefly?

Julian Sturdy: Very briefly.

Dr Drew: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous. I actually taught rural studies, although I look too young. Does he accept that the wider rural economy is crucial to the relationship between agriculture and the rural hinterland?

Julian Sturdy: Again, I entirely agree. I will go on to mention that this is not just about agriculture. The wider rural economy, the environment and food security link back to agriculture and food production.

I understand that the Department for Education has recently introduced changes to secondary qualifications and wants a time to allow those to settle down, but a model exists for how to design and teach the subject at GCSE level, which suggests it would be straightforward for the Government to make it available. Has there been any consideration of replicating the content of the GCSE syllabus available to those in Northern Ireland for students in Britain?

I have been sympathetic to an expansion in GCSE options for some time, but I was encouraged to argue for this more publicly by the intervention of the BBC “Countryfile” presenter, Adam Henson, who publicly called for the introduction of an agriculture GCSE in September last year. He said:

“You can get a GCSE in religious studies and business, so why not in agriculture?”

That is a fair question. A GCSE in agriculture has a strong claim to feature among current non-core science and mathematics options, which currently include geology, astronomy and psychology. Expanding the offer to include the option of a GCSE in agriculture would be a sensible and logical development of the Government’s welcome plans to expand the provision of vocational and technical education in order to create a better skilled and more productive workforce, enjoying higher wages and better living standards. That is recognised in the Government’s industrial strategy, which made the claim of “putting the UK at the forefront of this global revolution in farming.”

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am old enough to remember when there was an O-grade, or an O-level, in agricultural science in Scotland—I am substantially older than my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who is far too young to remember it. An agriculture GCSE has to be about food production and what the countryside is really about, as opposed to the countryside as a national park. The best thing that could come out of it would be that people connect again with food production and the countryside.

Julian Sturdy: I entirely agree that it is about connecting with food production, and ensuring that we understand where our food comes from, how it works in the chain, the environmental impacts, and how we manage production. I cannot say that I am old enough to remember the O-level; my year was the last to take O-levels, but I cannot remember having the opportunity to take that one. The point is that we have to ensure that we move forward and the GCSE would be one way of doing that.

I am watching with interest the development of plans for T-levels, as a full technical alternative to A-levels, but if there is truly to be the parity of esteem necessary to boost the take-up of vocational and technical skills, the option of a vocational or sector-linked qualification needs to be offered to pupils as soon as possible, at the time they first select the qualifications that they will take—that is, at GCSE level. Have the Government considered the effects of boosting the number of students taking the agriculture, environment and animal care route from 2022 by introducing a dedicated pre-16 qualification?

In Parliament, we are all familiar with employers saying that schools do not do enough to prepare our young people for the world of work. Offering an agriculture GCSE would go some way to respond to those concerns, by allowing pupils to equip themselves for work at an early age. GCSE-age children could learn about a practical and essential subject, directly linked to a varied and dynamic field of employment.
Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he has been very gracious. As we move towards leaving the EU on 31 March next year, the opportunities for agri-food business to increase across the whole world are magnificent and large. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that now may be the time to focus on them? There are opportunities in farming here, and in exports overseas.

Julian Sturdy: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman; he makes the point very well. As we move forward with Brexit, now is the time to push the boundaries and take agriculture to new levels. To do that, however, we will need the skills base for the future, and we have to enthuse young people. A GCSE in agriculture gives us a real opportunity to do that.

Sadly, there is plenty of evidence that young people do not consider agriculture as a potential career path at the moment, which is unfortunate, considering the role in the UK economy, and in addressing the huge global challenges of world hunger, food security and environmental conservation. Only 4% of UK workers would ever consider farm work or going into agriculture. Statistics show that about 20,000 students opt to study agriculture at university each year. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) said, that is a growing number, which is very encouraging. However, some 280,000 school leavers sign up for business-related degrees. Introducing agriculture as an option early on, at GCSE level, would give young people a chance to understand the huge opportunities that the sector offers them, and would do something to correct the imbalance.

The comparison with business studies in those statistics, along with Adam Henson’s comments that I quoted earlier, are important because it is essential that we remember that farming is a business, and therefore offers exactly the same opportunity for entrepreneurship and innovation as urban enterprises, as well as addressing huge environmental and humanitarian concerns. Moreover, it is a business sector that will be at the forefront of unfolding technological developments and exciting scientific advancements. A GCSE option would be a useful way of alerting school pupils and school leavers to those opportunities.

Agriculture is being, and will be, transformed by the fourth industrial revolution, and it is important to alert pupils and parents to the option of pursuing a career in a high-tech, high-skill industry, utilising the latest scientific developments. School leavers entering the farming sector in the next few years could expect to use GPS technology to harvest wheat, to use driverless tractors, to use drones to deliver herbicides to weeds on a precision basis, to grow wheat with nitrogen-fixing bacteria, and to use other new technologies that will drive up animal welfare, such as robotic milking parlours. The industry needs entrants with sound scientific understanding and applied skills.

In the next few decades, robotics, biotechnology, gene editing and data science will become increasingly established in the farming sector. Our country is home to some of the best agri-science research in the world, such as at Rothamstead Research in Herefordshire—

Bill Wiggin: Hertfordshire.

Julian Sturdy: Sorry, Hertfordshire—once again, I thank my hon. Friend for giving the correct details. Other examples include Fera Science, just outside my constituency in North Yorkshire, and Stockbridge Technology Centre in North Yorkshire. We should be trying to fire the imaginations of our young people by engaging them in the classroom with such examples as soon as possible, just as we try to inspire pupils with the achievements of British scientists and astronauts and the richness of British cultural and literary achievements in their science and English GCSE courses. The development of indoor vertical farming using hydroponics will also expand the opportunities for growing food in urban areas, which could make agricultural knowledge just as relevant to pupils in urban areas as in rural ones.

An agriculture GCSE would also encourage schoolchildren to grapple in a practical manner with the huge practical, humanitarian and environmental challenge of global food security. The growth of the global population means that, as a world, we have to produce 70% more food over the next 30 years to keep pace with demand, and to ensure that people do not go hungry. Moreover, we have to do so in an environmentally sustainable way that makes the best use of our finite resources.

The challenge is as significant in its own way as that of climate change, and I argue that, like climate change, it should be included in school curricula. Putting an agriculture GCSE on the curriculum would also widen opportunities for students, by giving them the option to learn about a sector that relatively few of them will have knowledge of, or have considered as a career choice. The majority of farms are family businesses, mine being no exception, and the routes to getting involved if someone is not directly from a farming background can, sadly, be quite limited. That is to the detriment of both the sector and school leavers, who are restricted in their ability to get a taste of a sector in which they could well thrive.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I was pleased to host the UK and Ireland delegates to the global agricultural summit here in Parliament last November. All the current entrants were university students. I was hugely impressed by their knowledge, their enthusiasm for the latest advances in agriculture and their desire to contribute solutions. However, what was most telling was that not a single one of them had a family background in farming. They had all been drawn to the sector by developing their own independent interest and research into agricultural questions. That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.

That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I was pleased to host the UK and Ireland delegates to the global agricultural summit here in Parliament last November. All the current entrants were university students. I was hugely impressed by their knowledge, their enthusiasm for the latest advances in agriculture and their desire to contribute solutions. That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I was pleased to host the UK and Ireland delegates to the global agricultural summit here in Parliament last November. All the current entrants were university students. I was hugely impressed by their knowledge, their enthusiasm for the latest advances in agriculture and their desire to contribute solutions. That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I was pleased to host the UK and Ireland delegates to the global agricultural summit here in Parliament last November. All the current entrants were university students. I was hugely impressed by their knowledge, their enthusiasm for the latest advances in agriculture and their desire to contribute solutions. That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I was pleased to host the UK and Ireland delegates to the global agricultural summit here in Parliament last November. All the current entrants were university students. I was hugely impressed by their knowledge, their enthusiasm for the latest advances in agriculture and their desire to contribute solutions. That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I was pleased to host the UK and Ireland delegates to the global agricultural summit here in Parliament last November. All the current entrants were university students. I was hugely impressed by their knowledge, their enthusiasm for the latest advances in agriculture and their desire to contribute solutions. That certainly emphasised to me the capacity of agriculture to challenge and inspire young people, but I would also highlight that it is relatively rare for someone is not directly from a farming background to make the best use of our finite resources.
I ask the Minister to look closely at this issue going forward. There is a great opportunity for our economy, as well as an opportunity to give young people the skills in what is, to me, an incredibly vibrant and exciting sector.

11.22 am

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this debate. He spoke passionately and emphasised the need for people—not just young people—to know about careers in all aspects of farming. He also mentioned agri-tech. In my role as Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, I have met a number of people in that sector about the opportunities. My hon. Friend and I have spoken at length before about grazing horses. This is a new subject for us to discuss, and I heard everything he had to say.

I am mindful that with apprenticeships and T-levels there is a tendency for the focus to be urban-based and for rural areas to be forgotten. I assure my hon. Friend, as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—who has now left—my hon. Friends the Members for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), and the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), that I will not forget that, because it is important.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer raised the issue of food production across the world and the international aspects of farming, which is equally important. It is also important that the sector gets the workforce it needs. He will be aware that a number of subjects taught at key stage 4 and earlier include some core knowledge about food production and the environment. Those have been recognised in the changes that have come about to GCSEs. There have also been a number of changes to GCSEs that make the content more rigorous. Whatever someone does after 16, it is critical to have a good foundation in maths, English and digital skills. My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of understanding that farming is a business. Business skills are important, and such skills are predicated on a solid grounding.

In geography, for instance, pupils are expected to learn about changing weather, climate change, global ecosystems, biodiversity and resources, including an overview of how humans use, modify and change those ecosystems and environments in order to obtain food, energy and water. In the nutrition GCSE, pupils are required to understand the economic, environmental and socio-cultural influences on food availability. That is quite important. There is also content in some of the science GCSEs. I suspect that that will not be enough to satisfy my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer, or indeed my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire, who spoke with his usual passion, but material in the core reformed subjects provides a general background, which forms an important grounding in some of the knowledge needed to go on and run a business.

Schools can also do outdoor learning and there is a certain amount of freedom, which many schools use. I gather that there are more than 100 schools with farms in the UK, a fact I was not aware of. They bring pupils from both rural and urban areas to understand a little bit more about farming. Also, there is a City & Guilds technical certificate in agriculture for 16 to 18-year-olds, so some opportunities do exist. In addition, apprenticeships and T-levels—technical education that will be on a par with A-levels—will change the world. To some extent, it is in the hands of hon. Members to go out into their schools to highlight the opportunities that exist.

The first teaching of T-levels will start in September 2020, with the remainder launched in two phases in 2021 and 2022. The agriculture, environment and animal care route will be rolled out in the second phase, which gives it a degree of importance not accorded to all. The content of the T-levels will be decided by employers, professionals and practitioners, which will mean they have real market relevance and real currency within the sector. We are currently consulting on T-levels and I am sure the farming sector and the broader agri-tech sector will have input.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer is right that early introduction to the issues is important. I launched our careers strategy in December last year. The strategy recognises that young people’s interaction with work is absolutely critical—not just doing work placements, but employers coming into schools. There are now duties on schools to bring people in and there are clear benchmarks about what they have to achieve in terms of introducing young people to the wide range of careers and the routes to getting there. Entrepreneurial, talented new entrants are needed to encourage the next generation of farmers.

There has been wide-scale reform of apprenticeships. There will be some farmers who pay levies, but there are opportunities even for small and medium-sized enterprises. Apprenticeship standards for land-based service engineer and land-based service engineer technician are already live and a number of standards are in development, including crop technician, farrier, poultry technician and stockperson. The Institute for Apprenticeships is working with employers to ensure that quality standards are high. I recently met some students in a school for young people with special needs. I was very impressed with the work that they are doing to encourage those children, who are going on to do level 2 apprenticeships in agriculture, farming and animal care. It is very impressive.

We want to make sure that the sector has the right skills, but what is absolutely critical is overcoming a not insignificant degree of parental and teacher prejudice about the options that are open for young people. It has been a pleasure to have this debate. I am sorry I did not have longer, but I assure my hon. Friend that I am on the case. It is very important that the tendency with these changes for an urban focus is spread out into rural communities. National Apprenticeship Week is coming up. He will have the opportunity—

Bill Wiggin: Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: Yes, briefly.

Bill Wiggin: It is critical that we have an academic qualification for people in urban areas in this subject, rather than making them do apprenticeships that they cannot reach because they live in the towns.

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because it is also about attracting people back into the countryside. One of the issues for rural communities is

577WH Agriculture GCSE 7 FEBRUARY 2018 Agriculture GCSE 578WH
that people leave and go elsewhere. There are high-level qualifications too—it is not just about levels 2 and 3; it is about levels 4 and 5. The degree opportunities were mentioned, and degree apprenticeships are really taking off. There is not much not to like—

11.30 am

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
one of its 88 recommendations—No. 21, on access by lawyers to medical records—had been substantially implemented.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Military Court Watch reported that 79% of children detained in 2017 signed a confession or a statement in Hebrew. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the majority of those children would not have had a guardian or responsible adult with them, and that they probably would not have understood the language they were committing to?

Sarah Champion: I share my hon. Friend’s concern, and I will address that point. Arabic is an official language in the state of Israel, so why are the documents presented to children in Hebrew? I will let my hon. Friend draw conclusions.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Before the hon. Lady leaves Military Court Watch, will she give way?

Sarah Champion: That was quite a rude interruption. Please go ahead, though.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What evidence is there that NGOs such as Military Court Watch and other Israeli NGOs that perform this valuable function have themselves been subject to a measure of harassment at an official level?

Sarah Champion: I am afraid I cannot answer that, because I do not know the data. I hope that any organisation that is trying to speak on the basis of facts does not suffer harassment, but as the right hon. Gentleman knows, too often, when we put our head above the parapet, it gets shot off multiple times.

A year before the UNICEF report, a group of senior UK lawyers published an independent study entitled “Children in Military Custody”. Published in 2012 and funded by the Government, it found that Israel was in breach of at least eight of its international legal obligations under the UN convention on the rights of the child and the fourth Geneva convention, due to its treatment of Palestinian children held in military detention.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this very important debate. As she knows, Palestinian children as young as 12 are routinely taken from their homes in night-time raids, blindfolded, bound, shackled, interrogated without a lawyer or parent present and with no audio-visual recordings, put into solitary confinement and forced to remain blindfolded, bound, shackled, interrogated without a lawyer or parent present and with no audio-visual recordings, and with no right to respond to the allegations. What part of that is not plainly and simply wrong?

Sarah Champion: It is hard to argue with my hon. Friend’s passionate intervention.

The UK report set out 40 recommendations on arrest, interrogation, bail hearings, plea bargaining, trials, sentencing, detention, complaints and monitoring. Military Court Watch stated last year that only one of the UK report’s recommendations—No. 33, on the separation of children from adults in detention—had been substantially implemented. The empirical evidence is clear: half a decade after the publication of the UNICEF and UK lawyers’ reports, which contained dozens of recommendations to bring Israel’s military system of detention of Palestinian children in line with basic international legal standards, there has been limited implementation by the authorities.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to take this opportunity to explain to the House why Israel uses military courts.

Sarah Champion: I can do, but that is quite a big topic. Because of the, in my opinion, illegal occupation, people have to go through a military system, rather than a civilian system. The unfortunate thing is that that is applied to the Palestinians, who rarely have parity with the Israelis.

Although I praise the Israeli Government for allowing the studies to go ahead, it is disappointing that that leading international democracy has largely not acted on the recommendations, which were made in good faith. I now turn to the specific areas I would like the Minister to focus on.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I was last in the west bank in November—I have declared that in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—and I visited a family whose young son had been seized in the middle of the night and detained. He was in administrative detention. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in one respect, things have got worse since our last debate, because Israel has started using administrative detention—detention without charge for unlimited periods? That must be wrong on any basis.

Sarah Champion: Yes. That technique is not used often, but it is used. It allows the child to be held in detention without any charges being brought against them, and without their having the right to respond to the charges.

The prevalent practice of night-time raids by Israeli military personnel causes a huge amount of distress to children and their families. Inevitably, night raids on civilian population areas by any military tend to terrify those communities. After 50 years of use, they can become hugely debilitating. Although conducting night arrest operations reduces the potential for clashes with local residents, the practice cannot be said to be in the best interests of the child—a primary consideration under the UN convention on the rights of the child.

The UK report recommended:

“Arrests of children should not be carried out at night save for in extreme and unusual circumstances. A pilot study of issuing summonses as an alternative means of arrest should be carried out.”

UNICEF made similar recommendations. Following those recommendations, it was most welcome that Israel announced the introduction of a pilot scheme in February 2014, whereby summonses would be issued requiring attendance at police stations for questioning, in lieu of arresting a child at night. That was to be similar to the practice for Israeli children. Military Court Watch reports, however, that the use of summonses in lieu of night arrest has been very low. It found that 6% of the children affected in 2017 reported being served with a summons as an alternative to a night arrest; in 2016 the figure was just 2%.

Even in cases in which summonses are used. Military Court Watch identified a number of issues: in most cases, the summonses were delivered by the military after midnight; relevant parts of the summonses were
frequently handwritten in Hebrew without Arabic translation; relevant information, such as the nature of the accusation, was missing; and no reference to the child’s legal rights was included in any of the summonses. Military Court Watch further reports that, in the 80 cases it documented in 2017, 65% of children still reported being arrested at night, in what are frequently described as terrifying raids undertaken by the military.

There is some good news, but overall, since the summons scheme has been in operation, it has been apparent that, first, it is infrequently utilised and, secondly, arrests in terrifying night raids continue to be the norm. Furthermore, the indications—yet to be confirmed—are that the pilot scheme may now have been discontinued altogether. Will the Minister therefore please request from his Israeli counterparts confirmation as to whether the pilot scheme is still operational? Will he also request data on the use of summonses since the pilot scheme was announced in 2014, and will he urge that children should not be arrested at night except in extreme and unusual circumstances?

Next I would like to speak about the right to silence. As we all know, the right to silence is an ancient and fundamental legal right, granting protection against self-incrimination. Significantly, that right is also enshrined in Israeli military law. When implemented properly, it provides vulnerable children with some protection against undue pressure during interrogations, which may lead to false confessions. Military Court Watch notes that 84% of children continue to report not being informed of their right to silence. It further notes that in the 16% of cases in which “children were informed of this right, the manner and circumstances in which the information was conveyed raises serious questions as to whether the notification is sufficient.”

Another fundamental legal right is timely access to legal representation. International legal standards provide that interrogations should take place in the presence of a lawyer to protect against self-incrimination and to provide safeguards against potential ill-treatment or coercion. Israel’s highest court has confirmed the fundamental nature of the right to consult with a lawyer during the interrogation stage of an investigation.

In the 2015 update to its report, UNICEF noted that Israel’s military prosecutor highlighted that Israeli military order 1651, issued in 2009, provides a detainee with the right to meet and consult with a lawyer. Although military law is silent on when such a consultation should take place, it is accepted that it must occur before questioning, subject to limited security exceptions. As in many situations, however, there is a large gap between the law and what happens in practice.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend condemn the dangerous and short-sighted rhetoric of the President of the United States at the recent Davos conference, when he threatened to cut off Palestinian aid? Does she agree that, should that happen, the UK must ramp up its financial aid to Palestine so that Palestinians, especially children, do not pay for Trump’s fanatical world view?

Sarah Champion: I agree with my hon. Friend. As with the debate today, I think we forget that we put such statements on the public record, and they can have a direct and immediate effect. We hope that today’s speeches have a positive one, but in the case of Donald Trump, I can only say that he has had a very negative impact on the relations between the two countries.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): On legal representation, this geographical area has two separate sets of rules applied to it. Under the civilian code that applies for Israeli children, there is a requirement for a parent to be in attendance during interrogation, and an undertaking that interrogations not occur at night, but the same is not reflected in the military rules. Is it not a great shame that those rules could not be matched up?

Sarah Champion: I agree with my hon. Friend. There are many, many examples in which there is no parity. That is one of the things that I urge the Israeli Government to look at, because it is blatant discrimination and is not necessary.

Military Court Watch reports that, in the 80 testimonies it collected in 2017, 81% of the children reported not having access to a lawyer before interrogation. As a result, most children still consult a lawyer for the first time in a military court, after the critical interrogation phase is over. Given that context, the UK legal charity Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights has implemented a Know Your Rights campaign in partnership with Defence for Children International-Palestine to empower and educate Palestinian children in the occupied west bank to secure their basic rights if detained in Israel’s military detention system.

The campaign started in 2014 and is ongoing, due to the Israeli authorities’ continuing non-implementation of basic human rights and due process safeguards. I therefore ask the Minister to engage with the Israeli authorities to ensure, as a bare minimum, that: first, all children are, at the time of arrest, informed in their own language of their right to silence, and relevant documents are provided to them in that language; secondly, all children are able to consult a lawyer of their choice before their interrogation and, preferably, also during interrogation; and, thirdly, in order to ensure compliance, a breach of those principles results in the discontinuance of the prosecution and the child’s immediate release. I further ask the Minister to urge the Israeli authorities, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) suggested, to allow a parent or guardian to accompany the child during questioning—a right afforded to Israeli children when questioned by the Israeli police.

Audio-visual recording of interrogations is a practical safeguard. The UNICEF and UK reports recommended audio-visual recordings of all interrogations of children. Such recordings provide an essential further safeguard against potential ill-treatment or coercion; they also provide protection to interrogators against false allegations of wrongdoing. One would assume that that would be a win, win outcome. Perhaps in response to the recommendations, the military authorities issued military order 1745 in September 2014, requiring the audio-visual recording of all interrogations of minors in the west bank. However, the order limited that protection to non-security offences, thereby rendering it largely redundant, as most offences involving Palestinian children, including stone throwing and protesting, are classified as security offences. I ask the Minister to urge the Israeli authorities to remove the security offence exception from the military order providing for audio-visual recording
of detainees and to ensure that all interrogations of children are audio-visually recorded and the tapes made available to the child’s lawyer before the first hearing.

I will now say something about the prevalence of confessional evidence in the military court system, and the process by which those confessions are obtained. It is extraordinary and disconcerting that Israel’s military court system has a conviction rate of 95%, according to its own figures. Confessional evidence is central to securing convictions in that system, whether direct confessions or confessions by others. Effective scrutiny of those confessions is virtually impossible, due to the lack of basic legal safeguards to which I have already referred. There is compelling evidence that the lack of legal protections for Palestinian children is destructive of their safety and welfare. An expert psychiatric opinion from Dr Carmon, commissioned by Physicians for Human Rights Israel, considered the emotional and developmental factors that lead children to make false confessions during interrogations. The implications of such confessions should be understood by all of us. Dr Carmon says:

“The violent arrest process and psychological interrogation methods mentioned...lead to the breaking of the ability of the child or adolescent to withstand the interrogation and flagrantly violate his or her rights. These interrogation methods, when applied to children and adolescents, are equivalent to torture.”

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Champion: Let me finish the quotation first—it might answer the right hon. Gentleman’s question.

“These methods deeply undermine the dignity and personality of the child or adolescent, and inflict pain and severe mental suffering. Uncertainty and helplessness are situations that can too easily lead a child or adolescent to provide the requested confession out of impulsiveness, fear or submission. It is a decision that is far from free and rational choice...These detention and interrogation methods ultimately create a system that breaks down, exhausts and permeates the personality of the child or adolescent and robs him or her of hope. These methods are particularly harmful to children and adolescents who live in poor, isolated populations, in a state of conflict, political tension, and/or severe social stress, such as the occupied Palestinian population. The harmful effects on children can also harm the society to which they belong.

Every child has the right to be a child, to his or her dignity, and to protection from all forms of violence.”

Sir Desmond Swayne: A retired Israeli soldier told me that the explicit instructions for night operations were to carry them out in such a brutal manner as to achieve exactly the effect that the hon. Lady refers to.

Sarah Champion: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman of making that point. I too have spoken to retired Israeli soldiers and have, sadly, heard similar tales.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will remember that a year ago she and I both served on a delegation with Members from both sides of the House. She is quoting some horrific statistics and powerful testimony, but does she not agree that the terror experienced in military court by the kids who threw stones is often more powerful than the statistics in isolation? Sometimes people cannot get a grip on them. This debate should not be about the wider geopolitical situation, but the wellbeing of children.

Sarah Champion: I completely agree. That is what I want to focus on; we are talking about children. Regardless of the crime that they have or have not committed, they should still be treated with dignity and within the constraints of the law.

The arrest process and interrogation methods referred to by Dr Carmon were described in great detail in the UK and the UNICEF reports. It is deeply disturbing that two years after the release of the UNICEF report that concluded that ill treatment appears to be “widespread, systematic and institutionalised”, the UN agency issued an update that found “reports of alleged ill-treatment of children during arrest, transfer, interrogation and detention have not significantly decreased in 2013 and 2014.”

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. In the light of what she says, would it not be appropriate for our Government to demand an independent inquiry from the Israeli Government into what is going on? That would help everyone.

Sarah Champion: The reality is that we are not in a position to demand. The purpose of this debate is to reach out a hand of friendship and to offer the skills and expertise that we have in this country on this topic, to work in partnership with Israel.

Although UNICEF is yet to release any further updates, reports issued by the US State Department, Military Court Watch and others indicate that the situation today remains substantially unchanged. It is worth recalling that the UK report noted that if the process of arrest and interrogation is occurring to a significant extent as described, Israel would be in breach of the absolute prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

As a bare minimum of protection, I urge the Minister to make representations to ensure that no child is subjected to physical or psychological violence, no child is blindfolded or painfully restrained, and no child is subject to coercive forces and threats. Any statement made as a result of torture or ill treatment must be excluded from evidence in proceedings. I ask the Minister to make inquiries to UNICEF about when the agency will release its next update, and to commend it on the important work it has done.

Two years ago, in a debate on the same subject, I referred to Israel’s policy of transferring Palestinian detainees—adults and children—from the west bank to prisons located in Israel, in violation of article 76 of the fourth Geneva convention. International law classes this activity as a war crime. In UK domestic law, the Geneva Conventions Act 1957 and the International Criminal Court Act 2001 class this activity as a war crime. The latest data released by the Israeli prison
service indicates that in 2017, 83% of adult detainees and 61% of child detainees were transferred and detained unlawfully. This practice affects approximately 7,000 individuals each year and it has continued for 50 years. Strikingly, however, Israeli military authorities informed UNICEF in late 2014 that they have no intention of changing this policy.

That rejection undermines the credibility of the international legal order, and therefore harms the security of us all. I have been to Ofer military court and spoken to parents. Because of the restrictions on movement and the requirement of permits to visit their children in Israel, some parents never get to see their children in prison. The unlawful transfer and detention of children in Israel is not just a legal issue but one of basic humanity. Has the Minister or anyone in his Department had any conversations that would shed light on Israel’s decision to explicitly reject the specific UNICEF recommendation? What further steps does he intend to take to encourage Israel to meet its international legal obligations on the transfer of prisoners out of occupied territory? Can the Minister ascertain how many UK citizens are currently involved, directly or indirectly, with the unlawful transfer and detention of Palestinian prisoners outside the occupied territory? What measures will he take in respect of those individuals in accordance with the law?

By now I am sure everyone is aware of the case of Ahed Tamimi, a now 17-year-old girl from the west bank village of Nabi Saleh. In December, she was arrested in the middle of the night after being filmed confronting and slapping Israeli soldiers in her village following the shooting of her 14-year-old cousin. Like all Palestinian female prisoners, Ahed has been transferred to a prison in Israel. The case is polarising: on the one hand, there are those calling for her immediate release; on the other, Israel’s minister for education calls for the whole face of riots, more than 3,000 arrests were made and more than 1,000 people were issued with criminal charges. Financial Interests.

Sarah Champion: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Howell: No, I will not.

The singling out of Israel ignores the fact that Israel faces extensive acts of terror on its territory. It ignores the fact that Israel has established military juvenile courts, shortened the period of initial remand, stressed the rights of minors, raised the age of minority to 18, enacted a statute of limitations for the prosecution of minors, given parents legal standing and strengthened legal representation for minors. It also ignores the co-operation of Israel in the light of the 2012 Foreign and Commonwealth Office-funded report. The British embassy in Israel said:

“We welcome Israel’s focus on the particular needs of this more vulnerable category of detainees.”
As far as I am aware, the pilot programme in the west bank to issue summons, easing the need to arrest at night, to which the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) referred, continues. If Israel were to use civil courts instead of a military one, it would be accused of simply annexing the west bank.

Nevertheless, we must recognise that 30% of attackers against Israel—fuelled by intimidation that denies Israel the right to exist and glorifies terrorists and Nazi sympathisers—have been Palestinian minors under the age of 18. The majority were between 16 and 18. The youngest was an 11-year-old, who said after being arrested for stabbing an Israeli that he wanted to die a martyr.

Just over 300 minors are in custody after 400 violent, ideological terror attacks. That is not to be deprecated. The effect on wider civil disorder can be seen from the attack in Jerusalem on a 70-year-old Palestinian man who was mistaken for an Israeli. The use of minors in this way, driven by hate and incitement, is nothing more than the abuse of children.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, may I ask the hon. Gentleman to give a full and clear indication of his interest?

John Howell: I referred to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which contains the fact that I went on a trip to the area.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Thank you very much.

3.4 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate on the comprehensive way in which she introduced it. I also commend the Minister and the Government for the leadership that they showed on this issue during Israel’s third universal periodic review at the UN Human Rights Council.

A range of bodies have made a number of core recommendations in the past six years that are relevant to the issue of military detention. The Foreign Office-commissioned “Children in Military Custody” report published in 2012 found that Israel was in breach of at least eight articles of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. In 2013, as my hon. Friend said, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern in a report that recommendations it made in 2002 and 2010 had been fully disregarded, and UNICEF published a report with 14 core recommendations, again reflecting concerns that had been raised time and again.

The Minister will know that the vast majority of those recommendations, the recommendations made in a debate in this place seven years ago and the recommendations made in the debate that my hon. Friend led just over two years ago remain unfulfilled. He will also know that in February 2016, a follow-up mission by UK lawyers to investigate the situation was cancelled because the Israeli authorities withdrew co-operation.

I know that the Minister cannot magically fix the world’s problems, even though I am sure he would like to try, but I ask him to do two specific things as a result of this debate. First, will he push for a thorough review of the implementation of the recommendations of the 2012 report commissioned by his Department, which should include seeking from Israel an assurance that it will facilitate a return mission so that those independent lawyers can assess whether, and if so how, things have changed since their first report and what will happen in the future? Secondly, will he follow through on the Government’s approach to Israel’s third universal periodic review last month? I would appreciate it if, as part of that, the Minister outlined how he intends to follow up on the recommendations I mentioned. The Government were absolutely right to call for Israel to put right these problems. The question is what is done about them.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing the debate. I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which includes a trip that I took to the region in 2016.

I believe in human rights for all people around the world, and Palestinian children are no exception. Israeli authorities, be they military or civilian, have a duty to uphold those human rights and to ensure that their justice system is fair and proportionate. The UK Government were therefore right to raise concerns with the Israeli authorities, and we should continue to engage with Israel to improve its practices. As ever, the ultimate solution to these problems is a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and I welcome the fact that this Government continue to advocate for both sides to return to the negotiating table and resume peace talks.

However, we should be careful not to fall into the trap of accepting the simplistic narrative of anti-Israel propagandists. This complex issue cannot be solved with a round of Israel bashing. The Palestinian Authority rules over a society where it is easy for a child to be led into accepting terrorist ideology. The Palestinian Authority—not Hamas, but the so-called moderates in the Palestinian Authority—name schools after terrorists, give them honours and pay them monthly salaries. At the same time, they delegitimise the existence of the state of Israel and the Jewish presence in the region, and deny the Jewish connection to much of the region’s history.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, I only have three minutes.

Is it any surprise, then, that some young Palestinians are becoming so radicalised that they are willing to engage in or incite terror? Since 2015, dozens of terrorist stabbings have been perpetrated by Palestinians under the age of 17. If we criticise Israel, we must also criticise the Palestinian Authority, whose security forces’ record with children leaves a lot to be desired. In that region alone, we must also criticise Saudi Arabia for executing children, Iran for executing people who were arrested when they were children, and Egypt for—according to Human Rights Watch—allegedly torturing children.

Yes, let us call for Israel to improve its practices and uphold the human rights of Palestinian children, but let us also acknowledge the complexities that Israel faces. Let us stand up for the rights of children worldwide.
Let us also call for the Palestinian Authority to stop honouring terrorists and build a society where children are less easily radicalised. When we act with respect and consistency, we may find we get better results.

3.13 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am grateful to be called to speak in this debate on a very important issue about which hundreds of my constituents in Edinburgh South West write to me on a regular basis.

In October 2016, I visited the west bank on a cross-party parliamentary delegation with the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Human Appeal. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests in that regard. I visited the military court at Ofer. As a lawyer of 25 years’ standing, I was not impressed with what I saw there, because of the lack of due process and the lack of respect for basic human rights norms.

To give one example, we observed the trial of a young Palestinian man for allegedly throwing stones at a settler car. The man’s interrogator, who the defendant claimed had assaulted him during interrogation, was in court as a witness, with his gun casually slung in the back pocket of his jeans. It was claimed that the interrogation was conducted in Arabic and that alongside the statement an audio recording was taken. However, the audio recording was nowhere to be found, and the level of the interrogator’s Arabic was revealed to be insufficient to be able to obtain and record a fair and accurate statement. The only transcript of the interview was in Hebrew. In a fair trial in a democracy that respects the rule of law, that case would have been thrown out. It was not, and that is the gravamen of the issue here.

The issue is not about military law, because sadly the west bank is under a hostile occupation, and occupations require military law—although they are meant to be temporary, and this one has lasted 50 years. However, having military courts is no excuse for disregarding the proper rules of justice and legal safeguards, particularly for children, but also for adults. There should be proper accounting for the physical and mental maturity of the detainees and an awareness of the long-term consequences of actions on children. That is not the case for Palestinian children in Israel’s judicial system under military law in the west bank, and something needs to be done about it. I have been an MP for less than three years, and I remember when the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), whom I congratulate, secured a debate on this issue two years ago and we seem to be absolutely no further forward.

I know the Minister is an honourable man and that he takes his duties very seriously, particularly in this area. I am not speaking as a result of what I witnessed, but on behalf of hundreds of constituents who write to me about this matter regularly and feel passionately about it because they believe in human rights, due process and the rule of law. I look forward to hearing what the Minister is going to do about it.

3.16 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), whom I know well and like a lot. The way in which she presented the debate this afternoon was in many ways consensual. She acknowledged there had been changes in Israel. However, I would take her to task on some of the things she did not say. The frustrating thing about debates on this subject is that they become divisive—you either believe in human rights or you don’t. On this particular issue, we have to understand not only what is happening on the ground, but the context in which Israel operates the military courts.

As the hon. Lady said, there have been some changes, such as establishing the juvenile military courts and piloting a programme of issuing summonses to minors instead of arresting them in their homes. Those are things we should encourage. I know the Minister will seek to encourage such things, but we should also understand that those are not simple things to implement in a hothouse part of the world.

Many people raise the issues that have been roundly denied and debunked, such as the issue of statements being made only in Hebrew, as mentioned by my hon.
Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). There have been plenty of examples of the improper conduct of investigations resulting in cases being thrown out, and any claim that a confession has been gained incorrectly results in an independent review, which is exactly as the process should be.

I do not have long to speak, so I will talk about context. There are a couple of things that the hon. Lady did not talk about. My hon. Friends the Members for Henley and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) mentioned earlier how children and juveniles are being used in the conflict. If it were in any other part of the world, we would call some of those people child soldiers and we would be concerned about how they were being wound up and forced towards violent behaviour.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: No. I do not have time.

We must tackle the issue of Palestinian incitement as part of the debate, and the same goes for the lack of engagement from the west bank authorities for non-custodial sentences. We should also talk in these debates about what we can do as parliamentarians. I am proud to take a pro-Israel position. I am not anti-Palestinian—I consider myself to be pro-both—but those of us who take a more nuanced view on Israel should also talk about what we can do as parliamentarians, using our aid budget and all the rest of it, to bring people together, because that is the best way to bring an end to the conflict. I used to be a teacher and I know young people are quite positive and open-minded. Yes, there are concerns, which I hope the Minister will address, but things have happened, and we also have to remember the difficult context in which Israel is operating.

3.19 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

The detention and trial of a child is a tragedy whenever it occurs. However, I am concerned that this debate is symptomatic of the disproportionate and unfair focus on Israel that is all too prevalent in the media, international institutions and this House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) said—I congratulate her on obtaining the debate—this is the second debate in two years. However, we have not debated the fate, for instance, of child prisoners in Iran, where Amnesty International estimates there are at least 80 individuals on death row for crimes allegedly committed when they were under 18, or indeed the fate of others in Egypt, the Maldives, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Yemen, which have all sentenced juvenile offenders to death since 2010. Israel is, of course, a liberal democracy, and should be held to a higher standard than the likes of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. We have also never discussed the fate of the 60,000 children locked up in juvenile detention facilities in the United States—many for truanting, under-age drinking or consensual sexual conduct—or the fact that, adjusted for size of population, 5.5 times more minors were arrested in 2015-16 in England and Wales than in the west bank by Israel.

None of that is to suggest that the plight of Palestinian children in the tragic conflict there is not important, but we must make clear our deep and continuing concern at the Palestinian Authority’s policy of inciting violence—a policy intentionally aimed at children and young people.

Chris Williamson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Joan Ryan: I will not.

We see that policy in the naming of schools and sports tournaments after terrorists; in the newly revised curriculum, which asks students, as a maths exercise, to calculate the number of martyrs in Palestinian uprisings; and in the countless examples of anti-Semitism that litter children’s TV programmes on official Palestinian Authority TV.

Sarah Champion: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Joan Ryan: I will not, at this point.

We must register our deep and continuing concern at the Palestinian leadership’s attempt to recruit children into committing acts of violence. In December Fatah posted a photograph to its Twitter account of a young boy hurling rocks with a slingshot, together with a guide to how best to throw a rock. Let us remember that Yehuda Haim Shoham, one year-old Jonathan Palmer and three-year-old Adele Biton were all killed as a result of stones being thrown at cars they were travelling in.

Finally, it is important that we show our deep and continuing concern at the recruitment of children into Palestinian armed groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. As Child Soldiers International has stated:

“Children received military training and are used as messengers and couriers, and in some cases as fighters and suicide bombers.”

If we do not acknowledge and address those very serious issues, we run the risk of this debate being seen less as a matter of the welfare of Palestinian children and more as simply another opportunity to attack Israel.

3.22 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is important to provide some context to the issue. Many things have been raised this afternoon, but I shall concentrate on just one. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) raised the case of 17-year-old Ahed Tamimi. We all know what has happened to her now that she has been imprisoned, but I wonder whether hon. Members know what she said on Facebook straight after slapping an Israeli soldier. Out of earshot of the soldier, Ahed turned to the camera and said in Arabic:

“I wish that everybody all over the world would unite, so we can liberate Palestine... Be it stabbings, martyrdom-seeking operations, throwing stones, everyone must do his part and we must unite in order for our message to be heard that we want to liberate Palestine”.

I know what “martyrdom-seeking operations” means, and I am sure many other hon. Members do; that is why she was charged with inciting violence on social media.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Offord: I will not, at the moment.

I hope that the Minister shares my concern at the fact that a key part of that sad incident has gone largely unreported, and that such sentiments are a product of the hate-filled rhetoric of the Palestinian Authority, rather than being those of a 16-year-old child.
3.25 pm

[57x-761]part in this debate to tell Israel how to live its life.

We do not need hon. Members who are taking live in peace and security, and have its own laws of the land. We must leave Israel to decide its own future, whether it is stone-throwing, incitement to hatred or martyrdom operations—those are terrorist acts.

Sarah Champion: Will the hon. Gentleman give way, as I gave way to him?

Dr Offord: I will not give way.

Those are terrorist acts. There is a judiciary in Israel, and it is better for politicians in this country, and indeed in Israel, not to involve themselves in the judicial process. As has already been stated, there have been occasions when cases were thrown out because the evidence was not there. We must leave Israel to decide its own future, live in peace and security, and have its own laws of the land. We do not need hon. Members who are taking part in this debate to tell Israel how to live its life.

3.28 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is timely that you have called me to speak now, Mr Stringer, because I too want to speak about the case of Ahed Tamimi. I met her in her home at Nabi Saleh in November, a few weeks before she was arrested. She is an ordinary teenager who has not been groomed as has been suggested by some speakers.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I ask those in the Public Gallery not to intervene either vocally or by applause.

3.28 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

The failure of Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate a two-state solution to their conflict has resulted in a disturbing situation, including what we are discussing today; but the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be resolved only by direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians—not by the Palestinian Authority’s incitement of young people to hate and kill, as is happening on the west bank today. Such incitement is specifically in breach of the Geneva conventions.

We must remember that 75% of the offences committed by Palestinian minors are violent crimes, including murder, attempted murder, shooting, making and throwing Molotov cocktails, and attacking soldiers. Thirty per cent. of assailants in the terror attacks of 2016 were under 18 years old. The youngest was 11. For example, in June 2016, 13-year-old Hallel Ariel was stabbed to death by Nasser Tarayrah, a 17-year-old Palestinian, who climbed into her home and stabbed her repeatedly in a frenzied attack in front of her younger siblings.

Such violence has been encouraged by the Palestinian leadership, in direct contravention of the Geneva convention, which specifically prohibits the recruitment and involvement of children in terrorist activities. Fatah recently tweeted a practical guide to show young people how to throw rocks, which were euphemistically called “stones”. That has resulted in the murder of young people, including Yehuda Haim Shoham, aged five months. The Palestinian Authority incites hatred towards Jews and Israelis. In its October issue, the Palestinian youth magazine, Zayzafuna, claimed that Mohammed sanctioned the throwing of rocks at Jews. Terrorists are glorified. A recent report by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education—IMPACT-se—shows schoolbooks that glorify violence and martyrdom. The Palestinian Authority’s rewritten 2017 curriculum teaches children about its support for people who carry out terrorist attacks. In May 2015, a PA TV programme, “The Best Home”, showed a girl who recited a poem that called Jews “barbaric monkeys who murdered Allah’s pious prophets.”

If young people are continually told that murderous terrorists are heroes, it is not surprising that they try to emulate them. Nobody can be content with the current situation, and all individual allegations of any injustice must be investigated. However, the answer is to negotiate
peace, not to glorify hatred and violence by telling young people and children that murdering Israelis is justified resistance.

3.31 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing it.

At the end of November 2017, 313 Palestinian children were held in Israeli prisons, and three out of four of them will have experienced violence during their arrest. The majority of children will be arrested in the middle of the night, when heavily armed police break into their homes and drive them to a military detention centre where they will be interrogated. Many report being beaten and abused after their arrest and while in detention. Children are often interrogated without their parents or a lawyer present. Under military law children can be held in detention for 90 days without seeing a lawyer, and as of this year two children are held under administrative detention, which is indefinite imprisonment without trial. Currently, more than 180 children are held in detention without having been convicted. Under the occupation, children can be held for one and a half years before their case goes to trial.

There are two legal systems in the occupied territories. If an Israeli settler is arrested, they will be tried under Israeli civilian criminal law; if a Palestinian is arrested, they are tried in a separate military court. Access to justice is segregated. A child’s nationality and ethnicity determine the type of justice that they receive under Israel’s occupation. After sentencing, nearly 60% of Palestinian child detainees are transferred from the occupied territories to the prisons of Israel, in violation of the fourth Geneva convention. That means that most will be unable to receive family visits, due to the freedom of movement restrictions placed on Palestinians and the long time that it takes to issue a visiting permit.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marsha De Cordova: I will not.

If, step by step, we go through the journey of a child living under military occupation and what they will endure—the physical violence, the fear, the complete interruption of their life, and the huge swathes of time spent in detention—one thing becomes clear: this system is designed to repress, crush and intimidate generation after generation of Palestinians.

The military detention of children is a legal issue, and Israel is in breach of international law—namely the UN convention on the rights of the child and the Geneva convention. There is, of course, a deeper problem, because such detention is part of the cycle of humiliation and violence that characterises the continued illegal occupation of Palestine. That is a disgrace and should be condemned.

Finally, I wish to show my solidarity with Ahed Tamimi. Yesterday we celebrated the brave women in the UK who fought for their rights, often suffering the brutalities of the police and state as a consequence. Ahed Tamimi carries that flame forward for all young children such as her across the world—solidarity.

3.34 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I congratulate all Members who have contributed to the debate, and especially the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on her powerful and detailed speech. I will leave the Minister as much time as possible to respond to her concerns.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) pointed out, this issue is of huge concern to many of our constituents. We are dealing with basic questions about the rights of the child and the importance of the global conventions that govern them, as well as with specific questions about the role and actions of the Israeli Government.

The SNP condemns the arrest, detention and prosecution of Palestinian children by the Israeli Government, and we are deeply concerned about the increase in the number of children who have been detained as a result of the escalation of tensions in the territory. Estimates for the number of cases vary, but they are clearly into the hundreds, and the reports of people’s experiences—night arrests, strip searches, blindfolds—are extremely concerning, as are reports of children being denied access to due legal process and lawyers. As the hon. Member for Rotherham said when opening this debate, such treatment is unacceptable on a basic human level, even before considering conventions and international human rights obligations.

Colin Clark: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: I am not giving way.

Israel has ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child and the optional protocol on children and armed conflict, but it has been slow to incorporate the principles and provisions of the convention into its domestic legal system. In 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was clear that Israeli actions constituted “violations of the rights of Palestinian children and their families, feed the cycle of humiliation and violence and jeopardise a peaceful and stable future for all children of the region.”

 Constituents have raised with me the specific case of Ahed Tamimi, and the hon. Members for Rotherham, for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) all spoke about that case in different ways. In some ways that shows why this case has become symbolic—perhaps even metaphoric—for the broader conflict. It involves well-resourced, heavily armed and armoured soldiers on one hand, and, on the other hand, a young, unarmed girl who is causing a bit of a nuisance and slapping those soldiers about. That has ended in her arrest, and the polarised views that that has caused. I agree that violence never solves anything, but a relatively minor incident has spiralled into something much bigger and triggered many further consequences and polarised perspectives.

Amnesty International, and others, are clear that the treatment of Ahed does not respect her human rights or fulfil Israel’s obligations under the UNCRWC. Indeed, Amnesty says that nothing she has done can justify her continued detention, and it has called for her immediate release. It is clear from my mailbag, and from Members who have spoken in this debate, that the public want

Con
action from the UK Government, and for them to use their influence to call for action by the Israeli Government. I know the Minister does his best, and we are not expecting him to resolve a conflict that has been going on for decades, but it is important that the Government condemn in the strongest possible terms the mistreatment of children all around the world. They should also guarantee that UK funds will not support the military detention, interrogation, abuse or ill-treatment of Palestinian children. What dialogue are the Government having with the Government of Israel about how they intend to incorporate their obligations under the conventions into domestic law? More specifically, how will the Israeli Government take forward the recommendations in the various reports that have been referred to?

The SNP accepts that the Palestinian conflict is complex, and there are real sensitivities on all sides. However, the rights of the child are enshrined in international law and convention, and as the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) said—these days I do not see her on the train heading south as often as I used to—children are the victims of conflict, not parties to it. The rights and dignity of children in conflict must be upheld and protected.

Some Members asked about children involved in conflicts elsewhere in the world. Of course we should look at that, and if Members want to secure a debate on the human rights situation in other countries, I know that other Members—I have taken part in enough such debates—will speak out and condemn the situation in those countries.

The Government of Israel have a duty to live up to the protocols and conventions they have signed, and if progress is to be made in reaching a peaceful solution, surely a starting point must include taking children out of the equation. It is clear that there is a global public outcry against the detention of Palestinian children by the Israeli Government. The Israeli Government must act, and the UK Government must use their influence to help bring that about.

3.39 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): We have had a passionate and wide-ranging debate on an issue that affects children. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing it. She started her speech with an important statement when she said that she was not making a judgment on the alleged crimes that a Palestinian child may have committed, or on Israel’s right to act to uphold the law. This debate has been about the way that children have been treated by a democracy that is widely respected around the world as open, democratic, and subject to the rule of law.

My hon. Friend said that half a decade after the UNICEF and UK lawyers’ report was published, there has been limited implementation of its recommendations by the authorities, which I am sure we all agree is regrettable. She mentioned that there is another fundamental legal right that Palestinian children arrested by the Israeli authorities do not have: timely access to legal representation, which we would all agree is an important aspect of the rule of law in any nation. She also said it is both extraordinary and disconcerting that Israel’s military court system has a conviction rate of 95%, according to its own figures. We must then question whether justice really is being done.

My hon. Friend urged the Minister—I add my voice and that of Labour—that, as a bare minimum of protection, no child, whether in Israel, Palestine or anywhere else in the world, should be subjected to physical or psychological violence, blindfolded or painfully restrained, or subjected to coercive force or threats. That should be universal. I hope that Israel, above all countries in the world, would adhere to that.

We have heard powerful contributions from many right hon. and hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) has a strong record in upholding the cause of a Palestinian state living side by side with the state of Israel. He asked the Minister to press for a review of the recommendations of the 2012 report, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman can offer us something on that.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) said that we must criticise the Palestinian Authority if we criticise Israel on its treatment of children. Yes, of course we must, because this is universal. This is not just about Israel; it is about every country in the world that supposes itself to uphold the rule of law. I urge the Government to take those steps.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) said that we must support the rights of the child, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) made a good speech, as did the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South (Joanna Cherry). The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) pointed to the context in which Israel operates its military courts and mentioned child soldiers. I suggest to him that the way in which children are treated by Israel in the Palestinian territories is rather different from the recruitment of child soldiers in parts of Africa we have seen in recent decades.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) rightly talked about the detention and trial of a child being a tragedy wherever it takes place, and she compared the situation in the occupied territories with that in Iran and Saudi Arabia. We have had debates in this Chamber on human rights and especially the rights of the child in Iran. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) knows a great deal about the subject, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) set out the tragic case of Ahed Tamimi, who he met in Nabi Saleh, her own village. He made clear the context in which her arrest took place, which to me and others seemed a gross overreaction to her behaviour.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) always makes a rational contribution to any debate on Israel and Palestine. She pointed out that 30% of terror attacks on Israelis are carried out by Palestinians under 18, and that the Palestinian authorities incite hatred against Israelis and Jews. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) made a powerful contribution.

I will be as brief as possible because we want to hear from the Minister, but from the official Opposition’s point of view, as in any debate on issues relating to Israel and Palestine, it is important to think about the context in which these children find themselves. I ask the Minister and hon. Members to consider this question: how much has changed since my hon. Friend the Member...
for Rotherham introduced her first debate on this issue in December 2016 in Westminster Hall? Have things got better, or have they got worse?

We have heard about the 50 years of occupation of the Palestinian territories and the increasing expansion of settlements that are illegal under international law. We heard that there is no plausible ongoing peace process, and of course we know about Donald Trump’s attempts to help the situation as he sees it by recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which has sparked the resurgence of tensions all over the region—not just in the occupied territories and Palestinian areas but in Jordan and other countries. There have also been cuts by the United States to United Nations Relief and Works Agency funding, which has jeopardised the schooling and healthcare of Palestinian refugees all across the middle east, including around 500,000 children who are being educated in UNRWA schools.

The prospect of a two-state solution, which I am sure every Member in the Chamber supports, seems to be increasingly far off. As hon. Members will know, the Labour party has a strong policy of recognising the state of Palestine as an attempt to help the process of a two-state solution. Back in November, when I visited the region with the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), we met Israeli and Palestinian politicians, who are struggling to engage with young people in the area. A generation is being badly let down by their own leaders.

Members have reflected on the numerous problems in the system that allow child prisoners to be kept. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) was with us when we met children in the occupied territories last November. He referred to arrests, which are often made late at night, and often in Hebrew, which is traumatic for the families concerned. There is a disparity in the treatment of Israeli and Palestinian children in the way in which evidence is collected, and many other disparities between the treatment of settler children, who are Israelis under Israeli law, and Palestinian children, who are treated under military law.

Finally—I want to give the Minister enough time to respond to the many questions—there is a long-term problem in the increase in hostility between the Israeli defence forces and Palestinian children under 18 years old. When I was in Qalandiya in November with the shadow Foreign Secretary, we heard first hand from a 14-year-old girl who had been arrested for posting critical comments on Facebook, having witnessed her brother’s arrest in the middle of the night. Those children are the future leaders of a Palestinian state. What future awaits people on both sides if they grow up to fear and despise their Israeli peers for the treatment they received? Following the 2012 report, will the Government commit to make funding available for another report? What progress has been made since 2016 to press the Israelis to make funding available for another report? What future have the future leaders of a Palestinian state? What will they despise their Israeli peers for the treatment they received? Following the 2012 report, will the Government commit to make funding available for another report? What progress has been made since 2016 to press the Israelis to make funding available for another report? What future have the future leaders of a Palestinian state? What will they despise their Israeli peers for the treatment they received? Following the 2012 report, will the Government commit to make funding available for another report? What progress has been made since 2016 to press the Israelis to make funding available for another report? What future have the future leaders of a Palestinian state? What will they despise their Israeli peers for the treatment they received? Following the 2012 report, will the Government commit to make funding available for another report? What progress has been made since 2016 to press the Israelis to make funding available for another report? What future have the future leaders of a Palestinian state? What will they despise their Israeli peers for the treatment they received?

I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for initiating the debate and all colleagues who spoke. I will not be able to refer to each speech in the manner of the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who did a remarkable job to cover as much ground as he did, but I will refer to what I can.

The hon. Lady made a comprehensive and forensic speech. I will take her up on the offer of responding to a number of questions by letter, which I am happy to make available to any colleague. I also thank her for referring right away to the United Kingdom’s position on the universal periodic review and to note what we have sought to do in this instance. Some very hard things have been said today. Colleagues speak for themselves and must justify their own words, but suffice it to say there is an element of truth in almost everything that has been said on both sides. That should be salutary to all of us. We are talking about incitement, killing, the death of children and the loss of land—in short, the catalogue of despair and misery that has haunted these lands for much too long. We set all that in that context.

Although I will devote most of what I say to the specific issue raised by the hon. Member for Rotherham of the rights of children, let me not ignore the issue raised by a number of my hon. Friends and by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), relating to incitement, and set my comments in that context right at the beginning. The UK strongly condemns the use of racist, hateful language that can stir up prejudice. We frequently press all sides on the need to refrain from provocative actions, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric. Israel and the Palestinian Authority need to prepare their populations for peaceful co-existence, including by promoting a more positive portrayal of each other. Engaging in or encouraging incitement and hateful action or language makes it more difficult to achieve a culture of peace and a negotiated solution to the conflict. We frequently press all sides on the need to refrain from those things; there are too many on each side to bring up individual occasions.

There has been a suggestion in the past of a trilateral forum in which Palestinians, Israelis and a third party can discuss specific incidents. I hope we might be able to return to that idea.

Chris Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind; there is a time limit and an awful lot to get through.

As I said in the House on 9 January, Israel’s treatment of Palestinian minors, particularly the practice of holding them in military detention, remains a human rights priority for this Government, as set out in the universal periodic review. Clearly, the whole situation is inextricably mixed up with Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories, which is also why there are no civilian detention facilities. The situation will not be resolved until a settlement is negotiated that serves the interest of both sides. I will return to that later.

Children are entitled to special protections and due process under international humanitarian law. Those protections are reaffirmed in the UN convention on the rights of the child, to which Israel is a state party. Many of the issues raised today come fully within that convention. To take a phrase from its text:
“States Parties recognize the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child’s sense of dignity and worth”.

That covers quite a lot. I do not stint in making very clear that Israel needs to live up to what is in conventions that it signs. We are talking here about everybody who is responsible, and everybody who bears the need to respond to obligations, and that is one right there.

We recognise, as a number of Members said, that Israel has made some progress toward fulfilling those obligations. It has reduced the number of detainees aged between 12 and 14, increased the age of maturity from 16 to 18, established separate juvenile courts and enacted a special statute of limitations for minors. However, our assessment is that Israel is still falling short and needs to do more to safeguard vulnerable people in its care.

In 2012, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office sponsored an independent report, “Children in Military Custody”, by leading British lawyers, as has been mentioned. It made 40 specific recommendations for protecting child detainees, including that Israel should make audio-visual recording mandatory in interrogations, that it should stop using painful restraints and that it should inform detainees fully and consistently of their legal rights. To our knowledge, Israel has only implemented one of those recommendations. We have repeatedly and publicly called on Israel to fulfil its international legal obligations, and I do so again today.

In answer to the question of what we can try to do about this, I raised our concerns during my visit to Israel last summer, and our ambassador in Tel Aviv raised the issue with the Israeli Justice Minister as recently as December. We have a regular dialogue with Israeli authorities on legal issues relating to the occupation, as part of which we discuss the treatment of Palestinian children in military custody. Our “Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016” explicitly referred to Israel’s treatment of children in detention and this year’s report does likewise, as colleagues will see when it is published shortly. We also raised the issue at the United Nations universal periodic review last month, as I said, and while welcoming the positive steps that Israel has taken since the last review in 2012, we urged the Israelis to take further action to meet their obligations. We also continue to urge them to implement in full the recommendations I mentioned earlier.

Significantly, the hon. Member for Rotherham spoke about an understanding, particularly given her background, of wanting to help in this situation. It serves no one’s purpose to use the detention of minors as a weapon in this long-running dispute, and it serves nobody’s interest to defend a situation if minors are treated wrongly. It serves us all to work toward a situation where those who are engaged in detaining people for infringement of law do so only in a manner that absolutely conducive to fulfilling their obligations.

It is in that spirit that the United Kingdom continues its efforts. We are committed to helping the Israeli authorities to make the necessary changes. Last year, we invited them to attend expert discussions with the Metropolitan Police to share more than 30 years of UK experience of implementing regulations designed specifically to protect the rights of minors in detention. Do we have to arrest young people? Yes, we do, but it is all a question of how we do it and in what context. We were disappointed when our invitation was declined. It is not a threatening invitation or a condemnatory invitation, but an opportunity to put something right. It still stands, and we hope it is taken up in due course.

Turning to Ahed Tamimi, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, I do indeed know the family. I cannot recall whether I met Ahed Tamimi when I was in the village, but I know the Tamimi family. Although I cannot verify absolutely everything the hon. Gentleman says, I recognise the description of the village that he gave. It is absolutely correct. From the village people can see the settlement on the other side, and see the water that is the source of distress and discontent in the area. This case has rightly kept the issue of the mistreatment of child detainees in the spotlight. Footage of Ms Tamimi’s arrest, aged 16, for slapping an Israeli soldier has been shared widely online.

None of us was there to hear everything that was said. I know that remarks from Ms Tamimi, quoted on television in Arabic, have not been translated in a manner that her lawyer recognises, and we are not entirely sure of what was said, but the language is there. It is on television for people to hear. Her case is of concern to all of us here who know of it. I said in the House the other week that it was a sad case, and I repeat that. In answer to the many letters I have had since making my comment in the House, I do not in any way wish to excuse Ms Tamimi’s behaviour, but nor do I condone her treatment. As I said in the House, I believe that she should not have needed to do what she did, because the soldiers should not have been there. Let me explain that still further. These flashpoints are a direct consequence of the failure to reach an agreement, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside, in her wisdom and long experience of this subject, rightly said. They are more evidence of how the unresolved conflict continues to blight the lives of all those involved.

It is a tragedy that each new generation, which should be growing up together in peace, continues to be divided. It is not that the Israeli soldiers did not have a right at the time to be in land they are occupying; they did. It is that the young lady should have done what she should not. But the circumstances just should not now be arising, because we should have settled this. That is as important for Israel as it is for the Palestinians.

We are following developments on Ms Tamimi’s case closely and, while it is ultimately a matter for the Israeli authorities, we have raised our concerns with the Israeli ambassador here in London, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice in Tel Aviv.

Let me conclude as I have previous debates. I find these debates incredibly sad. We should not be having them, because the situation that gives rise to them needs to end. That can only happen with the resolution of issues by direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian people. I do not find it incompatible to believe passionately in the existence and the security of the state of Israel and in justice for the Palestinian people in lands I first visited 40 years ago, based on the efforts of peacemakers over the years. I also believe passionately that it is never too late, although it might soon be so.

The UK will do it all it can. It will make every effort and strain every sinew to work, upon the resumption of the middle east peace process, to support those who
wish finally to bring that conflict to an end. Israel is a close and trusted friend of the United Kingdom. As such, we do not shy away from raising our serious concerns about the detention and treatment of minors in military facilities, but we understand the context in which Israel works, as everyone in this room does. However, the situation we have described today is just one of the many compelling reasons why we will continue to support progress toward a two-state solution. I want to see a situation in which it is no longer the case that a young IDF conscript and a Palestinian youngster have the options that they seem to have at the moment, so that they have a better chance of a better future together.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered military detention of Palestinian children by Israeli Authorities.

Credit Cards: Cost Regulation

[STEVE MCCABE in the Chair]

4.1 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of the cost of credit cards.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I hope that by the end of the debate we will actually have done more than consider the cost of credit cards. This is a familiar place for me to come to raise concerns with Ministers about personal debt in this country. However, I hope that I get a better hearing today than I did several years ago, when I came here repeatedly to warn the Government about the dangers of payday lending, because I believe that we are again on the cusp of another massive personal debt crisis in this country. There are proactive things that we can do to tackle that, one of which is dealing with credit cards.

We have to be honest: this is a nation in debt up to its eyeballs. Individuals actually owe more than the Government, with total household debt standing at £1.23 trillion. Most of that total is mortgage debt, but £117 billion of it is from credit cards and loans—a 15% increase in the last couple of years alone. The average UK household now has £14,000-worth of debt, and that is expected to rise to £19,000 of unsecured personal debt by the end of this Parliament. It is little wonder that the number of people going bankrupt in this country is soaring. Indeed, the number of people taking out individual voluntary arrangements is also soaring.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this pertinent and important debate. Does she agree that credit card companies must play their part in ensuring that small retailers are still able to use card machines as a payment option? It must be the credit card companies, not the small businesses, that pay the bill.

Stella Creasy: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has a particular concern. I hope I can convince him that the regulation of credit cards that I am interested in is about their cost to the consumer in the first instance.

I do not think the reason we have such a personal debt crisis in this country is rocket science. There is simply too much month at the end of the money for too many people. We now know that economic insecurity is the new normal, with at least 70% of Britain’s working population defined as “chronically broke”. Some 32% of UK workers have less than £500 in savings, and 41% less than £1,000. Almost 30% are desperately concerned about their debt, because it is not just about everyday living costs: it is about the financial shock that might come because someone loses their job or their relationship breaks down. Too many people live on that edge now.

It is worrying that, unlike in previous years when insolvency rates have increased so much, unemployment rates are still dropping. That tells us that people are in full-time work, but are still unable to pay the basic costs of living, such as utility bills and rent. Combine that
with inflation increasing at about 3% a year and stagnating wages, and it is not hard to see why personal debt is booming in this country.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On credit card debt, a lot of people are suckerized in with introductory interest-free periods and their credit limit being increased, to a degree where they end up putting a noose around their neck. Ultimately they are unable to repay because of their lack of savings, as the hon. Lady has already identified, and as a consequence they end up paying at exorbitant interest rates once the interest-free period runs out.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Gentleman prefigures much of what I will say about who I believe are the new Wongas in our society.

It is not possible to make the argument that the millions of people on zero-hours contracts and in temporary work can manage their repayments and can be confident about the amount of money coming into their households. With millions of people now self-employed, and more people in England likely to be employed in the gig economy than working for the NHS in a few short years, it is clear that insecure, precarious work and precarious finances are the new norm for millions of people in our country.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Many of my constituents rely on organisations such as Citizens Advice to support them when they are in dire credit card debt. At the West Hampstead Women’s Centre in my constituency, bespoke Citizens Advice surgeries often lead to referrals to specialist services, such as the face-to-face disability and debt service. However, since 2010, Citizens Advice has seen its funding slashed from £178 million a year to £99 million a year. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to taking on credit card companies, we need to ensure that debt management services are protected as well?

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The idea is that this is just a problem for a few hundred thousand people, but debt, worrying about debt and the causes of debt are mainstream concerns in this country. Debt management, debt advice and the work of Citizens Advice is very important, but I also believe that, when we see these problems growing again, there is a role for us to step in before they get any worse. I made a call to action several years ago about payday lenders. We did not listen then until it was too late. I hope the Government will listen now.

We know that not everybody is struggling, and that Britain is a nation of contrasts, where some people have seen their wealth balloon because of property and pension rights. However, we also know that there are too many for whom debt is just everyday life. It is debt on basic payments—on food, rent and travelling to work costs. We know that 25% of the UK population now struggles with debt. Not everybody is in trouble, but enough are, and the reason is the nature of the products they use to deal with their debt, particularly credit cards.

I hope the Minister will understand why we need to act, because credit cards are the acceptable face of modern debt for people. All of us have one: I am sure if Members were to open up their wallets and purses, they would have, if not one, then maybe two or three with them. There are 30 million cardholders in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the Financial Conduct Authority has been investigating the credit card market.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady has been very gracious in giving way. I appreciate that very much. Does she appreciate, as I and many others in the House do, the good work of Christians Against Poverty, church groups, Citizens Advice and those who step into the gap to give advice and help people to manage their affairs when they get into debt?

Stella Creasy: I happily join the hon. Gentleman in supporting Christians Against Poverty, which very kindly came and ran a workshop for activists in my local community not a few weeks ago, to help residents to understand what they should say to somebody who is struggling with debt.

People often do not see credit cards as debt because they are just a fact of life. We know that the Financial Conduct Authority will tell the Minister that the market is working well for most, and that people shop around when getting a credit card, are able to compare rates and understand what they are buying. However, the problem comes when we look deeper and see the connection between those who struggle with debt and the nature of the credit cards they have.

Credit card debt is £263 billion—about 15% of total household debt—but it accounts for half of all interest payments made each year. That is the first signal that we need to look more closely at the interest rates on these cards. A whopping £28 billion is repaid each year, which accounts for 41% of all consumer debt, up from 33% in 2008. The average balance of those making just minimum repayments—the zombie debtors, who are paying off the interest but not the capital—is about £5,000; that is what they owe. However, 15% of zombie debtors owe more than £10,000. Crucially, when the FCA looked into this, it found that 20% of the people who ended up paying interest on their credit card did not expect to do so when they took it out. The reason is that life does not always go the way we expect it to. Jobs disappear. Relationships break up. The cost of living gets higher and higher.

Little wonder that there are 5 million accounts that, with people making just minimum repayments, it is estimated it will take 10 years to pay off the balance. It is no wonder that four in 10 British adults are worried about their credit card debt. They understand that what seemed like the best way to manage their finances has quickly got them into a situation that they cannot get out of. Forty per cent of adults in this country say that they struggle to make it to payday and, of those, 30% say that credit card repayments are causing them the problem. The FCA has identified that; it has identified those people whom it would say are in difficulty because of their credit card debt. It considers more than half those people to be “potentially vulnerable” because they have few resources to fall back on, even if they are managing to make some repayments.
The FCA has also identified that one third of people do not really understand the interest rates that they are paying on their credit cards. Again, it is the point about interest rates and what it will actually cost people to use these cards, even if they are flipping between zero-rate-interest cards. It identified that people who switch are switching because they think that they are getting a better balance offer—crucially, they are not getting out of debt.

The point of today’s debate and raising this issue with the Minister is to ask him not to wait until the situation gets worse, because we know the consequences of waiting until it gets worse. Let us learn the lesson from those legal loan sharks, the payday lenders—the people who were lending £100 to people who were ending up paying an average of £260 back. They were using payday loans when they were unregulated to pay for their basic living; 53% of them were using them just as people are using credit cards—to pay for groceries and utility bills. They were paying for things that they could not go without. Three in five borrowers on a payday loan said that they could not go without the item for which they had taken out the loan.

Let me tell the Minister that when we do act—when we recognise the consequences of leaving a situation to fester, as we did with payday loans—it makes a massive difference. Bringing in a cap on the cost of credit saw a 45% reduction in the numbers of people going to the citizens advice bureau in difficulties with payday loans; indeed, there has been an 86% reduction since 2016.

These credit card companies are truly loan sharks pretending to be the good guys. We know that what matters is in the small print. Many of us may have looked at our own credit card interest rates and seen that they vary from between 0.8% and 2% a month, but we also know that those basic interest rates on credit cards have been rising over the past 11 years, from an average of 15% to 23% now. As the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) pointed out, the zero balance transfer deals have been lengthening, but what is happening is that the credit card companies are making up for the minimum payments, they will have paid £480 within one year, £680 within 18 months, £800 within two years and £1,000 in interest by 28 months. Those figures reflect exactly the sort of lending and patterns of repayment and costs of interest that we recognised were wrong for payday lenders, yet now that is happening in the credit card industry.

There is a simple principle at issue here. We recognised that it was wrong to ask people to pay back more than they had borrowed; up to 100% was a fair amount of interest to be charging. Why have we intervened and said that was wrong in the payday lending industry, but are letting it happen with credit cards? That is exactly what is happening: people are paying back in interest double what they have borrowed.

Yes, the FCA conducted a market study, and yes, parts of the market are working well for some consumers. Therefore, if we act where the market is not working well for the other consumers, we can stop these problems before they get worse. I do not understand how the FCA can justify not bringing the same lessons that we have learned from payday lending, about not asking people to pay back in interest double what they have borrowed, to the credit card companies, even though we recognise that that is wrong in the payday loan industry—but that is what has happened.

All the FCA’s remedies at the moment require people to have the cash to be able to act—to be able to make quicker repayments and to be able to pay back earlier. Bringing in what we are seeing is a nation that does not have spare cash in its pocket, let alone when facing economic shocks. These companies are entering into voluntary agreements with the Financial Conduct Authority. We are not learning the lessons of asking legal loan sharks, like turkeys, not to speak in favour of Christmas. These companies are making millions of pounds from pushing people into debt in exactly the same way as the Wongas of this world did, yet still the FCA is standing by.

There are things that we can count on in the coming months. We can count on the fact that the economic situation will still be uncertain for people, that there will still be precarious work as the new norm, that people will not be able to plan. We can count on the fact that the cost of living is still going to go up—that if we want to put food on the table, keep a roof over our head and put petrol in our cars to get to work, it is going to get more expensive. We can count on divorce, house moving and redundancy still being facts of life. And yes, we can count on the fact that some parts of these markets work well, but not enough of them do, so I am asking the Minister to learn from history. Do not wait until millions more British people are stuck in spirals of debt with credit cards. Do not think that credit cards are acceptable and high-cost credit and payday lending are things of the past. This market is mutating, but it is still firmly focused on exploiting communities such as mine, exploiting...
people in financial difficulty, exploiting people who have few options. If the FCA feels too timid to be able to act, then just as we did before, let us give it muscle. Let us bring in a cap on the cost of credit cards, just as we did with payday lending, and recognise legal loan shark ing in this country for what it is. I look forward to what the Minister has to say.

4.18 pm  

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for raising this significant issue with characteristic passion. I will seek to answer the specific questions she has raised about the role of the FCA and how fluid the situation is.

Consumer credit, including credit cards, plays an important role in our economy, helping consumers to smooth their income, spread costs over time and cope with unexpected financial shocks. However, risk is inherent in any credit product, so it is vital that consumers are treated fairly and protected from unscrupulous or predatory practice. The Government recognise that and are working with the regulator to ensure that such activity is curtailed.

I think it will be helpful if I set out first what the Government have already done on consumer credit. Our vision is of a well functioning and sustainable consumer credit market that responsibly meets the needs of all consumers. That is why we fundamentally reformed regulation of the consumer credit market, transferring regulatory responsibility from the Office of Fair Trading to the Financial Conduct Authority on 1 April 2014. The Government have given the FCA a robust set of powers, designed to protect consumers, in three key areas. The FCA assesses every firm’s fitness to lend and has put in place a binding standard on firms. The FCA requires all firms to assess each customer’s ability to repay. The hon. Lady gave the example of Vanquis being able to lend £1,000 without any checks. I repeat: all lenders must make that assessment of their customers’ ability to repay. Firms must also treat customers who fall into arrears fairly. Thirdly, the FCA monitors the market. The characterisation of the FCA as passively waiting for a crisis does not do justice to the actions it has taken. I will go on to set those out and describe how they are still under review.

Focusing on the areas that are most likely to cause consumer harm, the FCA has a broad enforcement toolkit to punish breaches of its rules. The FCA’s enforcement arm supports its objectives by making it clear that there are real and meaningful consequences for firms and individuals who do not follow the rules. There is no limit to the fines it can levy. Crucially, it can force firms to provide redress to consumers. For example, in October 2017 the FCA announced that BrightHouse, a rent-to-own firm, will pay over £14.8 million in redress to customers in respect of agreements that may not have been affordable and payments that should have been refunded. That is just one example of the effectiveness of the FCA enforcement action. In total, the FCA issued fines of nearly £230 million last year, and as of December 2017 it had secured £734 million in redress for more than 1.47 million customers in the consumer credit market.

I turn now specifically to credit cards. When the Government gave the FCA responsibility for consumer credit regulation in 2014, it sought to build a sound understanding of the credit card market and to assess whether it was working well in the interests of consumers. To that end, as the hon. Lady mentioned, the FCA conducted an extensive study of the credit card market between 2014 and 2016. It found that competition within the industry was working well for the majority of consumers, but identified concerns about the scale and extent of problematic credit card debt. Last year the FCA consulted on remedies to tackle persistent credit card debt and proposed a robust package of remedies to tackle the issues—

**Stella Creasy:** The Minister mentions that the FCA consulted on persistent debt. The FCA defines persistent debt as paying 100% in interest and charges on top of the principal repaid over an 18-month period. Given the evidence that that is exactly what people are doing on these credit cards, and the fact that we intervened and capped the cost of credit through payday loans when we saw that, will the Minister explain why it is acceptable not to do that for credit cards when it is okay to do it for payday loans?

**John Glen:** I will come on to that. As ever, the hon. Lady is eager to intervene. Let me finish what I want to say, and I will give her the answer that she wishes to hear.

The remedies include requiring firms to take steps to encourage customers to repay debt quicker and to avoid getting into persistent debt in the first place. Where customers are not able to repay their debt in a reasonable period, firms will be required to offer forbearance. Firms will also be required to use the data available to them to identify customers at risk of financial difficulty earlier and to take appropriate steps.

The FCAs rules apply to all credit card companies, including those that lend at the higher interest rates, some of which the hon. Lady mentioned, to customers with poor credit ratings. All lenders have a duty to treat customers fairly and to lend only to those who can afford to repay. We expect the FCA to publish a final policy statement soon, and I will look carefully at what it says to see how we can take this forward. It seems a bit unreasonable not to wait for the final policy statement before we conclude where the FCA has got to with it.

As an additional weapon in its armoury, the FCA has worked with the industry’s leading body, UK Finance, to secure a voluntary agreement with its members to...
restrict unsolicited credit limit increases, giving customers more control over their accounts. All customers will be made aware that they can choose not to receive offers, and customers in persistent debt will not receive any unsolicited credit limit increases at all. New customers will be given the choice of how credit limits will be applied to their account, and firms will make it easier for existing customers to decline offers of a credit limit increase by reminding them of their options.

The combination of existing FCA powers and the proposed package of remedies is a very robust arsenal.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I will continue.

The measures are a demonstrable commitment by this Government, the regulators and the industry to tackle structural issues within the credit card market.

Thinking about the limits that should be put on the cost of credit card borrowing, which I think the hon. Lady referred to, it is important to note that the Government have already given the FCA the power to cap all forms of credit, and the FCA can do that if it thinks it is necessary to protect consumers. However, it is neither this Government’s mandate nor our role to intervene in a functioning and competitive market. In addition, a credit card cap would be inherently more complex than the price cap introduced on payday loans in 2015. Payday loans are fixed-term, discrete loans, whereas credit cards provide a revolving credit facility—they are quite different.

What the Government can do, and already have done, is ensure that there are regulatory checks and balances in place to ensure fairness. The FCA has said that it will keep the issue of a mandatory cap on the cost of credit, including credit cards, under review. The FCA will monitor the effectiveness of its credit card remedies, and can take further action if necessary.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I am not going to give way.

Stella Creasy: The Minister has not answered my question. With the greatest respect to the Minister, I asked him a very specific question about the disparity between it being unacceptable for people with payday loans to pay double in interest what they had taken out, and those 5 million people who are stuck in 10 years-worth or more of credit card debt continuing to pay those rates. I would like his specific answer on that unacceptability.

John Glen: I did directly explain that there is a distinct difference between the nature of a payday loan and a credit card facility. I explained that very clearly and I am sorry the hon. Lady did not hear it.

It will be helpful to set out some of the things that the Government have done with respect to dealing with people in financial difficulty. The Government are delivering on their manifesto commitment to implement a breathing space and debt management plan. The call for evidence on the breathing space scheme recently closed, and the Government have committed to consult on a policy design proposal in the summer.

We set up the Money Advice Service, which spent close to £49 million on providing 440,000 debt advice sessions last year. We are now going further to ensure that consumers can gain easier access to financial guidance and debt advice by creating a new single financial guidance body, which will bring together the Pensions Advisory Service, Pension Wise and the Money Advice Service. The new body will make it easier for consumers to get help with all aspects of their financial lives, as well as having a statutory duty to improve financial capability and to commission free-to-use debt advice. The Bill to create the new body is currently before the House of Commons.

I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue—I acknowledge that it is very important—and for speaking with such fervour. I share some of the concerns that she has expressed. Millions of people in this country use credit cards regularly, and the Government are committed to ensuring that they are treated fairly and not encouraged to fall into persistent debt. I hope the hon. Lady understands that a cap on the cost of credit card borrowing is not an effective solution. It is a blunt, interventionist approach to a complex issue. The Government have given the FCA strong powers to take action, and the FCA is putting in place measures to tackle persistent debt in the credit card market. This is not a static issue, however, or one that I and the Government are not interested in examining on an ongoing basis. The Government and the FCA are committed to ensuring that it remains under constant review.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered regulation of the cost of credit cards.
A5 Upgrade

4.43 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the upgrade of the A5 between junction 18 of the M1 and junction 10 of the M42.

The A5 is one of our oldest roads. It was commissioned during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, after his successful invasion of Britain in AD 43. It is also one of our most strategically important roads. The stretch that we are discussing goes past the geographical centre of England, which is near Higham on the Hill in my constituency. More than ever, it is an essential road because of the circumstances around it, in terms of the growth of proposed housing and business. There is a very pressing need for an effective relief road when there are problems on the M1, M6, M42 and surrounding motorways in this golden triangle.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. Right now, there are 90-minute delays on the M6 between junction 1 and Rugby and junction 3 at Nuneaton, where two out of three lanes are closed for repairs to an expansion joint. Highways England is advising drivers to use other routes. In this context, the other main route is the A5, which is one of the reasons why we need the upgrade to deal with traffic that gets moved when there are hold-ups on the M6, as is often the case.

David Tredinnick: My hon. Friend, who is ever quick out of the stalls in a debate, makes a very good point. I will touch on the problems of congestion.

There is a historical perspective to this 30-mile stretch of the A5. Near this road, the governance of our country has changed not once but twice. At the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, the man who became Henry VII defeated Richard III. Most of us are familiar with that, not least because of the publicity around Richard III’s re-interment a couple of years ago.

Less well known is the battle of Watling Street, which took place 1,400 years earlier. In AD 60, when Nero, the adopted son of Claudius, was on the throne, the 14th legion of the Roman army was moving down the country after defeating the druids in Anglesey. Somewhere near Witherley in my constituency or, more likely, further south at Mancetter, the legion met Boadicea, queen of the Iceni—her statue is not far away—and the united English tribes, and roundly defeated them; this led to Roman dominance in England south of that area for many years to come. According to the historian John Higgs, Tacitus said that 80,000 Britons were killed in that battle. If that is true, it would be the most people killed in a single day in history before the first world war.

Those anecdotes about the two battles and the geographical centre emphasise the point that this is no ordinary A road. It is right at the heart of our country. It has been crucial and has played its part in troop movements—Henry VII moved down Watling Street to London after his success at the battle of Bosworth Field.

The road has lost its pre-eminence—or had lost it, I should say—since the building of the M1 between 1959 and 1968, and the building of the M6 from north of junction 18 of the M1, which was finished in May 1972 and opened by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. After that, the A5 lost attention and was no longer the great north-west road that it had been. That has all changed. I will now turn to the arguments for making it an expressway and expanding £10 million, a relatively small sum of money, to take that project forward.

Along this 30-mile section of road and beyond, my hon. Friends the Members for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and other colleagues, have an incredibly fast-growing corridor of movement and of economic growth. There are significant proposals for 60,000 new homes—a staggering amount—to be delivered along that corridor between Northampton and Stafford via Warwickshire and Leicestershire up to 2031. I cannot see how that can take place without investment in the A5.

There is also the impact on the sub-regional economies of Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. In addition to housing growth, more than 500 hectares—more than 1,000 acres—of new employment land is planned that will contribute £1.5 billion gross value added to the economy and generate thousands of jobs over 20 years. That is a staggering investment.

The golden triangle in the midlands is bounded by the motorway system. I could go through a list of business parks in or near my constituency, including Sketchley Meadows, Magna Park and MIRA Technology Park, that are set to expand in a staggering way. Yesterday I spoke to MIRA, which got the go-ahead to become an enterprise park in 2011. There were originally about 600 jobs there, and there are now 1,200. In five or 10 years’ time, according to our conversation, there will be between 2,500 and 3,000 high-value jobs there.

MIRA is working with Warwickshire Council on a proposal for an additional development on the 92 acres of land on the south side of the A5, Watling Street, which I am sure comes as no surprise to the Conservative Members present—my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton, for North Warwickshire, for Rugby and for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). That development will be massively affected by what happens on the A5. MIRA tells me that it is trying to bring entirely new technology to the region, including projects that relate to the environment, such as the development of electric batteries for cars. It is advertising internationally right now to take that forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby was quick off the mark in mentioning congestion. The economic prosperity of the midlands relies heavily on the performance of the motorway network. I could go through a list of projects that relate to the environment, such as the development of electric batteries for cars. It is advertising internationally right now to take that forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby was quick off the mark in mentioning congestion. The economic prosperity of the midlands relies heavily on the performance of the motorway network because of its central location and the connectivity with routes, including no less than four motorways—the M1, M5, M6 and M40—and the A14, A46 and A5 trunk roads. The standard of the A5 is shocking. It is a single-lane road, with some dualling, and it regularly gets clogged up, as we all know. It will be impossible for the economic corridor to develop unless we act now. For the sake of resilience, a proper relief road for the motorway system is critical. The M1 and M6 are frequently closed because of traffic problems, bridge changes and all kinds of other problems; I am sure my hon. Friends present could name many more.

The A5—the old great north-west road—is the obvious candidate as a relief road, because it goes straight through the triangle of motorways. Our case is that the 30-mile stretch of the A5 should be upgraded to expressway standard, with priority given to the section between the
M1 and the M42. I understand from Highways England, which is responsible for the A5, that £10 million would be required for completion of detailed studies to secure early delivery of the expressway over the next route investment strategy periods. I hope that the Minister will address that in his reply.

Let me set out what action has been taken so far. A transport partnership was formed in 2009-10 and has representation from 18 local authorities, including local highways authorities and the local economic partnership. It has grown to cover a much longer stretch of the road—the 72-mile section from Gailey in Staffordshire to Stony Stratford near Milton Keynes—and has produced its first report. It seeks delivery growth, support for network resilience, management of freight impact and the delivery of a safe, secure and sustainable A5.

This is what others have said about the matter. Sir John Peace, Chairman of Midlands Connect and Midlands Engine, said:

“The Midlands Connect Strategy demonstrates that to improve the economy of our region, rebalance the UK’s economy”— we in the midlands often feel that sometimes we are neglected—

“and accommodate growth we must upgrade the transport infrastructures”.

He said that we need to

“see the A5…playing a key role”,

that

“upgrading the route will dramatically improve access within our region”,

and that the A5 is

“a vital component to strong economic growth for the Midlands, and our region’s contribution to the UK economy.”

Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, said that

“we recognise the significance of the Midlands A5 Expressway in the larger Strategic Road Network...indeed, Midlands Connect have highlighted the A5 Expressway as a corridor of strategic and economic significance...which is a statement we also advocate”.

Highways England has undertaken four studies and concluded that there is a strong economic case for an A5 scheme, with a range of credible options for further study. Four options have already been tested and shown to offer high value for money. The housing infrastructure fund bids that have been submitted for key priority work in the north Warwickshire stretch of the A5 will have a huge impact.

I must raise a couple of parochial matters. A long headache in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire for providing me with information about his meeting with the Secretary of State; no doubt he will raise that today if he catches your eye, Mr McCabe. I also thank Councillor Brian Conway, lead councillor of the A5 parish councils contact group, who has highlighted problems with the rat runs through Witherley and Fenny Drayton: the notorious A5 Woodford Lane junction, which has the worst accident record of any intersection between the M42 and Milton Keynes; the anomaly of A5 traffic having priority over traffic already on the Mancetter island; and the Department for Transport’s reliance on old data.

To use modern slang, this is a no-brainer. We will not be able to deliver the terrific expansion at MIRA, the huge housing developments that I am sure other hon. Members will raise, or a solution to the pressure from Birmingham if we ignore the A5. We have to do something about it—the A5, the old great north-west road, Watling Street. That would be terrific value for my hon. Friend the Minister, because a proper relief road is essential when there is trouble on the motorways. I rest my case.

4.58 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): As ever, Mr McCabe, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) and congratulate him on securing this debate, which is a very important one for my constituents. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) and for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) present.

The part of the A5 under discussion is a vital part of the national strategic road network and the UK distribution and logistics network. All the constituencies represented by the hon. Members present are part of what is known in the logistics industry as the golden triangle, because of its excellent links to the rest of the country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth has identified, the A5 is a vital resilience route for the operation of the west midlands section of the M6 and the east midlands section of the M1.

My speech will address the particular challenges facing the route along the northern boundary of my constituency. This is often a heavily congested part of Watling Street, where there are challenges associated with heavy volumes of local traffic meeting heavy volumes of traffic travelling long distance along the A5. This section of road also includes a number of busy junctions, which are not just traffic bottlenecks; at times, there have been significant accidents, and there has been a very sad history of fatalities.

On the positive side, the A5 between the Royal Redgate junction and the MIRA Technology Park, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth mentioned, has been upgraded in recent years to dual carriageway. That was done under a £17 million regional growth fund grant in 2014. Since then, as my hon. Friend also said, over 600 jobs have been created at the MIRA Technology Park, and it is thought that another 1,500 to 2,000 could be created on that site.

We are therefore seeing economic development as a result of that comparatively small investment, but my constituents have also seen significant safety improvements. That is because the once lethal Royal Redgate junction, where people have to cross the A5 to go north or south on the A444, has been significantly improved and is much safer than it was.

My constituents also have significant issues in relation to the Woodford Lane junction, which my hon. Friend mentioned. I have a number of constituents in the Hartshill ward who use Woodford Lane. It is a minor but extremely busy junction, where it is possible to turn both left and right on to a very wide part of single
[Mr Marcus Jones]
carriageway. In recent years, there have been a series of
minor accidents, some major accidents and, regrettably,
several fatalities. Although there have been some very
minor upgrade works there, we have not seen anything
approaching the type of major upgrade scheme that is
needed to make the area much safer. I must also say that
a number of my constituents have contacted me recently
about the quality of the road surface on the A5 in the
area; currently, it is far from ideal.

Probably the most difficult area for the majority of
my constituents who use this stretch of the A5 is the
Long Shoot junction, where the A47 meets the A5.
Despite upgrade works undertaken in 2015, which have
been relatively successful, the sheer volume of traffic at
this junction at peak times creates huge delays for my
constituents on the A47 and the A5. Also, for those
living at the top of the Long Shoot junction and on that
stretch of Watling Street that runs alongside it, there is
a significant problem with pollution from standing
vehicles, given the length of time it takes them to get
through.

The Minister will know that an upgrade is planned
for the short section of the A5 between the Long Shoot
junction and the Dodwells island, where Nuneaton
meets Hinckley. He will not need me to tell him that,
given the challenges in that area, that upgrade is very
much a short-term fix. It is important and it is required,
but it will not deal with the fundamental issues. I also
understand that the work to upgrade that short section
of road has been put back slightly, to facilitate the
important upgrade of the M6.

Although this debate is not about the M6, there is the
issue of resilience to consider, and I am glad that the
Government are investing significant money to bring
smart motorway to junctions 2 to 4 of the M6. That will
hopefully cut significantly on the accidents there,
which have the knock-on effect of causing gridlock for
my constituency, as people see fit to get through to the
A5 and the M69. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby has said, we can absolutely guarantee even today
that the people of Nuneaton will suffer absolute gridlock
as a result of the closure of the M6, so we need to
consider resilience.

As I have outlined to the Minister, there are challenges
but they are set against the backdrop of a very positive
economic story around the A5. We heard from my hon.
Friend the Member for Bosworth of the plans that
exist. As I understand it, there are 500 hectares of new
employment land being planned along this stretch of
the A5, which could deliver £1.4 billion in gross value
added to the regional economy of the midlands and
create thousands of jobs in the next 15 to 20 years.

There will also be significant housing growth, with
15,000 new houses being built in my constituency and in
the neighbouring Bedworth part of the constituency of
my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire.
Although many of my constituents are concerned with
that development—I myself am concerned, because
much of it is taking place on the north side of Nuneaton,
in one large block—it highlights the necessity to find a
better solution to the A5 problem, so that we can
facilitate the new development.

I have explained the challenges; I will now turn to the
solution. I am enthused by the concept of the midlands
expressway. It will transform the A5, fully dualling the
highway from Tamworth right down to Crick. As I
understand it, there are several options to achieve that
transformation, which would open up the potential for
growth and, above and beyond that, transform the lives
of many of my constituents, improving their quality of
life tremendously.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth has
pointed out, there is a partnership of local authorities,
and I pay tribute to the excellent work of the Conservative-
controlled Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council. It
is a medium-sized district council, but it has been
instrumental in the work of this A5 partnership. On my
side of the A5, it is being very well supported by
Warwickshire County Council, and on the side of my
hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth, it is being very
well supported by Leicestershire County Council.

All those authorities are backed by a number of
business organisations and businesspeople. Sir John Peace,
the chairman of the Midlands Engine and Midlands
Connect, is backing this project, as is Andy Street, the
West Midlands Mayor, who sees the value of the works
being proposed for this area.

Considerable feasibility work has already been done,
as the Minister will know. Highways England has looked
at this project and, encouragingly, it has concluded that
there is a strong economic and strategic case for a
scheme of this type on the A5. It has also concluded
that there are a number of credible options and that the
project would deliver “high” value for money.

The Minister is currently working on roads investment
strategy 2. My ask is that the A5 scheme is acknowledged
as part of RIS2 and that our request for the resource to
develop more detailed work on a specific route for early
implementation is looked on favourably. My hon. Friend
the Member for Bosworth said that £10 million is
needed to take that initial work forward, so I will just
impress on the Minister that this is an important matter
for my constituents. If we are to achieve this transformation,
it needs to be thought about now—even if the work
itself is carried out several years from now—because
this route needs safeguarding. That is because there is a
lot of new development in the area, and the last thing
we want is for that new development to take place where
the route of the A5 should be.

I am sure that, throughout this roads strategy process,
my hon. Friend the Minister will have colleagues from
across the country knocking down his door to try to get
a response on the road projects that they want. However,
I just say to him that, on this stretch of the A5, there is
clearly a solid business case, and the project will help to
deliver significant numbers of new houses and significant
amounts of commercial development and new jobs,
allowing the midlands to fulfil its economic potential.

Finally, the time for quick fixes and sticking plasters
along this stretch of the A5 is over. We very much need
to take a more substantive approach. We need to make
this once Roman route fit for the 21st century.

5.9 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): It is an
honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.
I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for
Bosworth (David Tredinnick) on securing this hugely
important debate and on his thoughtful speech, which
was excellent in covering the sensible and reasonable A5
improvements that are much-needed. Watling Street
and Fosse Way cross in my constituency. I often wonder what my ethnic ancestors would think if they were to look at that stretch of the road today, with its high level of traffic. When the Romans first built that junction, it was busy, but it was never heavily congested. Perhaps we have something to learn from my ethnic-Roman ancestry.

Many Members will no doubt be aware of the huge strategic importance of the midlands to Britain's thriving industry. Whether it is logistics parks, rail freight terminals or international airports, the midlands is a beacon for British industry and innovation. I am proud that much of that industry can be found in my constituency of South Leicestershire. As my hon. Friend said, the area is known colloquially as the golden triangle. That refers to the intersection of major motorway networks in the local area, which provide crucial links for commercial and residential traffic.

The A5 shares that commercial and residential importance. As my hon. Friends will be aware, the A5 is a major road in my constituency and theirs. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), I have experienced the long queues of traffic on the A5 at various times of the day. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth correctly stated, unless the Minister takes account of the ever increasing traffic demands in and around those areas, these rural, idyllic villages already suffer from a swathe of large HGVs and other commercial traffic. While I have been working closely with constituents in Sharnford, for example, to help to remedy the problems, I fear that the issues will only get worse if we see the further planned industrial and housing developments.

Further consideration should be given to the villages in the vicinity of the A5, particularly those in and around my constituency. I am thinking of the Claybrookes, Ullenhope, Wigston Parva, Sharnford, Cotesbach and Shawell, to name but a few. Having listened to the chairman of the Leicestershire Fosse villages neighbourhood plan group—a voluntary organisation that speaks for constituents in the south Leicestershire villages of Sharnford, Stoney Stanton and Sapcote—I think we need to take account of the ever increasing traffic demands in and around those areas. These rural, idyllic villages already suffer from a swathe of large HGVs and other commercial traffic. While I have been working closely with constituents in Sharnford, for example, to help to remedy the problems, I fear that the issues will only get worse if we see the increase in development outlined by my hon. Friends without any significant increase in the associated infrastructure, in particular the improvements on the A5 that we seek.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is making an important point about ensuring we get infrastructure before development takes place. The A5 acts as a boundary between his constituency and mine. I am thinking of the Claybrookes, Ullenhope, Wigston Parva, Sharnford, Cotesbach and Shawell, to name but a few. Having listened to the chairman of the Leicestershire Fosse villages neighbourhood plan group—a voluntary organisation that speaks for constituents in the south Leicestershire villages of Sharnford, Stoney Stanton and Sapcote—I think we need to take account of the ever increasing traffic demands in and around those areas. These rural, idyllic villages already suffer from a swathe of large HGVs and other commercial traffic. While I have been working closely with constituents in Sharnford, for example, to help to remedy the problems, I fear that the issues will only get worse if we see the increase in development outlined by my hon. Friends without any significant increase in the associated infrastructure, in particular the improvements on the A5 that we seek.

Alberto Costa: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. My family use a dentist in Pailton, so we are familiar with travelling along the A5 to get to that wonderful village.

The Magna Park logistics park is one of the largest in Europe and is located in my constituency. Given its proximity to the market town of Lutterworth, my constituents are often subject to unreasonable amounts of commercial traffic clogging up the area. However, as we heard from my hon. Friends, the A5 does not have an impact only in my constituency. I am glad to say that it is also important and significant for my hon. Friends here today. My hon. Friends the Members for Bosworth, for Nuneaton, for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) have been instrumental in pushing the matter to the very top of the Department for Transport's agenda, and I pay tribute to their excellent efforts. Like me, they recognise the plight of their constituents and are cognisant of the A5's huge importance. For that matter, I thank Conservative-led Blaby District Council and Conservative-led Harborough District Council, which have also been pushing efforts to help to improve infrastructure on the A5 and surrounding areas.

In closing, it is important to note that the concerns I have expressed about the A5 are not simply local concerns; they are regional and national. The A5's strategic importance should not be underestimated, but to keep up with economic growth and our nation's industry, vital infrastructure improvements such as those proposed to the A5 must be prioritised. The road stretches through four counties and multiple constituencies and encompasses hundreds of thousands of our constituents, so the A5's inclusion in the road investment strategy 2 is not only vital for my constituents and those of my hon. Friends; it is a must for the people of the midlands. It is very much a big picture project, and the road needs big improvements right away.
If there is an accident on one of the roads that the A5 connects to, such as the M42, the M1 or the M69, we have complete gridlock. As I have said, there is a strong business case and need for this. If we are to unlock the potential of the area, it is important that we take urgent action.

I would like to raise three specific points with the Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth mentioned that I have already put them to the Secretary of State. I brought members of North Warwickshire Borough Council along to the meeting, and the Secretary of State was very understanding. He knows the area well, particularly in relation to the first point that I will raise, but obviously I would like to hear the Minister’s view.

The first point is about the impact of HS2 on the area. I will not dwell on this too much, but anyone who knows me will not be surprised to hear me say that I am not a huge fan of the project and it is not something that I particularly support. It is worth reiterating that we are the most affected area outside London. We will get 31 miles of track, with disruption to the area potentially lasting for about 17 years. Critically, HS2 will run straight through junction 10, where the M42 meets the A5, so we will see further upheaval on an already busy junction.

HS2 provides a threat and an opportunity. The threat is quite clear: huge disruption to a key area of road, which is the gateway to not only the north Warwickshire borough, but large parts of the country. If there is no access through that area, traffic will be displaced on to other routes. The opportunity is to make substantial improvements that would not only mitigate some of the disruption that people will face over that long period as a result of HS2, but create a more freely moving road network, which will bring benefits and, as has been said, investment to the local area. From the discussions I have had, I think that the solution is to create a partnership with HS2, Highways England and Warwickshire County Council, which is the local highways authority. There is precedent for that being done along phase 1 of the route, where those partnerships have worked well. I do not support the development of HS2, but if it is to go ahead, it is important that the traffic offering to local residents is enhanced. This would seem the perfect opportunity to do that.

My second point, which has also been made by colleagues, is about local development in the area. North Warwickshire Borough Council is having to revise its housing figures from 3,150 to 9,070, and 42% of that is to accommodate the Greater Birmingham housing area. The challenge is that more than two thirds of the housing figures from 3,150 to 9,070, and 42% of that is to accommodate the Greater Birmingham housing area. The challenge is that more than two thirds of the

employment opportunities across North Warwickshire. Warwickshire County Council’s transport assessment backs that up, highlighting the importance of the A5 growth corridor. I have supported its bid to the housing infrastructure fund, but I cannot stress enough that, without the right infrastructure, housing simply will not be delivered in North Warwickshire.

The third point might seem small, but I urge the Minister to visit and judge for himself the rather interesting Mancetter island. It is right in the heart of the A5 and has really odd rights of way. Residents in a number of properties that front on to it have to reverse either on or off their drives to gain access to moving lanes of traffic that do not have to give way as they come down the A5. It is difficult to explain, but I urge the Minister to look at it.

There is danger to both residents and people using that route on a daily basis. There have been some really significant accidents, in particular involving HGVs, because of its logistic nature, and the fact that there is an adverse camber on the road. A number of constituents have had their garden walls demolished as a result. Residents fear that it is only a matter of time before we have a fatality and somebody walking down gets hit. The issue has been raised with Highways England, which has agreed to look at it. Residents have every right to be worried about the issue, which is regularly raised with me. Without amendment to that part of the road, it is unlikely that we will be able to make the most of this important road network.

To sum up, my view, and I think that of colleagues, is that the A5 is currently underperforming, but offers huge opportunities for the area, the west midlands, and potentially the country as a whole. If the ambitions of our local MPs, councils, the action groups that we talked about earlier, and the resident groups are matched by those of the Government, the possibility of a substantial solution, which would greatly benefit the lives of my constituents and people living in communities along the A5, can become a reality. This is about not only the future of the A5, but how we improve the present. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), particularly in what he asked of the Minister. Clearly action is needed as an urgent priority. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

5.26 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) on not only giving us an incredibly good history lesson today, but extolling the virtues of all that is planned for his constituency and the surrounding area.

When we are talking about the scale of 60,000 new homes, we have to have a serious discussion about whether we are just talking about development of a new express way, or if we need to look at other modes of transport that are available for local communities as well. If we are talking about that scale of economic opportunity, particularly with the developments that we have heard about this afternoon and the potential of 3,000 new jobs, we need to think about how people are travelling to and from work. While the road provides one option, I think that where we are building significant new developments we also need to start exploring other modes, particularly the future of rail.
As the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) just highlighted, HS2 should be about creating new opportunity, as opposed to limiting choices for people in the area. If HS2 does not open up new opportunities and does not connect, we have to ask serious questions about what the point of it is in the first place. Although we can see that new stations in places such as Toton will provide new economic development, we need to make sure that everybody along the route benefits from greater connectivity. That will be absolutely essential as we scrutinise the route’s development, the plans moving forward, and the connectivity.

I believe that a very strong case has been put forward this afternoon by hon. Members. I wonder if the costing of £10 million will be the final sum proposed. It sounds like a rather small amount of money, so I was a bit confused by that sum. We know that improvements to roads are incredibly important. The hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) spoke about removing the rat runs from the villages, as they create such a nuisance. We heard about the distress of constituents over delays, which the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) highlighted. Delays do not just eat into a person’s evenings, night after night; they also affect whether someone gets the chance to get home to see their kids in the evening. For some, it will mean whether they can choose to go for a particular form of employment. It is therefore really important that all factors are considered when looking at new developments.

The other important point made by a number of hon. Members was on safety. Although capacity is vital and should be looked at in the future, travel safety has to be the prime consideration. Road improvements, whether changing the camber on the road or providing safe access on and off the highway, are vital. I am sure the Minister will hear that.

I also want to draw out the process of decision making. I have several concerns about phase 1 of the road investment strategy. Although hon. Members may well have put forward a strong case today, we know that a number of projects have been delayed in phase 1. Nineteen schemes have been pushed back into RIS 2, which means that resources that could have been dedicated to the project highlighted today—the expressway—could be delayed in further planning and payment processes. We need to look at that. Six schemes have been cancelled altogether—or, I should say, “paused for further review”. Sixteen projects have been delayed within the RIS 1 period, and there is a bunching up of 54 projects at the end of the phase. That clearly has an impact on the ability to deliver the programme at the end of the phase, in 2019-20 in particular.

In recruitment and skills, we are also seeing feast and famine across the construction sector that we really need to look at. We also need to make sure that we are able to recruit and train locally. The feast-and-famine approach means that people have to go further afield, and as a result, the costs of projects go up.

I would like the Minister to commit to moving on from that feast-and-famine approach—not least because it builds expectations from constituents. When the de-electrification of the trans-Pennine route was announced, I know from my own constituents how hope in the project plummeted. It is really important to do due diligence now, to make sure that every mode of transport has been explored to bring the best economic value into the midlands area. If there is a commitment, it is important they are adhered to in a timely way. We cannot have overprogramming and overpromising, then a deletion of expectation. I trust the Minister will speak to that in his contribution.

5.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight, possibly an honour, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) for this useful, important and timely debate, which ties into a wider pattern of effective and successful lobbying from Members and colleagues from the same area.

My hon. Friend will know that this is an important area not merely for its road transport connections but for its history. He referenced the battle of Watling Street in AD 60-61, traolically not referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) highlighted. Delays do not just eat into a person’s evenings, night after night; they also affect whether someone gets the chance to get home to see their kids in the evening. For some, it will mean whether they can choose to go for a particular form of employment. It is therefore really important that all factors are considered when looking at new developments.

In recruitment and skills, we are also seeing feast and famine across the construction sector that we really need to look at. We also need to make sure that we are able to recruit and train locally. The feast-and-famine approach means that people have to go further afield, and as a result, the costs of projects go up.

I would like the Minister to commit to moving on from that feast-and-famine approach—not least because it builds expectations from constituents. When the de-electrification of the trans-Pennine route was announced, I know from my own constituents how hope in the project plummeted. It is really important to do due diligence now, to make sure that every mode of transport has been explored to bring the best economic value into the midlands area. If there is a commitment, it is important they are adhered to in a timely way. We cannot have overprogramming and overpromising, then a deletion of expectation. I trust the Minister will speak to that in his contribution.

5.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight, possibly an honour, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) for this useful, important and timely debate, which ties into a wider pattern of effective and successful lobbying from Members and colleagues from the same area.

My hon. Friend will know that this is an important area not merely for its road transport connections but for its history. He referenced the battle of Watling Street in AD 60-61, traolically not referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) highlighted. Delays do not just eat into a person’s evenings, night after night; they also affect whether someone gets the chance to get home to see their kids in the evening. For some, it will mean whether they can choose to go for a particular form of employment. It is therefore really important that all factors are considered when looking at new developments.

The other important point made by a number of hon. Members was on safety. Although capacity is vital and should be looked at in the future, travel safety has to be the prime consideration. Road improvements, whether changing the camber on the road or providing safe access on and off the highway, are vital. I am sure the Minister will hear that.

I also want to draw out the process of decision making. I have several concerns about phase 1 of the road investment strategy. Although hon. Members may well have put forward a strong case today, we know that a number of projects have been delayed in phase 1. Nineteen schemes have been pushed back into RIS 2, which means that resources that could have been dedicated to the project highlighted today—the expressway—could be delayed in further planning and payment processes. We need to look at that. Six schemes have been cancelled altogether—or, I should say, “paused for further review”. Sixteen projects have been delayed within the RIS 1 period, and there is a bunching up of 54 projects at the end of the phase. That clearly has an impact on the ability to deliver the programme at the end of the phase, in 2019-20 in particular.

In recruitment and skills, we are also seeing feast and famine across the construction sector that we really need to look at. We also need to make sure that we are able to recruit and train locally. The feast-and-famine approach means that people have to go further afield, and as a result, the costs of projects go up.

I would like the Minister to commit to moving on from that feast-and-famine approach—not least because it builds expectations from constituents. When the de-electrification of the trans-Pennine route was announced, I know from my own constituents how hope in the project plummeted. It is really important to do due diligence now, to make sure that every mode of transport has been explored to bring the best economic value into the midlands area. If there is a commitment, it is important they are adhered to in a timely way. We cannot have overprogramming and overpromising, then a deletion of expectation. I trust the Minister will speak to that in his contribution.
make a quite a lot of points that I know he and other colleagues will want to respond to. Needless to say, of course the Government are sensitive to great and fast-breaking developments. We have schemes, including the large local major transport scheme, that are designed precisely to assist local government to petition where there are important local developments that can require new infrastructure on shorter term notice.

Highways England is making good progress according to the investment strategy launched in 2015, which brought with it a very large increase in funding for the strategic road network—more than £15 billion in the five years between 2015 and 2020. Highways England has already delivered something like 18 schemes that are open for traffic. Work on the £1.5 billion A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon scheme is advancing well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) mentioned the interaction between the M6 junction work and the work at Dodworth. He is of course right about that. What it shows—I use this to respond to the hon. Member for York Central—is that work has got to be phased, and sometimes the acceptance of bids is not consistent with the intelligent structuring of investment. As a result, Highways England routinely and quite consistently slightly over programmes the amount of investment that is going to be required, and that is what has happened in RIS 1. There has been some delay for all of those reasons. That does not, unfortunately, mean that the money that has not been spent can be redeployed, because it is overprogramming within an overall envelope that has been used for purposes of investment.

This represents significant progress, but we recognise that there is more to do, and it is in that context that it is important to think about the second phase of the road investment strategy, which has been highlighted by colleagues today, and the Government’s investment in the strategic road network between 2020 and 2025. It will be funded by the new national roads fund, an important development that is designed to assist planning, remove the potential for disruption and ensure that all money spent by taxpayers on vehicle excise duty in England will be reinvested back into the roads network. There will be a much closer link between the money people pay and the investment that is made, which will allow us and Highways England to take a co-ordinated, long-term approach to investment in the network.

It is vital that the strategy’s potential is realised, and that we use RIS 2 to unlock wide-ranging benefits for the whole nation. The RIS 2 system deploys and relies on proper input from local authorities, and we are very pleased with the work that has been done by those who have submitted bids and expressed interest in RIS 2 schemes across the country. That crucial feedback will help us to make and Highways England to implement the right investment decisions for our strategic roads.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), for Nuneaton, for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), and for Bosworth for their co-ordinated approach to considering this road, which is entirely appropriate for a regional bid. I also thank them for the letter they jointly signed supporting the proposed upgrade between the M42 and the M1 near Rugby. I note that the scheme is backed by 18 local authorities and has been endorsed by the Midlands Connect strategy.

It is important to understand that Highways England is taking careful note of the bid—I want to put that on the record clearly. We are grateful for that. Highways England has proposed the conversion of the country’s busiest A roads to what it calls an expressway standard. It has provided evidence to suggest that that could provide users of those roads with improved performance and safety benefits, and a motorway-standard experience. As hon. Members know, the Department is consulting on the proposals, and the consultation closes, as luck would have it, today, having been open for two months—again, serendipity for my hon. Friend’s debate.

I assure colleagues that the case Highways England made for investment in the A5 has been recorded as a formal response to the consultation, and I have noted it in this debate. The Department will publish its response to the consultation in the spring. Officials—those present and those in the Department—will have been noting all the advice given today, which will be taken into account as part of the consultation.

The hon. Member for York Central was right to raise a quizzical eyebrow about the £10 million that my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth said would be the total cost of the scheme. If I understand it right, that £10 million will be required for the next phase of work into a study of the options. We are not quite in the world of Linda Evangelista, but £10 million does not go far when we are building roads. The research phase concludes after the Department’s response to the public consultation, after which decisions will be made about the content of RIS 2.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton rightly identified the importance of avoiding accidents and pollution wherever possible, and of getting the full benefit from investments. I share that view. The reason for treating this as a route is so that a holistic view can be taken across all those issues—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order.

Jesse Norman: You said we would finish at 5.46 pm, Mr McCabe.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I said 5.43 pm.

Jesse Norman: In that case, I apologise.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I am very sorry, but the clock has beaten you on this occasion.

5.43 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
I am very pleased to have secured the debate, with the support of my right hon. Friends the Members for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Telford (Lucy Allan), for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and for Woking (Mr Lord). I also had the support of the right hon. Members for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the hon. Members for Stratford-upon-Avon (Mr Morris), for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and for Woking (Mr Lord). I also had the support of the right hon. Members for Sedgefield and for Worcestershire, East (Mr Dowd). I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this subject, which is vital to the nation's economic and social welfare. I welcome the Cabinet Office Minister to his place.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on her work in producing this excellent manifesto. It is good to know that more than 60 Members support it. I hope that number is actually greater—I am sure many Ministers would put their name to it were they able to. Strengthening families is a wide issue, which involves more than Government Departments; local authorities are also a vital part of the operation. Can my hon. Friend assure me that she has been in contact with local authorities, and that she has had some positive feedback?

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered strengthening families.

I am very pleased to have secured the debate, with the support of my right hon. Friends the Members for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Telford (Lucy Allan), for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and for Woking (Mr Lord). I also had the support of the right hon. Members for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the hon. Members for Stratford-upon-Avon (Mr Morris), for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and for Woking (Mr Lord). I also had the support of the right hon. Members for Sedgefield and for Worcestershire, East (Mr Dowd). I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this subject, which is vital to the nation's economic and social welfare. I welcome the Cabinet Office Minister to his place.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on her work in producing this excellent manifesto. It is good to know that more than 60 Members support it. I hope that number is actually greater—I am sure many Ministers would put their name to it were they able to. Strengthening families is a wide issue, which involves more than Government Departments; local authorities are also a vital part of the operation. Can my hon. Friend assure me that she has been in contact with local authorities, and that she has had some positive feedback?

Fiona Bruce: I can inform the House that, just last week, Westminster City Council expressed full support for the manifesto through its leader, Nickie Aiken. It is looking at how it can implement the relevant policies there—particularly family hubs, which I will speak of later.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this subject, which is vital to the nation's economic and social welfare. I welcome the Cabinet Office Minister to the debate. I recognise that the subject of the debate—streingthening families—has already served one main purpose of my speech, because it has highlighted the question of whether responses should come from the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions or the Home Office. Looking at the manifesto’s policies, we could add the Treasury, the Ministry of Justice, the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department of Health and Social Care or even the Ministry of Defence to those. All those Departments are affected by family breakdown and have a stake in strengthening families. What is needed, and what is at the heart of my speech and my plea to the Government, is a co-ordinated cross-Government approach and response to the biggest social problem affecting our nation today, although it is not recognised as such.

In the absence of a Cabinet Minister responsible for families, with a dedicated budget and civil service team to prioritise and co-ordinate family policies across Government, much in the same way as equalities policies have been over the past few years, it is to the Cabinet Office that we look to ensure the effective running of Government and to answer the question at the heart of the debate: how effective are the Government at supporting families, and how can they be more effective still? That is why I am so delighted to see the Cabinet Office Minister in his place.

May I be helpful to the Minister? On his Department’s website is a statement of what the Cabinet Office does. It says:

“We support the Prime Minister”.

So do I—very strongly, particularly as I am aware, following meetings I have had at No. 10, including with the Prime Minister, about the strengthening families manifesto, that she is leading a review within No. 10 of how the machinery of government can better support families. I am sure that the Minister will say that the Cabinet Office supports that.

While in this generous mood, I thank the Government for a number of the steps they have so far taken to combat family breakdown and for the commitment they have expressed to strengthening families. Several Ministers have recently stated in the House their desire for some of the policies to strengthen families developed in the manifesto to be implemented. Only last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), said in this Chamber:

“The Government are committed to supporting families”,

and that the Government’s view is that “families are fundamental in shaping individuals and that they have an overwhelmingly positive effect on wider society.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 285-6WH.]

Those warm words have been matched with long-term funding to support family stability. In November’s Budget, the Government announced an additional £15 million for relationship support over the next two years to help keep families together and reduce parental conflict, which we know has such an impact on children growing up. That is in addition to the £30 million earmarked for relationship support between 2017 and March 2020, which was announced last spring in the DWP’s paper, “Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families”.

I also welcome the Government’s response to a recent written question on the family test, restating their aim to “ensure that impacts on family relationships and functioning are recognised early on during the process of policy development and help inform the policy decisions made by Ministers.”
The current No.10-led review of the efficacy of the family test is also welcome, as we look to its becoming more than just a box-ticking exercise and one that truly supports family stability.

I have been hugely encouraged by the Government’s commitment to the implementation of the Farmer review on the importance of strengthening prisoners’ family ties to prevent reoffending and to reduce intergenerational crime. I am particularly encouraged by the support given in October by my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah)—at the time, an Under-Secretary of State for Justice—who told the House:

“The family is the most effective resettlement agency that we have. That is a view shared by the prisons inspectorate, the probation service and Ofsted. The time to work on those relationships is from the moment an offender is sentenced to jail. To leave it longer is to leave it too late.”—[Official Report, 31 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 686.]

He went on to welcome the “excellent” review by Lord Farmer. I thank the Government for “working to implement” every single one of the review’s recommendations. Indeed, that is one—just one—of the policy recommendations in our family manifesto. I am delighted that we can now say that recommendation is being implemented.

I am particularly concerned about the impact of family breakdown on children’s life chances. Children are often the worst victims of family breakdown, and I therefore welcome the inclusion of “better support for families with children and young people at risk of developing mental health problems” in the recent Green Paper, entitled, “Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision”. The paper pledges to commission further research into interventions that support parents and carers.

There is a core team of us working on the family manifesto, including Dr Samantha Callan, who worked for many years on strengthening families, including for the Centre for Social Justice, and the former hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate, David Burrowes, who has done such sterling work over many years with parliamentary colleagues on this issue. He is currently the executive director for the manifesto, and I am pleased to say that he is working weekly and tirelessly on it.

As I said, the Green Paper pledges to commission further research, and I thank the Government for that positive step in relation to the benefits of stable families for children’s mental wellbeing, which all of us in the House recognise is such a major problem in this country today. All those warm words having been said, it will not surprise the Minister and other hon. Members to learn that I am pressing for more action to strengthen families. In fact, the Prime Minister agreed to that, as she told the House at Prime Minister’s questions in October that the Government are “looking into what more we can do to ensure that we see...stable families”.—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 846.]

It is an essential part of the passionate commitment that I have made on the steps of Downing Street on becoming Prime Minister. She expressed her desire to fight against “burning injustice” and “to make Britain a country that works for everyone”. For that to happen there must be, as part of that fight, further real work to strengthen and support families. Indeed, this is a poverty-fighting tactic. In so many cases, family breakdown is a root cause of poverty. To give just one example, it stands to reason that if a family breaks up and one wage packet suddenly has to cover the cost of two homes, there will be less money to go round.

In committing to nurture stable families, the Prime Minister recognised the wide range of benefits that committed family relationships can bring, including improving wellbeing and reducing both poverty and Government spending. As the “Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families” report states, “For most of us, family is the bedrock of our lives. Acute parental conflict disturbs this foundation. It is important to help parents develop strong relationships so that they can better support each other and their children.”

The “Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, published in September, contains 18 specific policies that are the fruit of many years’ work by a number of people from both inside and outside this place. We published that to give the Government some practical ways in which families can be strengthened. When it was published, we had the support of about 40 Back-Bench colleagues; we now have the support of more than 60. Indeed, even this week, colleagues who have heard about it have come up to me and asked for their names to be added. I can think of no Government Member who opposes the principles of the manifesto.

The impact of family breakdown concerns not only Members of the House, but the entire nation. Centre for Social Justice polling reveals that 89% of people agree with the following statement:

“If we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start.”

The sad but undeniable truth is that Britain is one of the world’s leading nations for family breakdown, and the trend shows no signs of abating. It was highlighted by the CSJ in its report entitled “Breakdown Britain” in 2006, in “Breakthrough Britain: Every Family Matters” in 2009, and in “Fractured Families: Why stability matters” in 2013. For us in this place to hold back from acting for fear of being misrepresented as judgmental is selfish: many of us enjoy strong family lives.

In his excellent speech on family policy in 2014, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, spoke about the fear of being judged and said that “we should never let this stop us saying loudly and proudly that strong families matter.”

Otherwise, we are saying that our reputation and our fear of being judged in the press or in this place matter more than the millions of children who are growing up challenged by 21st-century problems, which stronger families could help them to combat. I am talking about problems such as pornography on their phones, bullying in school, being over-sexualised by the media, being confused about personal relationships and being at risk of self-harm—indeed, many are self-harming. Those modern-day problems affect modern-day families, and they need to be supported to tackle them. Not to support families is not social justice.

As well as the substantial personal impact on individual lives and the wider family, the fiscal cost of family breakdown has been variously reported to be about £50 billion a year, but I think that a vast underestimate.
It does not include the indirect costs, such as local authority care costs and prison budgets, given that one quarter of prisoners were looked-after children. Indeed, it is estimated that 21% of prisoners' children grow up to offend and enter prison themselves. The figure does not include the costs of treating addiction: this country has a major problem with alcohol, particularly among older people, many of whom are lonely and use it as a source of comfort. The figure does not include the costs of working days lost, the effects of loneliness in old age, which I have mentioned, and a host of other costs.

According to research published by the CSJ, the number of lone-parent families rose by 130,000 between 2006 and 2012. By the age of 16, nearly half of all children do not live with both parents. A million boys are growing up without their fathers. One of the most moving statistics that I ever heard from our former Prime Minister, David Cameron, was that a teenage boy growing up in this country today is more likely to have a smartphone than a father at home.

Research from the Social Trends Institute into families with children under 12 shows that Britain has the highest level of family instability in the entire developed world. Family breakdown has reached epidemic proportions. If it were categorised in health or environmental terms, it would be a national emergency. David Attenborough might well make a visually dramatic BBC documentary about it. News bulletins and front pages would demand urgent action. Urgent questions would follow. The Cabinet Office would be engaged with Cobra meetings to co-ordinate a response. But the Government are challenged even to provide a co-ordinated response to this debate.

I pause at this point to recognise that politicians, as I have said, often shy away from debates and policies on supporting families. This is not some moral crusade or a demand to impose a one-size view of family life. It is about strengthening all families. There are of course difficult cases in which it is better for a child not to be in the same home as one or other of their parents. In addition, as we always say in the many debates on this issue that we have had in this place over the years, many single parents work tirelessly and successfully to ensure that their children flourish and have a positive future to look forward to, and many find themselves single through absolutely no fault of their own. However, we must respond to the evidence.

We talk in this place about evidence-based policy making, and the evidence shows that single-parent families are the most likely household type to be living in financial poverty. Lone parents are 2.5 times more likely to be living below 60% of median income than couple parents. In 2011, 41% of children from lone-parent families were in households living on less than that after housing costs, as against 23% of children from two-parent families. In contrast—this is the good news—children from low-income households with an active father are 25% more likely to escape the poverty that they grow up in.

Family breakdown has an impact not only on financial wellbeing, but on long-term life chances. The importance of family stability to children’s educational outcomes is seen most strikingly among looked-after children, only 15.5% of whom pass both English and mathematics GCSE, compared with the national average of 58.7%. Children’s life chances rest not only on their educational attainment but, as I have mentioned, on their mental health. Sir Al Aynsley-Green, the first Children’s Commissioner for England, said that children’s biggest fear was their parents separating. It is the case that 50% of all mental health problems manifest by the age of 14, and 75% by age 18.

I am a patron of a mental health charity in my constituency, Visyon, which specialises in counselling young people—children as young as four. It is overloaded with counselling requests. Not long ago, I asked the chief executive officer, “How many of the children and young people you help to counsel have problems as a result of dysfunctional family relationships at home?” He looked at me as if to say, “Do you really have to ask that question, Fiona?” and then said, “Fiona, virtually all of them.” Yet what attention is given by children and young people’s mental health services to family relationships when they are helping young people with mental health problems?

A freedom of information request was sent to all mental health trusts and local authorities this year regarding their CYPMH services. The result found that workers did not routinely collect information on the background family circumstances of children presenting with mental health problems, and those that did did not specifically ask about exposure to parental conflict or family breakdown. That is a serious omission, which has to be addressed, as our strengthening families manifesto states. Local authorities should be required to collect information about family breakdown as a key poverty-fighting tactic. Those who counsel young people with mental health problems should also be trained to help counsel their parents.

In a recent survey of over 4,500 children across 11 local authority mental health services areas, family relationship problems were reported by clinicians to be the biggest presenting problem. Last week, Professor Tamsin Ford, who is professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Exeter medical school, told the joint meeting of the Education Committee and the Health Committee that “support for families is key” in tackling children and young people’s mental health.

As demonstrated by our manifesto, there is no lack of effective, practical and possible policies that the Government could employ, and no lack of hon. Members in all parts of the House who would like to see them implemented. If the Government wish to be defined by fighting the “burning injustices” that the Prime Minister highlighted on the steps of Downing Street, they must take a lead and drive forward this raft of policies to support children and families. They must lead on strengthening family stability and combat the impact of family breakdown. These are policies that will improve children’s life chances, benefit their mental health and help to alleviate a number of other pressures we face—in housing, for example. We must create a Government who are forensically focused on practically supporting today’s families, with all the modern day pressures they are under.

The family test for all policies is welcome, but it is reactive to the proposals of other Departments, rather than proactive in forming a family-orientated approach across all areas of policy. Government Departments need to be co-ordinated to be proactive. If successive Governments can work up a Treasury-approved assessment
tool for the natural environment, surely they can do the same for the family. As the Chancellor has stated, this country faces a productivity crisis and strengthening families will improve our nation’s productivity, so the Treasury itself will benefit. To provide such an approach, I ask the Government to appoint a champion for families at Secretary of State level—a Cabinet Minister responsible for families. He should be supported by every Department, each of which should have a Minister responsible for ensuring that policies aimed at strengthening families are delivered as part of their Department’s policy-making process.

The president of the family division of the High Court, Sir James Munby, has pointed out that far too many Whitehall Departments are responsible for children and yet “there is no Department and no Secretary of State whose title includes either the word ‘families’ or the word ‘children’”. Following the latest reshuffle, we have only an Under-Secretary of State with children and families in his brief. The only other Minister with family support in his brief is the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire. In a debate in the House just last week about Government policy on marriage—a number of colleagues here were in that debate as next week is Marriage Week—he said: “it is right to draw attention to an issue that affects a wide range of Departments.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 285WH.]

Without co-ordination across Departments, this will always run the risk of being a piecemeal and fragmented issue. It needs high-level co-ordination.

One example of the risk of lack of co-ordination involves the website DAD.info, which provides focused advice and support for fathers. There are over 35,000 users on its interactive forum. It is run by the Family Matters Institute, which has developed it into the largest interactive parenting network for fathers in Europe. It is being funded by the Department for Education, but only until the end of next month, because the support it provides goes beyond the reach of one Department, covering debt, child maintenance and legal advice, and relationship advice. I ask the Minister to look into this pressing issue.

We know that, at a local level, family support works best when it is co-ordinated. I want to talk a little about family hubs. They are a key aspect of our family manifesto. They offer a way forward, and the Government have the opportunity to play a leading role in their roll-out across Britain. As I understand it, there are about 1,000 children’s centres across the country—there is an estate there already—but children’s centres have traditionally offered support chiefly only for families with children up to the age of five. Why not extend this to the wider family? Why not have family hubs in local communities right across the country giving relationship support and education at all life stages? That could support couples in their own relationship, as parents or as grandparents. I know from the Minister’s question to the Prime Minister last November that that is a particular concern for him. Family hubs could also support couples in marriage preparation, strengthen father involvement, and support families as carers for elderly relatives or when specific life shocks or challenges occur. Family hubs could be local nerve centres co-ordinating all family-related support.

Many Sure Start children’s centres are currently under-utilised. There are already councils pioneering family hubs. Westminster City Council is looking at this now. Isle of Wight Council has good practice that others could look to and build on. Chelmsford City Council is launching its family hub next month. Aware of this debate, the leader of Westminster City Council, Nickie Aiken, has sent the following message:

“The Manifesto to Strengthen Families clearly understands that to ensure all children have the best start in life we must take a whole family approach. Westminster City Council has a strong record of innovation working with vulnerable families launching our Family Recovery programme in 2008, which was the foundation for the Government’s troubled families agenda. We have continued to innovate with our manifesto. I welcome this debate, and believe that if introduced, it would support more children to reach their potential.”

The reality is that many couples do not have anywhere to go when early challenges within their relationship present themselves. The period when children are aged nought to three is a particular problem period or pressure point in a relationship. We are all aware of the importance of early intervention in a child’s early years and how that can be so effective for a child. Let us support early intervention in couples’ relationships when they have challenges. Many cannot, in a timely way, get to Relate, which is one of many organisations that family hubs could host or help families to access far earlier, before they think of going either to one door to see Relate or to another to see the solicitor about divorce.

Family hubs can be a mix of statutory and voluntary services. They could be a real base for many local community organisations, enabling them to flourish and strengthen what they provide. To ensure that as many parents as possible know what is on offer at a family hub, local health commissioners need to ensure that all antenatal and post-natal services are co-located there. Each local area will have its own way in which to develop family hubs that suit that particular community—that is the beauty of this proposal—but at the same time there will also be best practice right across the country, which the Government could help promote.

As part of the Government’s consideration of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, will they consider placing a statutory duty on local government authorities to make fathers’ names compulsory on birth registrations wherever practicable and possible? That would provide an opportunity to signpost new parents to support services. Through structured, relaxed conversations at family hubs, families could be identified who might need support or where there are early warning signs of relationship distress. We also need family hubs because we need places in every community where people can go with relationship problems and not be seen in a judgmental way. Over the years, every family will have its challenges. Nobody judges if someone goes to the citizens advice bureau or the doctor. Let us normalise getting help to strengthen family life, just as we get help to maintain our health in other ways, whether physical or financial.

In this House we raise many challenges for which support could be provided through family hubs: not just mental ill health, but obesity, addictions and loneliness.
Therefore, will the Government look at putting in place a transformation fund and a national taskforce to encourage local authorities to move towards the family hubs model, and at best practice where that exists? Value that group is doing research on best practice, which I would be happy to share, but I know what the Minister will think: how to fund it? We have looked into that. The Government could earmark some of the £90 million in dormant accounts, which I understand is to be targeted to help young people.

This change of focus, to support families more holistically in local authorities, is also needed in mental health care provision. Incorporating couples therapy into NHS provision would not siphon off funds from where they are most needed but redirect them to where they could be most effective. That is why policy 13 of the strengthening families manifesto proposes the inclusion of couples counselling within children and young people's mental health teams locally.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm, I am familiar with the impact of addiction on families. Addiction’s intergenerational and immediate damage is major and getting worse. In 2016 there were 7,327 alcohol-specific deaths in the UK. Finding more effective ways of preventing and treating addiction, and protecting families from addiction developing within them, is essential. In line with the manifesto, I ask that the drug strategy board looks at how parents can be supported to prevent addiction from developing not only within families but among young people. There is not enough support for those seeking to support family members—they are, after all, probably the most effective at it—when there is addiction within a family.

Marriage has an instrumental role in promoting the stable relationships that support life chances for couples and their children. It helps with children’s educational attainment and future employment, boosts mental health and reduces the risk of addiction in later life. I am sorry to quote statistics, but if we are to make evidence-based policy, we do need them. Research shows that by the time children take their GCSEs, 93% of parents who have stayed together are married. In last week’s debate on marriage, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire, recognised the opportunity that Marriage Week provides to “celebrate the commitment and connectedness that a stable relationship brings to a family.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 285WH.]

I want to thank the Government for the introduction of the marriage allowance, which a number of us in this place, including my hon. Friend the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), pressed the Treasury over a number of years to bring in. However, the low level of uptake reveals that it has not been as effective as intended in redressing the unintended discrimination in the tax system—a discrimination that militates against stable families.

That is why I ask the Government to continue to look at removing the financial disincentives for the poorest—those on low incomes—to form lasting couple relationships. It cannot make sense that a household can acquire more money in benefits if they split up than if they stay together. We want the Government to enable those who are on universal credit and entitled to the marriage allowance to receive this tax break as an automatic part of their claim, and to ensure that it does not taper away. To repeat a request that has been made many times, but is none the less still valid, will the Government consider increasing the value of the marriage tax allowance for low-income married couples or civil partners with young children to combat the in-built penalisation of marriage? I believe that would boost uptake and, in turn, family stability.

We should be unashamed of educating our children on the value of marriage—doing so sensitively, recognising the difficulties that individual circumstances can present, the courageous achievements of those who have experienced relationship breakdown and the pain that many have suffered. I could not say it better than my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who said in this House, when Education Secretary, that it was “exceptionally important” to include marriage in relationships education because at “the heart of this is the fact that we are trying to help young people to understand how commitments and relationships are very much at the core of a balanced life that enables people to be successful more generally.”—[Official Report, 6 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1189.]

It is not only that we want an opportunity to teach children the benefits of committed relationships, including marriage; actually, we have a duty. In fact, it is a legal duty under section 148 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 that pupils learn about the “nature of marriage and its importance for family life and the bringing up of children”.

Will the Minister confirm this requirement with his colleagues in the Department for Education and ask that it be retained when the Government lay regulations in relation to relationships education in primary schools and relationships and sex education in secondary schools, following the consultation on this issue, which closes on 12 February? Will he talk to his Education colleagues as that consultation draws to a close to emphasise the importance of developing healthy, committed, resilient relationships, including marriage?

Many colleagues, some of whom cannot be here today, spoke in last week’s debate on this subject. I believe that we represent people across the country who are concerned with ensuring that the benefits of marriage are reflected, not omitted, when we talk to our children. It is interesting to note that when we talk to young people in their teens, they aspire to be married; there is, within us all, this deep desire for a fulfilling, long-term, committed, close relationship in life, and they recognise that marriage is a way to achieve that.

Marriage can help to combat loneliness in old age, reduce the pressure in terms of GP visits because of depression and reduce work absenteeism. It benefits the public purse. The strengthening families manifesto therefore suggests that high-quality marriage preparation be encouraged. One way to do that is by waiving marriage registration fees for couples who take part in an accredited marriage preparation course. If some of them take part in that course and decide that they have different views on finance, bringing up children or who will work or not work if a family comes along, and they decide not to marry, that is a positive outcome. At least people will go into that relationship with their eyes open rather than closed.

As the Centre for Social Justice’s report “Breakthrough Britain” highlighted, family breakdown plays a part in driving poverty and disadvantage. Almost half the nation
feels the effects of family breakdown by the age of 16. That is a huge statistic. As we have heard, children's health and wellbeing are fundamental to their educational attainment and their ability to thrive in the workplace. The health and wellbeing of society as a whole rests on their benefiting from safe, stable and nurturing relationships in their early years. For most of them, that means their family.

Many families today do not have role models on which to base a successful family life, as the troubled families programme has shown. However, it has also shown that, although complexities can ensue if families are not equipped to make a go of it, there are also ways that they can successfully tackle them. I pay tribute to the Government for persevering with and investing in the troubled families programme, but we need to do more than help troubled families; we need to help every family.

The need to strengthen families simply cannot be ignored any longer. It cannot be lost anymore due to reticence, indifference, embarrassment or the battles of party politics; it is just too important. Nearly 90% of those surveyed by the Centre for Social Justice agreed with the statement that “if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start.”

Broken families are the root from which so many other burning injustices can grow. If we do not seek to strengthen the bedrock of our nation, we start on the back foot with many of the other injustices that the Government are so admirably seeking to address, such as housing. I go so far as to say that they will never be able to address the other injustices successfully unless they address strengthening family life. It is our children and the poorest and most vulnerable who will pay the highest price.

There is a moment for Government to address the issue. That moment is now, and that Government is this one. We have much cause for optimism that the Government will continue to champion and encourage stable families, as they recently stated they would. The Minister’s Department likes to talk about transparency; I urge the Government to consider making an annual statement on the progress across Government on strengthening families.

When families are strong, they contribute to society by producing a competitive labour force and caring for family members across generation. They play a key role in the development of healthy children and young people, and a central role in strengthening local communities. However, there are profound social consequences when, for whatever reason, families fail. We need to match the warm words from Government and the promises made on economic support for families with more practical policies not only to prevent family breakdown but to promote healthy relationships.

I welcome the steps that have been taken by a number of Departments to strengthen families, because the issue touches all areas of life. I welcome the fact that numerous Departments are already engaged, but the Government as a whole cannot afford to drag their feet. There is much more that they need to do. If the Government are to honour their commitment to support families, we need a cross-departmental approach, and we need a Cabinet Minister.

This is not a moral agenda; it is a social justice issue. The Government claim to recognise the importance of stable homes and strong couple relationships to the success of our nation and the next generation. The Prime Minister wants to address burning injustices. Now the Government must back up their words with action, and my 60 colleagues and I will ensure that they do.

2.13 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on a comprehensive and courageous speech, and for trying her best to solve what she described as one of the greatest epidemics facing our country. The strength of the epidemic and the misery that it causes seem to go beyond any solution that one could possibly dream up. In so many areas of Government, from the Ministry of Defence to the Department for Education, when we identify a problem, we have an idea of what we can do to counter it, but this is such an epidemic and it goes so much to the root of society that it is hard to know whether just appointing a Cabinet Minister for families, although a worthy aim, would keep families together.

However, at least my hon. Friend is trying to identify the problem. As she said, if there were other issues costing the nation, not £10 billion, £20 billion or £30 billion, but probably £40 billion or £50 billion, and that caused so many obvious problems, it would be considered a national emergency, but the problem is that society has so changed over the past 50 years and marriage has been so downgraded that Governments—Labour Governments, Conservative Governments, Scottish National party Governments in Scotland, French Governments, Italian Governments—have scratched their heads and wondered what they could do to resist the problem.

It is a pity, because all the evidence—I will not take a lot of time to go through it—is clear. There is an absolute wealth of evidence on the importance of marriage to the welfare of children, and a wealth of evidence that marriage works, in that couples are much more likely to stay together. It is all published, and one could go on and on.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that parents who cohabit are approximately three times more likely than those who are married to have separated by the time the child reaches the age of five. A 2009 report by the Department for Children, Schools and Families found that a child not growing up in a two-parent family is more likely to grow up in poorer housing, experience behavioural problems, perform more poorly in school, gain fewer qualifications, need more medical treatment, leave school and home while young, become sexually active or pregnant or become a parent at an early age, and report more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence and adulthood. None of that is to gainsay the fantastic job done by tens of thousands of single parents, many of them single parents through no fault of their own, but every study shows that marriage works.

I will mention one issue that has not yet been discussed. People are now saying that they want no-fault divorce, and that it is a charade that people have to claim a reason for getting divorced. They say that it is a matter of tidying up expensive and messy legal paperwork and that such couples are totally irreconcilable anyway, and ask why
we are going through with the sham of our divorce laws. They say that we should have a simple legal system—“I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you”—and that is that. However, I think that making life cheaper and easier for such couples would also send a profound, wrong message and would make it easier for hundreds and thousands of other families to break down. It would proclaim from this House that marriage is just a legal device, like buying a home or selling a company, and that we therefore want to get rid of any kind of explanation for why people want to get divorced. Producing that reform would be saying to the nation that encouraging couples to stay together in marriage is not our first priority.

Again, repeated studies have shown that 90% of couples who manage to stay together until their child is 15 will stay married. We know from all those studies that family breakdown is a key driver for poverty among women in particular, with half of all single parents living in poverty. Those are the factors for which datasets are increasingly allowing us—I hope—to understand the situation. We do understand the situation: we understand that marriage works and that the breakdown of marriage, or indeed marriage not taking place at all, drives many people into a poorer outcome for life.

My hon. Friend is leading the campaign, and we are encouraging her. We all want better educational treatment for our children and a decline in juvenile criminality; we want families to stay together. She is right to say that, despite the appalling complexity and strength of the problems, Government can at least attempt to be a facilitator of families and married people staying together, rather than an enabler of breakdown.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the steps that some authorities are taking, such as family hubs. Benjamin Adlard Primary School is in Gainsborough south-west ward, which is one of the 30 poorest wards in the entire country. The headmaster, Sam Coy, runs the school, and I have visited it. So many of the problems that his children exhibit are due to family breakdown. I am delighted that he is leading the campaign to have a family hub in Gainsborough. Of course, having a family hub that gives help will not solve the problem—local authorities taking an interest will not prevent societal trends that have been so apparent for decades—but it is an attempt to do something. Brave young headteachers such as the headteacher of Benjamin Adlard Primary School should be given our encouragement.

My hon. Friend has mentioned the marriage allowance. A lot of people sneer at the marriage allowance and say, “It’s just ridiculous. Families don’t come together or split apart because of some change in the benefit rules,” but most developed countries and OECD members recognise family responsibility through family and marriage allowances.

Given that the cost of family breakdown is £47 billion, as my hon. Friend has explained, I do not believe that it is too much for the Treasury to recognise marriage in the tax system through a marriage allowance, for which I have campaigned for years. We are not trying to use the tax or benefit system to try to get people together or to stay together. All we are saying is that if one parent in a two-parent married family wants to stay at home to look after the children full time, that should not be discouraged in the benefit system—that is a profound injustice.

We had to drag the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer kicking and screaming to bring in the allowance. He brought it in at a very low level and it has never been pushed properly. There are still many people inside Government and the civil service who do not like it and would like it to fade away, but all it is trying to do is right an injustice. If one person in a married couple wants to stay at home to look after the children full time, they should not be financially disadvantaged by the tax and benefit system.

Marriage rates among the better-off are still very high, but at the less well-off end of the spectrum they are much worse. Journalist Ed West noted that research for The Spectator showed that, in 2000, someone in the top socioeconomic class was 22% more likely to be married than someone in the lowest socioeconomic class. By 2017, that division had risen to 48%, and the crisis is growing. More needs to be done.

There are lots of sound recommendations in my hon. Friend’s manifesto, and she should be congratulated on putting pressure on the Government. Relate has written to us about a report it produced with Professor Lord Layard. He observed—this is such obvious common sense—that:

“In every study, family relationships are more important than any other single factor affecting our happiness...Of all the factors that affect happiness, your family life or other close relationship comes first.”

We all know from our personal lives what a blessing a long and happy marriage is. It is the most important thing in our life. Although in many ways society is infinitely more prosperous than when I was born in 1950, is not a happier place in many respects. That is nothing to do with the size of someone’s bank balance, the size of their overdraft or where their children go to school; it is to do with a sense of belonging in a marriage that lasts.

I sympathise with the Minister. His civil servants will have done their best, and no doubt he will say some warm words at the end of this debate. However, it is incumbent on us to have some courage when we debate this subject, not just to talk in simple terms about a new Cabinet Minister or something of that sort, although that is a good step, but to say that there is something profoundly wrong in society and that one of the reasons why society is an unhappier place now is the massive breakdown and decline in religion, which did and does allow people to raise their eyes above their present circumstances and gives them some support.

That massive decline is never mentioned by politicians, because we are afraid that we will be seen as putting ourselves on a soapbox and proclaiming that we are better than other people, or that people will say that the decline in religious observance and that sort of thing is a private matter. It is all far too difficult, but occasionally we have to have the courage to say what we believe in.

My hon. Friend is quite right. She gave a comprehensive speech. In the Minister’s response, I hope he will raise his eyes from his civil service text for a few moments, speak from the heart, and give a clue of how we can begin to address and be honest about the greatest problem facing our society today.

2.25 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).
I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on her manifesto, on securing this debate and on her powerful speech.

My hon. Friend mentioned a new Cabinet Minister. I warmly welcome the Minister to his place, whose ears I have pricked up at the thought of a new Cabinet post—a cross-departmental role—suitable for somebody young, eloquent and forward-thinking. I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will have listened intently, especially to that point.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the family or of consistent and unconditional loving support. Facts and figures can be bandied around. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough was right to highlight certain facts and figures, and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton was also right to say that we must have evidence-based policy.

Each of us instinctively knows the importance of family, whether we have benefited from it ourselves or not. I grew up in a family that was not materially wealthy, but rich in love and support. As children growing up, we knew that we could make mistakes through trial and error and still have the support of a loving family. Now I have a family of my own, I know the difficulties, stresses and strains—and the sheer hard work—that it takes to hold it all together. Given that, I am delighted to support the manifesto and the debate.

In my brief contribution, I will tackle a specific aspect, which was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. An overlooked part of ensuring that families are strong is the support given to families involved in the criminal justice system. The excellent Lord Farmer review looked in detail at the impact that good family work in our prisons can have on prisoners, their families and society at large through a reduction in reoffending rates.

This is one of two statistics that I will give during my speech: for a prisoner who receives a visit from a partner or family member, the chances of reoffending are 39% lower than for a prisoner who does not have a similar visit. Support needs to be given for the benefit of the prisoner and their family. If prison is truly to be a place of reform, we cannot ignore the reality that there must be a supportive relationship to help to achieve rehabilitation. The estimated cost of reoffending is in the region of £15 billion a year, so it is essential to find new ways of rehabilitation and of supporting and cutting down those high rates of reoffending.

This is the second statistic that I will give. My hon. Friend mentioned a figure of 50%, but one study shows that 63% of prisoners’ sons go on to offend and commit crimes.

Fiona Bruce: Forgive me, but I obviously did not articulate myself clearly enough. Just so we are on the same page, the figure I meant to cite was 60%.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have also seen a figure of 63%, which may even be from the same study. Access to organisations and services with proven expertise in helping families that have members inside prisons is vital for protecting children’s life chances.

The Farmer review makes a lot of sensible and achievable recommendations. To give one simple example, today is the last sitting day before recess. Many families will be considering going on holiday over half-term, and some will even pass through an airport. The prison experience for visiting families should be treated in a similar way to airport security: it should be marked by courtesy, a customer service mentality and empathy for vulnerable and older people, for parents struggling with a young family and for children themselves.

Michael Tomlinson: I could not agree more. I could mention two local examples from Dorset and the south-west—the Footprints Project and Clean Sheet, a national organisation that operates in Dorset—that do exactly that volunteering work in prisons. We should also mention prison chaplains, who do so much in that area.

I am pleased that the Government have committed to supporting the Farmer review. I do not expect the Minister to respond to it in detail, but I look forward to the new prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), grasping and tackling the subject, as I know he will, and updating us in due course.

I have two final points to make. First, greater emphasis and training should be given to prison staff, who should be encouraged to build personal relationships with prisoners and their families, and to encourage prisoners in turn to build their own relationships with families and significant others. Secondly, when considering a prisoner’s application for release on temporary licence, family ties and supportive relationships should be a consideration. It should be a priority to ensure that an offender can improve family relationships ahead of release when it is safe to do so. A linked issue is the location of our prisons; we should ensure that prisoners are located as close to home as physically possible.

Families come in all shapes and sizes, but the evidence is clear. We know instinctively the importance of the family. I ask that the Government’s good work continue and that families’ importance be recognised, even within our criminal justice system.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I call Carol Monaghan—not to wind up for the Scottish National party, but in her own right.

2.32 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, particularly since by allowing me to leave the debate early you have shown your appreciation for my family’s importance to me.

I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her considered and comprehensive speech. I agree with much of what she said. In preparing for the debate, I read the strengthening families manifesto and was surprised to find myself agreeing with much of that as well. I would like to highlight a couple of points in it.
The manifesto discusses forces life. I have lived through forces life; as some hon. Members may know, my husband was an officer in the Royal Navy for 17 years, and for much of that time we struggled through forces life as a family. I appreciate the fact that forces life is mentioned in the manifesto, although I take issue with one comment: “Life in the Forces holds advantages for families.”

I struggle to find any advantages for families, to be perfectly honest—it was a very difficult time in our lives. However, it is important that the manifesto recognises the additional pressures and challenges imposed not just by separation but by the difficulties of living away from home. I hope that the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Act 2018, which has just been passed, will allow service personnel to consider flexible working in some roles, which may improve the experience for families in service life.

I was also pleased to see the importance that the manifesto places on fathers. It is crucial that the positive involvement of fathers is recognised and supported in society. Fathers should be able to participate fully in their children’s lives from day one. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published a review of maternity and neonatal services in Scotland, which sets out a future vision of maternity services in which fathers, partners and other family members are encouraged and supported to become part of all aspects of newborn care. It is important that we acknowledge fathers, who often feel excluded from the experience, even if they are present at the birth.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The Women and Equalities Committee has done some work on encouraging men to take a more active role in parenting from the very start. If we can get to a position where people do not automatically assume that parenting duties rest with women, society will benefit incredibly and women will have greater opportunities in employment.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. We are moving in that direction, but a huge amount of work still needs to be done. The Scottish Government support policies that encourage flexible working and free flexible childcare, to help to tackle the stigma affecting fathers who take on caring roles and to encourage a work-life balance for parents. Embracing flexible and family-friendly ways of working is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do, because it allows employers to retain talented, productive staff. A 2014 study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research revealed that a “work from anywhere” culture could add an extra £11.5 billion to the economy.

The hon. Member for Congleton spoke passionately about improving a child’s life chances, and I believe she spoke from the heart. However, she said that family breakdown was the root cause of poverty, whereas actually—statistically—poverty is the root cause of family breakdown, and we must recognise that. While the Government remain wedded to austerity, they can do little to alleviate the real problems that households across the UK face. Of course a low-income household can be a very happy one, but the reality is that anxiety about money can place enormous strain on relationships.

I must also mention the two-child limit on child tax credits, which according to analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies will result in 600,000 three-child families getting £2,500 less a year, and 300,000 families with four or more children getting £7,000 less. That really will push people over the edge and into poverty. We need to consider what we are doing. The Scottish National party strongly opposes the cap, just as we oppose the removal of the family element of universal credit, which is causing households to fall into poverty. The policy has a particular financial impact on members of faith communities who are more likely to have more than two children and therefore more likely to struggle financially.

Is the Government’s intention really to punish people of faith? I believe that all children should be treated equally and that families should be financially supported to raise our future citizens. That can take place only if we value the child from birth and value the benefits that they can bring.

Immigration also threatens families. Every week at my surgeries, I deal with issues related to immigration and family reunion. I will mention two particular cases. One involves a gentleman in my constituency who met his wife while she was working in Glasgow on a short-term work visa. They married, she went back to the States and found she was pregnant. She had the child in the States, but because my constituent is self-employed he has not reached the salary threshold for bringing her here, his wife and their child are still in the States, and they cannot all live as a family. Another of my constituents is a gentleman who met his wife when he was working in Saudi Arabia. She is from the Philippines. They lived for a number of years in the Philippines very happily, but then his father became unwell and so he travelled back to Scotland to look after his father. He described being a “Skype family” for two years, until his son came and joined him. Unfortunately, and again because he is self-employed, he has not reached the salary threshold and cannot bring his wife over. So they are still a “Skype family”, although the child is in a different location.

The policies I have mentioned are very real ones that are causing damage to families all across the UK. We need to think about how we are going to support families. Yes, the intention of this manifesto is good and, yes, there is lots of good stuff in it, but there are also very damaging policies in Britain that are affecting families up and down the UK.

I will conclude there, Mr Bone. I thank you once again and I thank the other Members who are here for allowing me to speak at this point.

2.41 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I entirely agree with the case that has been made for the manifesto, of which I am a supporter. I will draw to the attention of the Minister—in so far as it has not been drawn to his attention already, because it most certainly has—the magnitude of the problem we face. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) drew attention to the quite shocking statistic that this country has the most volatile family life of the entire developed world for children under 12, and that comes with huge consequences.

Tomorrow I will hold a surgery, and the 10 or so people who attend will have a range of problems. Some of them will come and tell me about their debt, with the perhaps unrealistic expectation that there is something I can do about it. Equally, there may be a problem with
housing—perhaps the completely inadequate nature of someone’s housing, which may be too small, or too damp, or bed and breakfast accommodation, or indeed appalling neighbour problems. It might be to do with schooling—not being able to get their child into the school of choice, the school not being near enough, problems with getting the child to the school, problems with the child’s performance at or behaviour at school. For children in my part of the country, the problem might be lack of access to mental health provision. It might be some other aspect of poverty, such as having to use food banks or whatever. But scratch the surface, and one finds that however that problem may have presented, for nine out of 10 of the cases that came through the door, the cause will have been family breakdown. It is the surest way to poverty and it is for that reason that I support my hon. Friend and this manifesto. Family breakdown is costing us billions and we have to make sure that, across all of Government, we pursue policies that will deal with this epidemic—and it is an epidemic.

Let me draw attention to two particular areas. We had a debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday last week on marriage. In summing up, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), slipped into what I hope the Minister who is here today will not slip into—indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) warned him not to. I mean that habit of quoting civil servants, or whatever. The Under-Secretary responded to the debate by saying, “Well, of course, of course, families come in many shapes and sizes.” I intervened and asked him, “How many? How many shapes and sizes?” and I challenged him, saying, “A family is not just any collection of people who happen to share a fridge!”

When it comes to this education consultation that is going on at the moment with respect to relationships, I do not believe that it is satisfactory to say that, whatever the continuing education requirement is, relationships education must include family life. Actually, it is the other way round. The law now is clear—the education must be about marriage. Of course, we want relationship education—the strength of relationship education—to be about marriage and other relationships, not relationships including marriage. The emphasis is the other way round, which brings me neatly to the Bill that passed last Friday promoted by our hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

That Bill seeks to make civil partnerships available to mixed-sex couples. Civil partnerships were introduced in 2002 only for single-sex couples—same-sex couples—because marriage was not available to them. His intention is that civil partnerships should be extended; there should be equality and they should be extended to mixed-sex couples. I understand that the Government’s intention is that the Bill will be amended in the Bill Committee so that there is a review of whether there should be such an extension. I have an open mind. I was accused of seeking to undermine marriage by my support for the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013; my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham accused me of that in the Bill Committee. My fear was that introducing some sort of step-down marriage is the danger that will undermine marriage. However, I have an open mind about what a review under the current Bill should look at.

It seems to me that there is a possibility that extending what is a clearly protected, committed, legal relationship to people who would not otherwise have entered into one may actually be a significant advantage. Equally, it may be that, by introducing some form of “marriage-lite”, we actually undermine marriage, by persuading people who do not feel that they could go for the full-fat version that they can enter a civil partnership, on the basis that it is not quite the real deal. In fact, it is: the legal obligations and protection that provide for civil partnerships are identical to marriage in almost absolutely every respect, and I think it would be a mistake to persuade people that somehow they were entering into a relationship that was less committed if they were to enter a civil partnership.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I intervened on our hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) last Friday, saying that there are unintended consequences to consider. I made the point that if he gets his way, everybody, of whatever sex, will be able to marry anybody they like, or have a civil partnership with anybody they like. The only people who would not be able to have a civil partnership are siblings.

I raised this issue in 2004, when the first Act on civil partnerships—the Civil Partnership Act 2004—got through. I had been written to by two sisters who had lived together all their lives, but when one dies the other one will be forced from their home. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), I have an open mind on this subject, but if we are going to reform the law we have got to think of the unintended consequences. It would be fatuous if anybody can have a civil partnership or marriage apart from siblings.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** My hon. Friend draws a very important and powerful corrective to proceeding with that Bill, certainly in its current form.

I am very glad that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke earlier. I draw attention to what she said about service life. Those of us who have experienced service life and who have a constituency with a large number of service personnel will know that the statistics for marriage breakdown are much higher and much worse for military families. That is largely as a consequence of the pressures of having to deal with prolonged absences and the whole operational cycle. I put that to the Minister in the hope that he will draw it to the attention of Defence Ministers.

There certainly is scope within such institutions as the armed forces to provide training courses that will help with family breakdown. There are all sorts of courses available that help people to strengthen their relationships, and I have experienced them myself. I suggest that within a military environment there is scope for making such courses available to both partners—not just the serving partner—in a way that would not be available in civilian life. After all, those of us who have served did our MATTs every year. I have long ago forgotten what that stands for, but as well as the ordinary battlefield drills, skill at arms, and nuclear, biological, chemical and battlefield first aid, part of it was about standards and values, and it strikes me that there is scope under standards and values to strengthen relationships.
2.51 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and to follow so many excellent speeches. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), with whom I share an office, for all the work she has done on this issue. I also pay tribute to our former colleague David Burrowes for the tremendous work that he continues to do in this area.

I want to comment briefly on two matters that have already been raised by Members. First, my hon. Friend the Member for somewhere in Dorset—I never quite remember where—

Michael Tomlinson: Mid Dorset and North Poole.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson)—it is south of Watford, anyway—spoke about prisons, which are an incredibly important matter. As I mentioned in an intervention, Stafford prison is in my constituency, and I had the privilege of visiting there at some length last Friday. I saw the excellent work that prison officers do with vulnerable prisoners and their families. It was a humbling experience to see the tremendous work that goes on there and the commitment and dedication of the officers, chaplains, staff and volunteers who put so much time into that. I am sure that outcomes would be considerably worse were it not for that dedication.

I would also like to follow on from what my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West—or is it East?—(Sir Desmond Swayne) said about the need for support for military families. I have well over 2,000 serving personnel, three Signals Regiments and the Tactical Supply Wing of the Royal Air Force in my constituency. I see the commitments that they make and the pressures they face. I also see the pressures put on families, particularly in Signals, where they are often sent on fairly small missions to all parts of the globe, whether the Falklands or the middle east. The same is true of the Tactical Supply Wing of the RAF. I draw attention to policy 5 in “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which states:

“Parenting and relationship support should be made readily available for military families. Life in the Forces holds advantages for families”—

the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) questioned that, which I can understand—

“but it can also impose unique and significant pressures.”

I welcome that policy and urge the Government to implement it.

I want to concentrate on mental health, which is increasingly spoken about in Parliament, which I welcome. The subject is sensitive to most in the House, given the prevalence of mental health problems in many families. According to the charity YoungMinds, one in 10 children has a diagnosable mental health disorder—that equates to three children in every classroom—and that statistic increases to one in five for young adults. That is a profound hardship for individuals and their loved ones. Due to its significant adverse effects on income, wages, employment and social mobility, poor child mental health has been calculated as having a lifetime cost in lost income of as much as £388,000, and that is just the monetary cost—we also have the more significant social and personal costs.

The Prime Minister has recognised that inadequate treatment for those suffering from mental health problems in Britain amounts to a “burning injustice...that demands a new approach from government and society as a whole.” Given that 50% of all mental health problems manifest by the age of 14 and that 75% manifest by age 18, logic and evidence point to family circumstances being a hugely significant factor. That is why I wish to commend my hon. Friend for Congleton on securing this debate, which enables me to speak about a subject that needs more attention: the role that families play in a child’s mental health. I wish to make it clear that mental health can impact the most loving family, as well as the most challenged family. However, as ever in social policy, we need to follow the evidence and take appropriate action.

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

The Early Intervention Foundation review commissioned by the Government concluded that inter-parental relationships are instrumental in determining a child’s mental health. Children of separated parents or in challenged families have been shown to be 50% more likely to fail at school, have low self-esteem, struggle with peer relationships and have behavioural difficulties, anxiety or depression. That is supported by a review of 18 international studies that was published this year by the University of Sussex. It found that family breakdown is consistently linked to higher risks of depression in children. I draw attention to the fact that those are international studies; they are not just about the United Kingdom.

New research recently published by the Marriage Foundation uses the latest data on 14-year-old children in the millennium cohort study. It found that family breakdown is a major driver of teenage mental health problems. It is in stable homes with nurturing relationships that children have the best chance to thrive. Sadly, that is a far cry from many children’s experience. The recent Department for Work and Pensions report, “Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families”, found that by the age of 16, 47% of all children do not live with both birth parents. That statistic has been referred to before, but it is well worth repeating. Indeed, between one and three in 10 children live in families where their parents say they are in unhappy relationships. The Early Intervention Foundation recently concluded that “childhood mental health...may be improved by working to promote the quality of the inter-parental relationship.”

Couple therapists who work for Tavistock Relationships have witnessed the reality of that at first hand. They reported that the mental health difficulties of children of couples with relationship problems were significantly alleviated if they engaged in couples therapy. That is a blind spot in current health care provision.

A child interviewed by Common Room Consulting described their experience of therapy. They said:

“The main focus was on me, and changing my behaviours and thinking patterns, not on the causes. I tried to tell people that home wasn’t good on a few occasions, but they didn’t seem to have the time or the space for these discussions to happen...the focus was on the impact of my behaviour on my parents and sisters.”

A couples therapist based in a children and young people’s mental health team stated that she was unaware of any other multidisciplinary teams nationally that provided the service as part of their approach to tackling children’s mental health. That needs to change.
Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is making some powerful points. Would he join me in commending the work of Keith Simpson, the headteacher at Middlewich High School in my constituency, who is a lead on the Emotionally Healthy Schools project? Wherever possible, when a child has difficulties at school, he not only works with the child to provide support, but will contact the parents and ask whether they would like to come in or would like some support themselves, so that the whole family gets the support that will ultimately benefit the child and their education.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Given that Middlewich is not too far from where I live and where I represent, with her permission I would like perhaps to come and talk to that headteacher, to see what I can learn from the school in her constituency.

As I say, the situation needs to change, and the Department for Work and Pensions has begun to recognise that. The “Improving lives” report announced plans to put £30 million into a programme to help workless parents to resolve conflict through independent providers. However, that provision does not go far enough, because the need is not just among workless parents. A far-reaching, holistic, family-based approach to tackling children’s health is needed, as the example in Middlewich shows.

The recent Green Paper on children’s mental health is an important step in the right direction, and for the first time recognises the importance of parental relationships on children’s wellbeing and mental health, but we need to do more to support families. By incorporating couples therapy into NHS provision, children and young persons mental health teams would not be siphoning funds from where they are most needed, but redirecting them to where they will be most effective. Training would be required to enable professionals and frontline workers to be confident in identifying and treating the needs of the couple, alongside an efficient system of referral. The roll-out of family hubs would facilitate a collaborative and consistent provision of couples’ support in addressing children’s mental health. Alongside providing for those affected by mental health problems, that would also help to prevent the mental health problems from arising by providing relationship support and encouraging the involvement of fathers in the family.

Sometimes there is a reluctance to make such points. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) talked about the reluctance to refer to faith and religious belief. I entirely support what he said, but also, in our western, perhaps individual-focused society, we do not recognise enough the support that the wider family, indeed the community, can give to families. When I was living with my family in Tanzania, we often came across a proverb that was originally in Igbo, a Nigerian language, but in Swahili is, “Inachukua kijiji kizima kumlea mtoto”, which means: it takes a whole village to raise a child. If we view a village as our community, we should not shy away from recognising that families cannot do everything, as I know from my own experience. They come under great pressure at various times. Parents are otherwise engaged, perhaps going through crises themselves. It takes a community.

In my constituency, and many others, we have an organisation called Home-Start, which works with troubled families. The problem is that Home-Start relies on volunteers who give their time. It takes professional co-ordination, but we find that the funding for that, which is frankly peanuts when one considers what else we spend money on, is often the first to be cut, as I found in my constituency. Local authorities who were very generous have been put under pressure and, because it is not a statutory requirement, will remove the funding. As a result, the whole service is put under pressure, and may even disappear. These are people working on a voluntary basis with families that are under pressure, and saving the state huge amounts of money, because those families might otherwise fall into needing extremely expensive services. In addition to the issue of mental health, which I have spoken about at some length, I ask the Minister to look at the possibility of making relatively small amounts of funding available to schemes such as Home-Start. We are talking about a few thousand pounds, or tens of thousands, in a whole local authority area. The total cost for the country would be pretty minor, and the savings substantial.

Finally, colleagues may disagree, but I have found the value of family time at meal times very important, as well as the value of not having television. I have never had television, either as a child or an adult, but if people do have a television, there is value in saying, “Well, it has its place, but it shouldn’t be the centre of family life, because it takes up so much time and stops people talking to one another.” I think we can extend that to social media. I was very encouraged to read in The Evening Standard last week of a school, I think in London, which has 10 commandments about the use of social media. That school is really improving the lives of the children, not by forbidding access to social media, but by saying, “Let’s put less emphasis on social media, and spend more time interacting with one another personally, face to face, rather than via small screens.”

We ought to spend more time together as families, and play more games together. Despite my distaste for games that take longer than half an hour, I have discovered a great game called Bananagrams, which is brilliant for families that enjoy that kind of thing. It is not something that the Government can get involved in, but schools and other organisations can provide opportunities and suggestions for families.

Sir Edward Leigh: Would it help Cabinet unity if they played Bananagrams?

Jeremy Lefroy: At the moment, I think one half of the Cabinet would be playing Bananagrams, the other Scrabble, but it absolutely would help unity. I would love the Cabinet to play Bananagrams together; it might be more productive than some of the conversations that are had from time to time.

In conclusion, the impact of positive family relationships and of family breakdown on mental health is a vital issue. I urge the Minister to look at the big picture on mental health, and at the relatively small initiatives that are locally based and enable communities to do their best through volunteering to support families that are under pressure.

3.7 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate. It is a great pleasure to speak for the Opposition in what has been an interesting
discussion covering a wide range of important issues. I was particularly pleased to hear many speakers talk of the importance of the role of fathers and the value to families of supporting prisoners.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) focused on child mental health provision, describing its inadequacy as a “burning injustice”. It was interesting to hear him talk about his childhood experiences and the phrase, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” That very usefully broadened the discussion out, away from a focus purely on families and on to the broader range of support that is needed.

I was somewhat surprised by the claim made by the hon. Member for Congleton that family breakdown is the root cause of poverty. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) explained, poverty is the root cause of family breakdown. It is important that we keep that in mind.

**Fiona Bruce:** The problem is that, for too long, successive Governments have ignored the fact that family breakdown is a root cause of poverty. We have given many examples of that today, and we cannot get away from that fact.

**Margaret Greenwood:** I notice the hon. Lady says it is “a” root cause, which is a helpful context, but we cannot get away from the power of poverty to damage family relationships. We all know that from our own lives and our surgeries, and it is important that we bear that in mind.

“A Manifesto to Strengthen Families” was published by a group of Conservative MPs and peers in September 2017. I agree with some of the recommendations of course—who would argue against the Government focusing on promoting healthy relationships as one way to tackle the country’s mental health crisis? Of course that is important, as is the proposal to create family hubs to co-locate superb early years health services and services that offer help for parents with children across various age ranges. That is exactly what the highly successful Sure Start programme, introduced by the previous Labour Government, does. Why, then, have more than 1,200 Sure Start centres been closed since 2010? That is a severe reduction in essential support for many parents. Do the Government recognise that the closure of Sure Starts was a mistake? Perhaps they are too embarrassed to say so and want to introduce them under another name. If they do, that will be fantastic. Please do.

The manifesto might have more credibility if it were not for the damage being done to families by the Government’s policies. For example, the manifesto calls on the Government to encourage every local authority to work with voluntary and private sector partners to deliver family hubs. However, local councils are being forced to cope with deep cuts to their budgets, and the cuts are having a detrimental effect on family life. Children’s services will face a £2 billion funding gap by 2020, yet in the recent draft local government finance settlement, no extra money was committed for children’s services, despite a 12.4% rise over the past 10 years in the number of inquiries where local authorities believe a child may be suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. The number of children needing child protection plans has increased by more than 23,000 in the same period.

In my own area of Merseyside, local authorities in Liverpool, Wirral and Knowsley have worked with the Merseyside police service to establish early health hubs to support families with complex needs. However, the police service is concerned that the level of cuts it is coping with means that it is becoming increasingly reactive rather than proactive.

It is important that we think carefully about how we talk about families, when we consider the many types of families that exist: single parents, widows, widowers and kinship carers, for example.

**Fiona Bruce:** I want to be absolutely clear that when we talk about family hubs, we say that they should be open to all families. There is no exclusivity. It is really important to make that clear in this debate.

**Margaret Greenwood:** I thank the hon. Lady for her clarification.

The coalition Government introduced the marriage allowance in April 2015, supposedly to support families. Couples with an overall income of more than £55,000 can benefit from the marriage allowance, but is that a priority when there is so much need elsewhere? Child poverty is increasing, 4 million children are growing up in poverty and two thirds of those are in working households. In some parts of Birmingham and London, more than 50% of children are growing up in poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that the cuts to universal credit will push 1 million more children into poverty by 2020, along with an extra 900,000 adults.

The coalition Government abolished the statutory targets for reducing poverty set by the previous Labour Government, along with the child poverty unit that the Labour Government set up to co-ordinate policy across Government to meet those targets. Instead, the coalition substituted measures of life chances. The Work and Pensions Secretary at that time repeated in February last year his belief that “family breakdown is a big driver of UK poverty as children in families that break apart are more than twice as likely to be living in long-term poverty. When couples break up, children suffer and poverty in the family is often not far behind.” That ignores the reality that, in many families, poverty places great strain on relationships. Research by Relate, Relationships Scotland and Marriage Care found that a significant number of people cited financial problems as a reason for the break-up of long-term relationships. Debt creates real problems for families.

A recent study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that one in four of Britain’s poorest households is falling behind with debt payments or spending more than a quarter of its monthly income on repayments. That is why the Opposition strongly believe that families in debt should be given breathing space to sort out a debt problem once they contact an agency such as StepChange to ask for help. We will press that as an amendment to the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill.

It is hard to credit that after repeated cuts to social security since 2010 the Government could seriously claim to support families. Child benefit, like most working age benefits, is frozen until 2020, yet inflation is over 3%, and food prices in December were over 4% higher than a year earlier.
The families manifesto calls for the marriage allowance to be increased for lower-income couples with children. It calls for those claiming universal credit and entitled to marriage allowance to receive the allowance automatically, and for the remaining couple penalties in universal credit to be removed. Is that really a priority when a fifth of people claiming universal credit still do not receive payment in full on time, and when more than one in 10 do not receive even partial payment on time?

Parents who find their claim for childcare delayed because the universal credit online system cannot validate the notepaper used for receipts might wonder how serious the Government are about supporting families and children. Parents with two children claiming tax credits, or the equivalent in universal credit, who find that a new baby is on the way and who will not qualify, will similarly be surprised at the Government’s claims, as will families claiming universal credit and earning more than £7,400 a year, whose children will no longer qualify for free school meals. That £7,400 is hardly a high income.

Only last week new Government statistics on the benefit cap revealed that 72% of households capped were single parent families, and 77% of those families had a young child under five. So will the Minister explain how the Government will support those families, who will doubtless experience increased difficulties in paying their bills as a direct result of Government policy?

The High Court ruled in July that imposing the benefit cap on single parent families with children aged two or under was unlawful. The judge in that case said that the mothers are not workshy, “but find it, because of the care difficulties, impossible to comply with the work requirement.”

He went on to say,

“Real misery is being caused to no good purpose.”

It is clear that that is not supporting families.

Single parent families have been hit especially hard by cuts to social security since 2010, delivering real hardship to parents and their children. An independent study for the Equality and Human Rights Commission on the long-term impact of tax and welfare changes between 2010 and 2017 found that lone parents are set to lose around 15% of their net income on average: almost £1 in every £6. It is important that the Government recognise and value all family types. One in four families in the UK is a single parent family, so it is important that they are valued as much as any other family. Stigmatising single parent families is unacceptable and highly damaging.

Social policy needs to take into account all the family types that I have mentioned. The Government have failed to do that in the case of the bedroom tax, for example. Where parents have separated or divorced, the parent who is not the main carer is not allowed to claim for an extra room for children. Fathers are particularly badly affected by that. Labour would abolish the bedroom tax. I know that that is not the Government’s position, but will the Minister look at addressing the impact of the bedroom tax on separated and divorced parents and their children as a matter of real urgency? Many Members have spoken about the importance of fathers, but if a father cannot spend quality time with his children at the weekend simply because somebody has to sleep on the settee, that is not good enough.

Where relationships unfortunately break down, it is clear that the changes to the child maintenance system have not succeeded in supporting parents caring for children or in enabling parents to reach agreement themselves.

The families manifesto calls for the Government to promote healthy relationships to tackle the country’s mental health crisis, yet we know that mental health services are under extreme pressure and that trusts are finding it difficult to recruit key mental health staff. According to a study by the King’s Fund published in January, approximately 10% of all posts in specialist mental health services in England are vacant. Its survey of trusts found a pattern of high vacancy rates, with difficulties recruiting child and adolescent psychiatrists in particular. High staff turnover is currently leaving 4% fewer mental health nurses employed each year. All MPs are aware of the strain that child and adolescent mental health services across the country are under and of the impact that that has in terms of our young people not being able to access the support that they need and being asked to wait for an exceptional length of time and, in some instances, to make unacceptable journeys to get help when it becomes available.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Lady omits to mention the recent announcement made by the Government to invest substantially in mental health support, including for school-age children, through schools.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

The families manifesto also states that the drug strategy board should look at how parents can be supported to prevent addiction to drugs and alcohol from developing in young people. Obviously, we all want to support people going through such difficult experiences in their families, but the families listening to this debate who think I am entitled to make the point that the Government are providing is not nearly enough. That was the point.

The families manifesto calls for support officers since 2010.

The families manifesto calls for the Government to promote healthy relationships to tackle the country’s mental health crisis, yet we know that mental health services are under extreme pressure and that trusts are finding it difficult to recruit key mental health staff. According to a study by the King’s Fund published in January, approximately 10% of all posts in specialist mental health services in England are vacant. Its survey of trusts found a pattern of high vacancy rates, with difficulties recruiting child and adolescent psychiatrists in particular. High staff turnover is currently leaving 4% fewer mental health nurses employed each year. All MPs are aware of the strain that child and adolescent mental health services across the country are under and of the impact that that has in terms of our young people not being able to access the support that they need and being asked to wait for an exceptional length of time and, in some instances, to make unacceptable journeys to get help when it becomes available.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

The families manifesto also states that the drug strategy board should look at how parents can be supported to prevent addiction to drugs and alcohol from developing in young people. Obviously, we all want to support people going through such difficult experiences in their families, but the families listening to this debate who think I am entitled to make the point that the Government are providing is not nearly enough. That was the point. [Interruption.] I am very unhappy that the hon. Gentleman is not even looking at me when I respond to his point. He says I am making a party political rant. It is tempting to step up to intervene. She and her party voted but yesterday against a £450 million increase for our police officers and yet she continues to read that out.

Margaret Greenwood: Our position was that the money the Government are providing is not nearly enough. That was the point. [Interruption.] I am very unhappy that the hon. Gentleman is not even looking at me when I respond to his point. He says I am making a party political rant. It is tempting to step up to intervene. She and her party voted but yesterday against a £450 million increase for our police officers and yet she continues to read that out.

Margaret Greenwood: Our position was that the money the Government are providing is not nearly enough. That was the point. [Interruption.] I am very unhappy that the hon. Gentleman is not even looking at me when I respond to his point. He says I am making a party political rant. It is tempting to step up to intervene. She and her party voted but yesterday against a £450 million increase for our police officers and yet she continues to read that out.

Margaret Greenwood: Our position was that the money the Government are providing is not nearly enough. That was the point. [Interruption.] I am very unhappy that the hon. Gentleman is not even looking at me when I respond to his point. He says I am making a party political rant. It is tempting to step up to intervene. She and her party voted but yesterday against a £450 million increase for our police officers and yet she continues to read that out.

Margaret Greenwood: Our position was that the money the Government are providing is not nearly enough. That was the point. [Interruption.] I am very unhappy that the hon. Gentleman is not even looking at me when I respond to his point. He says I am making a party political rant. It is tempting to step up to intervene. She and her party voted but yesterday against a £450 million increase for our police officers and yet she continues to read that out.
Reductions in local authority funding have also meant that youth services, for example, have been decimated. Parents in my constituency say to me, “Where are the youth services now? Why are the Government cutting funding for those things?” It is important that there are activities for young people to do.

**Fiona Bruce:** The hon. Lady is looking through the wrong end of the telescope. The whole point of what we are talking about is prevention—strengthening family life to reduce the drug-related problems that the police would have to deal with. It is about encouraging families to relate to one another and their young people, so that young people do not always have to look outside the family for enjoyable activities—although I do not say they should not do that. The Labour party always talks about dealing with problems after the event, rather than getting to what I repeat is the root cause. Strengthening family life would prevent problems from occurring in the first place.

**Margaret Greenwood:** I understand the focus on family life, but it is acceptable to look at the effect of policing cuts. When constituents are going to their MP and pleading for support, saying they do not feel safe, we have a duty to reflect that. It is important.

The Labour Government took hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty, but research published late last year by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that the number of people living in poverty will soar to a record 5.2 million over the next five years because the Government’s social security cuts are biting deepest on households with young families. As the IFS said, the benefit freeze, the introduction of universal credit, and cuts to tax credits will mean a surge in child poverty, and the steepest increases will be in the most deprived parts of the country. That will have an impact on family cohesion and relationships.

Universal credit was introduced to smooth the transition into work and lift people out of poverty, but since 2010 work allowances and the taper rate have been cut. Today the Work and Pensions Committee report on universal credit has highlighted the Government’s inability to ensure that universal credit will enable more people to find work. I am talking about the full range of people: not just single unemployed people, but disabled people, single parents, carers and the self-employed, who are now claiming universal credit as the full service is rolled out. Ministers continually refer to statistics that cover only single unemployed claimants with no children; that is a strange focus if the Government are committed to supporting families.

It is important to consider the impact of the cuts to work allowances, because so many people on low incomes are in insecure work. Low pay and zero-hours contracts have an impact on the family life of hundreds of thousands of people. They make life extremely difficult for parents who have to pick up children from school or childcare, or arrange childcare in the first place. It is difficult to do that if someone is on a zero-hours contract. It is easy to highlight the importance of active fatherhood in a child’s life, as the manifesto does, but research by the TUC, published last summer, showed clearly that some employers seek to prevent fathers and mothers from taking time off for family emergencies.

I was surprised to hear the hon. Member for Congleton claim that family breakdown is the biggest social problem affecting the nation today. I would suggest that there are a number of contenders for that. My personal view is that the Government’s privatisation of the national health service will lead to the biggest social crisis in this country within memory. [Interruption.] Conservative Members may groan or laugh, but that is the case. There is so much evidence. I wish that they would look at what is happening in their constituencies, to verify it. The Government are also failing to tackle the housing crisis. Young people in their 20s and 30s are reluctant to start their own families, because they cannot find anywhere to live, and still live with their parents. In addition there is the Government’s failure to tackle the scourge of low pay and insecure work.

To conclude, there have been some sensible suggestions in the debate, which I welcome, but there is a danger, in focusing on couple relationships, of ignoring the reality that there are many different types of family—and Government policy must reflect that.

**Michael Tomlinson:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Margaret Greenwood:** No. I have given way plenty, thank you.

The manifesto has some important threads to it, but in some places it reads like some sort of fairy tale, ignoring the impact of Government policy since 2010 and the way it has made life so much harder for many families, especially those on low incomes.

3.25 pm

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and it was a pleasure to have Mr Bone as our Chair prior to your arrival.

When we go to someone’s funeral, it is rare that people talk about that person’s educational or career successes. They certainly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, do not talk about the money that person made during their lifetime. Almost always, the eulogy centres on the family. People want to be remembered for the family—for their contribution to family life and the stable family life that they build. Families are at the centre of all our individual lives. They provide us with a sense of stability, security and purpose, sustaining us through times of emotional, health and financial difficulty, and providing us with a sense of place and fulfilment. We all experience families in different ways throughout our lives, as children to our parents, as parents or indeed grandparents as we grow older, as partners or through our extended relationships. To answer a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), of course we all know that modern families are not all two parents with two children. It has been established during the debate that it is not helpful to stigmatise people who do not conform to that measure, and I do not think anyone suggests we should do so.

As a dad with two young children, I know the importance of strong families and the role that families play in children’s development—not only physical development but cognitive, emotional and social development. I completely agree with the attitude of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) towards television and social media for children. The decline in the practice of children sitting at the table to eat with the family has profound consequences. When children eat with the family they learn many soft skills such as conversational
[Oliver Dowden]

ability and table manners that put them at an advantage and help them succeed throughout life. I certainly agree about playing games: my family like Articulate! My six-year-old already beats me at Cluedo so I am giving up on that one. I shall resist the temptation to speculate on games that members of the Cabinet might choose to play.

For all the reasons I have given, it is, for me and certainly for my party and the Government, families and not the state that form the cornerstone of our society. That is why families are at the heart of Government policy and why I am so pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government. It is an important issue, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, it is also a cross-cutting issue where responsibilities lie with a number of different Departments. As a Minister in the Cabinet Office, which has responsibility for co-ordinating cross-Government work and policy, I am responding to this wide-ranging debate on behalf of the Government. Within the Cabinet Office, we are continually looking at ways to measure the impact of policies in relation to the family. We currently analyse that impact through mechanisms such as the implementation unit, which falls within my brief. That is a central part of the initiative.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I know what a strong campaigner she is on the importance of families, and how much of her parliamentary career she has devoted to championing the cause. That was demonstrated once again by her passionate speech today. I also pay tribute to all hon. Members who were here. I know what a strong campaigner she is on the issue.

I am very familiar with this cause from my time working for the former Prime Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned “Breakthrough Britain”. I well remember that report and its impact. I pay tribute to Mr Burrows. When I visit jobcentres in my own constituency, I see how that accords with the tremendous increase in funding we have provided for the NHS.

Margaret Greenwood: When the Minister is talking about values as a society, will he set out for us what his Government are going to do to tackle child poverty, which is set to rise to 5 million?

Oliver Dowden: When the Minister is talking about values as a society, will he set out for us what his Government are going to do to tackle child poverty, which is set to rise to 5 million?

Margaret Greenwood: When the Minister is talking about values as a society, will he set out for us what his Government are going to do to tackle child poverty, which is set to rise to 5 million?

[Oliver Dowden]

where children grow up seeing their parents going out to work and having the stability and security of a wage packet.

That achievement stands alongside a range of measures that we have taken—for example, we are the first Government to introduce a national living wage. We are also cutting people’s taxes so they keep more of what they earn. We have essentially doubled the tax-free allowance, meaning that anybody working 30 hours a week on the minimum wage pays no tax at all. In addition to that, universal credit reforms pioneered by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the former Work and Pensions Secretary, have had a tremendous impact. When I visit jobcentres in my own constituency, I see the enthusiasm that people working there have because they know that we finally have a policy that genuinely incentivises people from welfare into work. We have a record of which we can be proud.

I did not want to descend into party political points at this early stage, but I would note on the issue of the so-called privatisation of the health service that I do not see how that accords with the tremendous increase in funding we have provided for the NHS.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady intervenes, I would remind Members that this is not a debate about the health service.

Oliver Dowden: I will give way in just one moment. Record numbers of operations are being performed on the NHS, record numbers of people are seeing GPs, and record numbers of people are being seen in A&E. We have committed an extra £8 billion in this Parliament and another £6 billion was committed in the Budget to the NHS. I will give way, and then I must move on.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for giving way and I take on board your comment, Ms Buck, but I would say that the debate is cross-departmental and the document does refer to health. Accountable care systems or integrated care systems are suggesting bundling together budgets for the hospitals, the GPs, community health, public health and local authority spending of one area—and potentially giving that to one private provider. We have seen what happened with Carillion, so there is clearly a huge risk in taking that kind of approach. I would say that if that leads to the privatisation of the national health service, it will have a devastating effect on families.

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): I call the Minister, and I would stress my earlier point to him as well.

Oliver Dowden: I thank you for that warning, Ms Buck. I will deal with the comment in one sense and move on to the substance of the manifesto.

There is virtue in integrating services. The sort of thing that is being pioneered in Manchester, where we bring together different services—it is in fact being pioneered by a Labour Mayor—in conjunction with the former Chancellor’s measures—is, I think, a way of improving health outcomes.
I will now move on to the specific measures in the manifesto, which form part of broader Government policy. For example, there is the important matter of education. There are now 1.9 million children in our excellent local or outstanding schools, which is a record number. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford raised some important points about mental health. As was recognised, we are investing £1.4 billion in mental health services for children and young people, and we have set up a scheme in schools to raise awareness and help them to know how to deal with individuals in schools suffering from mental health issues. We have published a Green Paper to set out our plans to transform mental health services in schools. My hon. Friend made an important point about the need for a holistic, family approach to mental health, and hopefully the Green Paper will be a starting point.

As I said, a route into meaningful work is very important for improving children’s life chances. We now know that nearly three quarters of children from workless households moved out of poverty when their parents entered full-time work. That means 608,000 fewer children are living in workless households.

Before moving on to the contents of the manifesto, I would like to try to address some of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. The importance of champions for the family in Government was raised by several Members. As a starting point, I know that the Prime Minister is personally committed to this—she is the principal champion of families. We have already discussed in this debate that there are now around 4.5 million children with family responsibilities, but I have certainly heard the point about a specific, designated family Cabinet Minister loud and clear, and I will relay that to my colleagues in Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised the DAD scheme. I understand from my officials that the Department for Education has funded a range of family advice and support services since 2008, including Family Matters, which runs the website called DAD. The service is well used and is valued by its users. Ministers at DFE are considering the future requirements for the next financial year, so it is under active consideration. I am sure the representations made by my hon. Friend will have been heard loud and clear. On children’s centres, an important point was raised about family hubs. Clearly, local authorities have responsibility for children’s centres and they are free to pioneer family hubs. As my hon. Friend said, a great number are already doing so. She highlighted Westminster and the Isle of Wight. I would urge other councils to consider doing so.

My hon. Friend made an excellent representation on a transformation fund. Sadly, it is entirely beyond my remit to make public spending commitments, but I am sure the Chancellor will take note, particularly regarding the £90 million in dormant bank accounts. On the statutory duty to have the father’s name on birth certificates, it is worth noting that 94% of birth certificates already have the father’s name there, so we are making progress.

On relationships education, which came up in a number of contributions, the call for evidence is out at the moment. Some passionate pleas were made. I would urge hon. Members to respond to that call for evidence—I believe it closes on Monday. That is the route for formulating policy in that area. Again, I think family responsibilities made about the need for an annual statement on strengthening families and that is again something I will relay to my right hon. Friends in Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford talked about Home-Start, which is very important. I have looked into it very briefly, and I believe that comes under the local transformation plans that we put in place in 2014-15. There is an opportunity, as part of those plans, to provide for such schemes, but I will write to him further on that point.

Let me turn to the substance of the debate: this excellent manifesto. The Government introduced the family test in 2014 to bring a family perspective into policy making. It helps to ensure that the impact on family relationships and functioning, both positive and negative, is recognised in the process of policy development, and it informs policy decisions made by Ministers. We introduced the test to ensure that, across Government, we think carefully about the potential for new policies to support or undermine family relationships. The Implementation Unit has a role in ensuring that the family test is implemented. The test means that families are considered at the start of any new policy development.

Margaret Greenwood: How would the two-child policy, under which families are disincentivised to have a third child, measure up to the family test?

Oliver Dowden: The whole point of the two-child policy is that people on benefits should be subject to the same restraints as people who go out to work. Anyone who goes out to work has to think carefully about whether they can afford to have more children, and many people choose not to have a third or fourth child. All the policy does is to replicate that in the benefits system by ensuring a cap at two children. It is a perfectly sensible policy with which many members of the public completely agree.

Margaret Greenwood:rose—

Oliver Dowden: I really need to make progress, and I do not want this to become a two-way, Conservative-versus-Labour debate.

On the point about spending on childcare, I have already talked about the role of parents in children’s development. Children from less advantaged backgrounds are already behind in their learning by the time they start school, and high-quality early learning from the age of two can help us to close that gap. Parents have a vital role to play in their child’s development. Evidence suggests that, aside from maternal education, the home-learning environment is the single biggest influence on a child’s vocabulary at the age of three. That is why we have committed £5 million to trial evidence-based home-learning environment support programmes in the north of England—my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton referred to them. They will focus on early language learning and literacy. We are currently running a procurement exercise to identify an external organisation to work with us in delivering that trial.

The primary purpose of providing free early learning places for two-year-olds is to improve outcomes for children. We want to make it as easy as possible for children to benefit from early education. One of the interesting initiatives is the voluntary sector, which has been aligned with parents who volunteer in return for lower childcare fees. Disadvantaged families are helped through the lower cost of childcare, and they learn parental
skills by working in the nurseries. A number of those trials have already happened with voluntary organisations, and they have had very positive outcomes.

The “Manifesto to Strengthen Families” also recommended that relationship education should be extended online, with a dedicated campaign and virtual platform. The Government want to help all schools to deliver high-quality relationships education and relationships and sex education to ensure that pupils are taught about healthy and respectful relationships, and that they stay safe and are equipped with the knowledge they need to prepare for adult life. I completely agree that it needs to cover concepts such as commitment, respect and safety. Of course, marriage is a perfect example of all those things. I urge hon. Members to make sure their views are heard as part of that consultation process, because that evidence will shape draft statutory guidance and regulations, which will be subject to further consultation later this year. There will be many opportunities for hon. Members to have an input into that process.

In December, the Government published our social mobility action plan, which set out our ambition to close the word gap in early years. It is a clear direction for all those that have a part to play, including children’s centres. Our focus is on delivering that ambition. We welcome the development of family hubs as one way to meet local needs. We believe that local councils are best placed to understand local needs, so if they believe there should be a family hub, they should be free to set one up.

This excellent manifesto also focused on health. The Government are already working to reduce health inequalities by addressing the social causes of ill-health, promoting healthier lifestyles and tackling differences in outcomes of NHS services. We are doing that in a number of ways. We are investing more than £16 billion over the current spending period to support local public health services. That action is being led locally to ensure that the solutions reflect the needs of individual communities. Local authorities can also commission a range of children’s public health programmes that support women in pregnancy through childbirth and support children from early years through to adolescence. Clinical commissioning groups and local authorities are responsible for commissioning services to meet the needs of their local populations. As part of that, we also need to look at mental health. The Government are committed to parity between mental and physical health, which has been one of the challenges in our health service for successive Governments.

The manifesto contains an excellent recommendation about maternity services and maximising the involvement of fathers. Perhaps I can call myself a new dad—I was certainly there at the birth of my two children. There really are some excellent maternity services now. I was at a midwife-led unit at Watford General Hospital, just outside my constituency, and I saw how helpful it is to have a dedicated room in which the birth takes place with en suite facilities. That helps the father to be involved. That is why the Government have provided more than £37 million of capital funding since 2013 to support maternity services and to create safe, family-friendly environments. That includes increased provision of facilities in labour and post natal units, such as double beds, reclining chairs—which can be converted to beds for partners to rest in, especially overnight, and remain with their partner and new-born children—en suite toilets, new birthing pools, and dedicated family rooms.

The manifesto also raised the important issue of couples therapy. When children arrive it is a time of great happiness, but it can put a tremendous amount of strain on relationships, so it is important that we focus resources at that stage. The NHS already offers couple-based therapy as part of its Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme.

On drug addiction, many hon. Members eloquently made the point that families play an absolutely central part in helping people through that very challenging time in their lives. At a national level, we have extended the troubled families programme to help local areas to ensure that their services have an integrated, whole-family approach. The programme now specifically supports families with younger children and those with a broader range of problems, including substance misuse, mental health problems and domestic abuse.

On the point about police and crime commissioners working with schools in which domestic abuse issues are prevalent, the Government are fully committed to tackling domestic abuse, and we will shortly be launching a consultation on the landmark domestic abuse Bill to improve protection and support for victims, to strengthen the focus on perpetrators, and to recognise the lifelong damage that domestic abuse does to children. The evidence on that front is completely overwhelming.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) made a passionate speech about the prison system and the role of families. I was particularly struck by his statistic that reoffending rates are 35% lower if partners and families are allowed to visit. That is also borne out by other studies. The impact of imprisonment on a family is likely to be long term, especially if the main breadwinner of a family goes to prison—the problems back home build up, with rent or mortgage arrears going up, and social stigma and loneliness for the family left behind.

While offenders are in custody, therefore, we have an opportunity to support them in changing their values and perspectives on their roles and responsibilities. As a Government, we believe that prisoners who are in touch with their family are likely to be more settled while in jail. Multiply that improved mood among prisoners, and we see a transformation in prison conditions. As we have heard, on 10 August last year the Government published a review by Lord Farmer that made several recommendations to strengthen family or significant other ties. As has been recognised, we have welcomed all those measures and will be working to implement them.

On the military covenant, the case was well put by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan)—sadly, she is no longer in her place. We all know, and I certainly do from my previous role as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary, the huge sacrifice made not only by our armed forces, but by their families. That is often under-reported, with the families often the main breadwinners. The Covenant aims to take the strain of prolonged periods of absence and moving around, so it is important that we support those families under the military covenant, which is exactly what we have done.
The Ministry of Defence launched its first ever UK armed forces families' strategy in 2016, which focuses and co-ordinates activity to support service families. The single service welfare organisations provide a flexible and inclusive network of welfare support to service personnel and their families. Defence also rightly works hand in glove with the principal service charities and organisations such as Relate to provide specialist support to families. In addition, we have launched a health and wellbeing strategy to improve mental health, and developed a memorandum of understanding with the Royal Foundation. As part of such efforts, I certainly take on board the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West about ensuring that we include training courses.

I thank hon. Members for allowing me to speak for some time. I wanted to cover all the points included in the manifesto, as well as the other matters raised. If Members feel I have left anything uncovered, I undertake to write back to them. I believe that as a Government we are working towards a shared goal of putting family at the heart of policy making. I hope that we will continue in that vein, because all the evidence shows the value of families to our national life.

3.52 pm

Fiona Bruce: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, and who have stayed the course in our final debate before we break for our recess. That demonstrates the commitment of colleagues to "A Manifesto to Strengthen Families".

I thank the Minister for his response, which showed his personal interest, his genuine concern and his desire to see families strengthened in this country. We appreciate that very much. We appreciate, too, the fact that he represents the Cabinet Office, which indicates a recognition by Government that this is a cross-cutting issue that needs a degree of oversight by one Department, across the many Departments that we have referred to as being affected by the policies in the manifesto that we want to see implemented.

I have one further request of the Minister. So many issues have been raised today and so many have to be taken back to other Departments that, on behalf of my colleagues who have spoken, I would ask him whether he will meet us in a few weeks' time for a further discussion of how the policies in the manifesto can be taken forward.

Oliver Dowden indicated assent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered strengthening families.

3.54 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Setting up the Office for Product Safety and Standards represents a significant upgrade in the Government’s approach to product safety in the UK and will, for the first time, give us dedicated expertise to lead on national product safety challenges. It demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that UK consumers receive the highest possible levels of protection from unsafe goods, and that UK businesses are protected from the unfair competition posed by substandard and unsafe products (including imports) and can have confidence in meeting their responsibilities to supply safe goods.

The Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety was set up in October 2016 to provide advice to Ministers on tangible improvements that could be made in the safety of white goods and the recalls system. The Working Group is chaired by Neil Gibbins, former Deputy Chief Fire Officer for Devon and Somerset and former Chief Executive of the Institution of Fire Engineers; and brings together product safety experts, the fire service and trading standards professionals.

The group published its recommendations in July 2017. The Government accept the recommendations in full and are now taking action to address them.

The recommendations, and the headlines of the Government’s response to each, are as follows:

- There is a need for centralised technical and scientific resource capability to support decision making and co-ordination of activity of Local Authorities and the businesses that they regulate. The Government fully accept this recommendation and today we are establishing the Office for Product Safety and Standards to deliver this capability.

A detailed Code of Practice should be developed with input from all relevant stakeholders; this should be informed by behaviourial insights research. This should set out expected good practice with regard to product safety corrective actions (including recalls). The Government fully accept this recommendation and commissioned the British Standards Institution who published a draft code in November. The draft code was widely welcomed and finalised text is expected to be published by March this year.

- Full consideration should be given to establishing central capacity to co-ordinate product safety corrective actions at a central level. The Government fully support this recommendation and the Office for Product Safety and Standards will be responsible for providing incident management capability and for maintaining a comprehensive database of corrective actions and recall programmes for consumer goods.

- Systematic and sustainable ways to capture and share data and intelligence should be established and agreed by relevant parties—this should make use of existing systems used by Trading Standards and the Fire Service. The Government fully accept this recommendation and the Office for Product Safety and Standards will establish an intelligence capability that brings together the widest possible range of information and evidence to inform the understanding of risks at industry and product level. Work has already begun to map available data sources and available expertise.

- Manufacturers and retailers should continue to work together and through standards setting bodies to develop technological solutions to product marking and identification. This recommendation was aimed at manufacturers and retailers however the Government would welcome further thinking from the business community on the practicalities and costs of taking this forward. The Government themselves are undertaking research on indelible marking which may prove useful to industry in their considerations.

Primary authority provides a key mechanism for ensuring that businesses, local authority and BEIS (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) expertise is shared to ensure the protection of consumers. The Government support this recommendation. Primary authority helps businesses to improve their compliance and it supports local regulators in delivering protections for the public. The Office for Product Safety and Standards will work with primary authorities and businesses to provide additional compliance advice based on the latest scientific and technical knowledge.

- The registration of appliances and other consumer goods with manufacturers by consumers should be encouraged to make corrective actions (including recalls) more effective. The Government welcome the ‘Register my Appliance’ initiative developed by the Association of Manufacturers of Domestic Appliances. The Government will continue to work with retailers, fire services and others to see what more can be done to improve the registration of appliances.

An expert panel bringing together trade associations, consumer and enforcement representatives and BEIS should be established. The Government fully accept this recommendation and is looking to build on the foundations of the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety. The Office for Product Safety and Standards will also work closely with the BEIS Chief Scientific Adviser to consider the potential role and make-up of additional scientific and technical committees.

The establishment of the new Office for Product Safety and Standards will deliver on the Working Group’s key recommendation which called for centralised technical and scientific capability to support effective decision making and to help co-ordinate the activity of local authorities and the businesses that they regulate. It also provides the capability needed to address the other recommendations made by the Working Group.

The Office for Product Safety and Standards will enable the UK to meet evolving challenges—responding to expanding international trade, the growth in online retail and the increasing rate of product innovation. It will also help the UK to put in place the most effective system for regulation and enforcement of product safety in preparation for our exit from the European Union.

The Office will:

- provide incident management capability to respond to national product safety issues;
- improve the information available to consumers on the Government’s product recall website;
- provide central scientific and technical expertise on product safety issues;
- provide support for local authority Trading Standards teams, and for district councils in Northern Ireland;
- support checks at UK borders and the interception of unsafe imports;
- provide improved intelligence and risk analysis to guide enforcement activities; and,
- work with UK business to ensure they are able to meet their compliance requirements.

The Office will also:

- set out expected good practice with regard to product safety corrective actions (including recalls);
- work with retailers, fire services and others to see what more can be done to improve the registration of appliances;
- provide support for local authorities and the businesses that they regulate;
- provide advice on the latest scientific and technical knowledge;
- work with BEIS to consider the potential role and make-up of additional scientific and technical committees.

The Office for Product Safety and Standards will bring together product safety experts, the fire service, and trading standards professionals. It will provide a key mechanism for ensuring that businesses, local authority and BEIS expertise is shared to ensure the protection of consumers.
The Office for Product Safety and Standards will initially be based in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and will have an operating budget of around £12 million per year when it is fully operational. In the longer term, the Government will examine the options for making the Office an arm’s length independent body and will look at associated funding options. This will be subject to further consideration and public consultation before any decisions are made.

The Government’s response to the Working Group’s report marks the culmination of longer term work on product safety and recalls. An independent review of the recall system was undertaken by Lynn Faulds Wood in 2015, with her review published in February 2016. The Working Group has built on that review and made its own recommendations.

On 16 January 2018, the BEIS Committee published its report “The Safety of Electrical Goods in the UK”. The Government will respond to the Committee in due course.

The Government response to the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety sets out in full how we are addressing each of the Working Group’s recommendations. That response has now been published, and copies of the documents have been placed in the Library of each House. [HCWS418]

**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN: 23 January 2018**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 23 January 2018. European Finance Ministers will discuss the following: Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief Ministers on the outcomes of the 22 January meeting of the Eurogroup, and the Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)

The Council will hold a policy debate on the deepening of the EMU.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The presidency will present information on the current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

VAT: simplification of rates and simplification for SMEs

The Commission will present proposals to reform the rules on VAT rates and structures and to simplify VAT obligations for SMEs.

Presidency work programme

The Bulgarian presidency will present its work programme for January to June 2018, followed by an exchange of views.

European semester 2018

The Council will be asked to adopt Council conclusions on the Annual Growth Survey 2018 and the Council conclusions on the Alert Mechanism Report 2018. The Council will also be asked to approve a Council recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area.

**DEFENCE**

Devonport Collection

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):

My right hon. Friend Earl Howe has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

I have today laid before Parliament a Ministry of Defence Departmental Minute describing a gifting package which the Department intend to make to the National Museum of the Royal Navy.

Devonport Dockyard had a museum known as the Adelaide Gallery in the first half of the 1800s comprising a number of artefacts including figureheads and items such as flags from ships that served at Trafalgar. Sadly a fire in 1840 destroyed the majority of the collection. However, with the help of volunteers the museum was opened, within the Naval Base estate, in the disused Old Admiralty Fire Station in April 1969. Since opening, the “Devonport collection” has been enhanced by a group of willing volunteers who have accumulated artefacts of both local and national significance.

The current collection is made up of over 100,000 artefacts spanning the period 1588 to the present day. The collection includes naval stores, uniforms, medals, badges, personal kit and also model ships. It also includes silver, china and kitchenware, weights and measures as well as larger items such as figureheads. The total cost of the proposed gift is estimated at approximately £650,000.

The expansion of the collection is such that artefacts are now displayed in eight galleries across three buildings and is managed by a group of over 30 dedicated volunteers and uniformed staff. Currently, members of the public can only visit the collection by appointment.

Given the changes to the Naval Base site and the wider area under the Plymouth and south-west peninsula city deal and the complexities associated with supporting such an extensive collection of historical material, I propose the gifting of the Devonport collection to the National Museum of the Royal Navy in order that it can be suitably conserved and more widely displayed in Plymouth for current and future generations allowing greater access to the public.

The Departmental Minute, which I have today laid before Parliament, describes a gifting package to the National Museum of the Royal Navy that will comprise a number of historical items which need the continued support of the professional services that the Museum can provide.

Gifting is expected to be undertaken as soon as possible after the completion of the Departmental Minute process. [HCWS419]

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill: EVEL

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 830 in respect of any motion relating to a Lords Amendment, for Commons Consideration of Lords Amendments to the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): I am pleased to announce that it is my intention to lay regulations in the House later today that will make some enhancements to a number of the eligibility conditions relating to the social fund funeral expenses payments scheme, and simplify the process for making a claim. The scheme makes a contribution to paying the costs of funerals being arranged by people on qualifying benefits.

The changes, which we plan to bring into force on 2 April, were the subject of a public consultation exercise in summer 2017 which generated an overwhelmingly positive response for our proposals. This package of proposals will, among other things, enable claimants to receive contributions from charities, relatives or friends without them being deducted from the overall sum payable toward funeral costs. In future, claimants will have six months from the funeral date in which to make an application for help with funeral costs instead of the current three months. They will also have the option of submitting any evidence needed in support of their claim electronically.
Written Statements

Tuesday 23 January 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Carillion

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): On Monday 15 January 2018 I notified the House of the steps taken by the Government in regards to the compulsory liquidation of Carillion plc.

Throughout this unfolding situation the Government have prioritised the continued delivery of public services. Taxpayers should not, and will not, bail out a private sector company for private sector losses or allow rewards for failure.

The failure of this company has understandably caused concern for many people over their jobs, their pensions and their local services. The court has appointed an official receiver from the Insolvency Service who has taken control of the delivery of public services contracts and we are supporting them to do so. We will support the official receiver to provide these services until a suitable alternative is found, either through another contractor or through in-house provision.

I would like to provide further reassurance that all employees working on public services should continue to turn up to work, as they have been doing since the announcement of the liquidation, confident in the knowledge that they will be paid for the work they are providing.

In order to safeguard our public services, we have been implementing contingency plans that have been developed since July 2017. Since I last updated the House, there has been no significant disruption to service delivery in schools, hospitals, prisons, defence and other public services as staff have continued to provide services. We have been engaging with all devolved Administrations with exposure to Carillion to ensure that robust contingency plans are being implemented.

A number of Carillion’s joint venture partners such as Kier, Eiffage, Balfour Beatty, KBR, Amey and Galliford Try have committed to stepping into the respective public sector contracts to ensure continuity of these vital services. Public sector construction sites have been secured and construction will begin following the appointment of a new contractor. I would like to express my thanks to all those who have worked hard to ensure the continuity of public services.

Over 90% of Carillion’s private sector facilities management service customers have indicated that they will provide funding for the official receiver to maintain interim services while new suppliers can be identified to deliver these, ensuring the retention and employment of staff on these contracts. In addition, we are making sure the usual level of support from Government to affected employees is available from Jobcentre Plus, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Pension Protection Fund (PPF), HMRC and also dedicated websites from the Insolvency Service.

At present, seven Carillion pensions schemes, covering 6,000 members, have moved to the pensions protection fund assessment period, this occurs automatically when all the sponsoring employers become insolvent. The remaining 21,000 members are in schemes which have at least one sponsor not in insolvency, and are therefore not in the Pension Protection Fund (PPF).

Where pensions have moved into the PPF, the PPF is making sure current pensioners continue to receive their pensions at 100% of their usual rate, and are assessing the eligibility of Carillion’s pension schemes to enter the PPF to protect current employees’ future pensions. We have also set up a special additional helpline with the Pensions Advisory Service for members of Carillion’s pension schemes (0800 7561012). We have responded to over 500 calls to the Pensions Advisory Service line since it opened last week.

The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has worked with the Education and Skills Funding Agency to ensure funding is available to support former Carillion apprentices. Over 1,400 apprentices have been contacted and the CITB is offering every former Carillion apprentice a face-to-face session with CITB Apprenticeships to find out their individual learning needs. To date, the CITB has matched 400 Carillion apprentices to new employers, and they continue to assess the industry offers they have received to find placements for the remaining Carillion apprentices.

HMRC will provide practical advice and guidance to affected businesses in Carillion’s supply chain through its business payment support service (BPSS). The BPSS connects businesses with HMRC staff who can offer practical help and advice on a wide range of tax problems, providing a fast and sympathetic route to addressing immediate concerns with practical solutions. HMRC has also offered to provide affected families with cash support through the tax credit system and has published details on how to contact them to arrange.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark), the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen) and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths) met with several banks on 17 January 2018 to seek assurances that they will support small businesses affected by Carillion’s liquidation. Lenders are contacting customers and, where appropriate, are putting in place emergency measures, including overdraft extensions, payment holidays and fee waivers to ensure those facing short-term issues can be helped to stay on track. Three lenders have made a fund of £225 million available to support small businesses exposed to Carillion’s liquidation. Furthermore, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has set up a taskforce to monitor and advise on mitigating the impacts of Carillion’s liquidation on construction firms, particularly SMEs and those working in the sector. He chaired the first meeting of the taskforce on 18 January 2018 and will be holding a further series of meetings with stakeholders in the coming weeks.

The official receiver has also taken immediate action to stop severance and bonus payments to former directors. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has written to the Insolvency Service and the official receiver asking that the statutory investigation into the conduct of Carillion’s directors is fast-tracked.
and extended in scope to include previous directors. He has also asked the Financial Reporting Council to conduct an investigation into the preparation of Carillion's accounts past and present, as well as the company's auditors.

Officials in my Department have been in touch with various Members' offices last week following their queries through the dedicated helplines we set up. I shall be holding drop-in sessions for Members to meet with Cabinet Office Ministers and relevant officials to answer any further queries. Alongside ministerial colleagues, I will keep the House updated on this ongoing situation.

**DEFENCE**

**Armed Forces Pay**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I would like to thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions to the Opposition day debate about armed forces pay held on 1 November 2017. The passionate and constructive comments of Members regarding pay, allowances, pensions and accommodation clearly demonstrated this House's support for our armed forces.

The armed forces are among the most extraordinarily talented and hardworking people in our society. We can all be rightly proud that we have the most professional and effective armed forces in the world. The Government are committed to ensuring that the overall package they, and other public sector workers receive, reflects the value we place on their work.

The 2015 spending review and autumn statement budgeted for 1% average basic pay and progression pay awards. However, the Government recognise that in some parts of the public sector, more flexibility may be required, particularly in areas of skill shortage and in return for improvements to public sector productivity. There continues to be a need for pay discipline over the coming years to ensure the affordability of the public services and the sustainability of public sector employment.

Armed forces' pay levels are recommended by the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body. The Government value hugely the role of the pay review bodies, and with a more flexible pay policy it is more important than ever that their recommendations are based on independent advice and robust evidence. They are in the process of considering evidence to inform their recommendations for the 2018 report which we look forward to receiving in due course.

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**Security Industry Authority: Annual Report and Accounts**

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The 2016-17 annual report and accounts for the Security Industry Authority (HC 744) is being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

**INTERNATIONAL TRADE**

**Prime Minister’s Trade Envoys**

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister has approved two new appointments to the Trade Envoy programme. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) has been appointed as the Trade Envoy for Sri Lanka, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), as the Trade Envoy for Mongolia. These new Trade Envoys take the total number to 30 parliamentarians covering 59 markets.

The Trade Envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary cross-party network, who support the UK’s ambitious trade and investment agenda in global markets. They have contributed to business wins worth around £19.5 billion.
Written Statement

Wednesday 24 January 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Overseas Entity Beneficial Ownership: UK Public Register

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): I am today confirming to Parliament the Government’s timetable for implementation of their policy to achieve greater transparency around foreign entities that own or buy UK property, or which participate in UK Government procurement. This will set down in legislation the commitment made at the 2016 Anti-Corruption summit and reaffirmed in the UK’s anti-corruption strategy, published in December.

The Government intend to legislate to establish a public register of beneficial owners of non-UK entities that own or buy UK property, or which participate in UK Government procurement. They will publish a draft Bill before the summer recess this year. This will be a significant piece of legislation that delivers a streamlined policy, consistent across the UK, where currently the land registries for England and Wales, for Scotland and for Northern Ireland have taken different approaches to land registration and registration of overseas entities.

The Government intend to introduce the Bill to Parliament early in the second Session. Following Royal Assent and the making of secondary legislation, the Government intend that the register will be operational in 2021.

Separately, I will be publishing a response to my Department’s call for evidence last year on this policy very shortly that will provide more detail on responses received and our proposed approach.

[HCWS425]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I am today launching a public consultation on the draft national policy statement and supporting environmental appraisals for geological disposal infrastructure for higher activity radioactive waste. I am also laying the draft national policy statement before this House which will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny, including review by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Select Committee.

A second consultation “Working with Communities” proposes how local people should be engaged if they express an interest in hosting a disposal facility. A facility will only be approved for construction with the consent and support of the local community affected.

In 2014 the Government set out a renewed approach to finding a site to host a geological disposal facility in the “Implementing Geological Disposal” White Paper which was developed following consultation with stakeholders and the public. In it, the Government committed to bringing geological disposal facilities and the deep investigatory boreholes necessary to characterise sites within the definition of nationally significant infrastructure projects and to producing a draft national policy statement for this type of infrastructure in England. The relevant secondary legislation to designate geological disposal facilities and deep investigatory boreholes as nationally significant infrastructure projects was passed in March 2015.

The draft national policy statement sets out a clear route for future planning decisions in respect of geological disposal infrastructure in England, as well as providing planning guidance for developers of such projects and for the Planning Inspectorate and Secretary of State in their consideration and determination of any such applications. The national policy statement will give greater certainty to developers and lead to faster and more transparent delivery of planning decisions. The Government have appointed Radioactive Waste Management Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, to develop this infrastructure. It does not prevent any other developer from bringing forward an application for development consent for a geological disposal facility or deep investigatory boreholes; however, we are not aware of any other developers showing an interest in developing a geological disposal facility and do not expect this to occur.

In this consultation we are actively looking for views and suggestions on the draft national policy statement and the related environmental and sustainability appraisal documents to enable us to meet our objective of delivering a clear planning process for a geological disposal facility in the most effective and efficient way.

The consultation will run for 12 weeks, and will include a series of regional events and technical workshop with interested parties. In parallel with this consultation, we are also running another consultation seeking views on a draft framework for Radioactive Waste Management Ltd’s engagement with willing communities as part of the separate process of finding a suitable site for a geological disposal facility. The approach of working with a willing community to host a geological disposal facility, as set out in the 2014 White Paper, gives communities an opportunity to decide whether or not they wish to proceed with the development of a geological disposal facility. The working with communities policy sets out how Radioactive Waste Management Ltd will work with a community throughout the siting process. Once a community has indicated its support for hosting a geological disposal facility the national policy statement sets out how a geological disposal facility application will be assessed through the planning system. It is important to stress that all the usual opportunities for the public to have a say in the development of a facility like this through planning, safety, security and environmental permitting processes will also be in place.

Planning is a devolved issue and so this draft national policy statement provides the framework for the decision making on development consent applications for geological disposal infrastructure in England only. The planning process in Wales and Northern Ireland is to be decided by their respective Administrations. Scotland has a different policy for the long-term management of higher activity radioactive waste.

Following our analysis of the responses to this consultation and the consultation on working with communities and feedback from the Select Committee, we will finalise our policy approach.

The “relevant period” for parliamentary scrutiny of the national policy statement will be from 25 January 2018 to 28 September 2018.

The consultation document and supporting papers will be laid in the Libraries of both Houses.

Today I am also publishing the seventh and latest annual report on the geological disposal programme covering the period April 2016 to March 2017. The report can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-geological-disposal-annual-report-april-2016-to-march-2017 and I have made available copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Exploring and developing the UK’s shale gas resources could bring substantial benefits and the Government’s view is that there is a national need to develop these resources in a safe, sustainable and timely way. As set out in the clean growth strategy, the Government are fully committed to the development and deployment of low-carbon technologies for heat and electricity generation. As we move towards this low-carbon economy, natural gas will continue to play an important role in our energy system. The Government are confident that the right protections are in place to
explore shale safely and have always been clear that shale development must be safe and environmentally sound.

On 29 November 2017 I issued a direction to the Oil and Gas Authority. This direction closed a loophole in instances where prospective shale gas wells had been drilled prior to the Infrastructure Act 2015 coming into force. It ensures that all operators proposing to hydraulically fracture a well are subjected to the same rigorous final step of scrutiny.

Third Energy UK Gas Ltd's proposals to hydraulically fracture its site in Kirby Misperton, north Yorkshire, have been referred to me as a result. I am committed to ensuring that a meticulous approach, rooted in rigorous evidence, is taken when reviewing the application.

Having given careful consideration to the evidence submitted, I have informed the Oil and Gas Authority today that I am satisfied that the 13 technical requirements set out in section 4A of the Petroleum Act 1998 have been met.

I also consider that an equivalent assessment should be undertaken of the financial resilience of companies proposing to carry out hydraulic fracturing operations so that stakeholders can have confidence in the company’s ability to meet its commitments.

I note that as of 24 January Third Energy UK Gas Ltd and other related companies had yet to submit their accounts for the accounting period ending in December 2016, despite a statutory deadline of 30 September 2017 for them to do so. I have therefore asked the Oil and Gas Authority to seek further financial information from the company, including the required set of up-to-date accounts, to inform my decision.

I have also asked the Infrastructure and Projects Authority to assess the financial resilience of the applicant, including its ability to fund decommissioning costs. Once I have received this assessment I will inform the Oil and Gas Authority whether I am satisfied with the application as required by the 1998 Act.

The Government consider that the financial resilience of a company wishing to hydraulically fracture is a relevant consideration. As a matter of policy, we will therefore look at the financial resilience of all companies wishing to carry out hydraulic fracturing operations alongside their application for hydraulic fracturing consent.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus will be information from the European Commission on “The Future of Food and Farming”, looking towards the next cycle of the common agricultural policy.

The Bulgarian presidency will present its work programme for the remainder of this term, finishing at the end of June. The European Commission will update the Council on the situation in EU agricultural markets, and on trade-related agricultural issues.

There are currently three items scheduled under “any other business”:

- situation in the sugar market after the abolition of the quota system
- situation in the pig-meat market
- conclusions from the ministerial conference on Xylella fastidiosa (Paris, 1 December 2017).

Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2000, Max Hill QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, has prepared a report on the operation in 2016 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006.

I am today laying this report before the House, and copies will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published on gov.uk.

I am grateful to Max Hill for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations he makes, and will respond formally in due course.
Written Statement

Monday 29 January 2018

TRANSPORT

Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill: Governments Amendments and EVEL

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83L in respect of the Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage for the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill.

It is also available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.
We must continue to do all we can to support these efforts and I am grateful to all who were involved, and contributed to, the review. The tailored review is being deposited in the Library of both Houses and is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tailored-review-of-uk-anti-doping

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**Sporting Future and Anti-Doping**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I am today publishing the second annual report on the Government’s sport strategy “Sporting Future: a New Strategy for an Active Nation”, together with the “Tailored Review of UK Anti-Doping”.

Second annual report to Parliament on Sporting Future

Sporting Future set out a new Government vision to redefine what success looks like in sport by concentrating on five key outcomes—physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development. It was a bold new strategy for an active nation. It marked the biggest shift in Government policy on sport for more than a decade.

We have continued to build on the significant progress achieved in the first year of the strategy and have continued to embed, and invest in sport and physical activity on the basis of, the five outcomes. On mental wellbeing, for example, we are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to explore how elite and professional sport can improve its offer of mental health support. We are also building on Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson’s duty of care report to ensure that sport takes its responsibilities to all participants seriously, whether that be elite athletes or those at the grassroots.

Investment in sport and physical activity continues to be focused on the five key outcomes. Funding has been opened up to organisations which can demonstrate how they will consistently deliver some or all of those shared goals, with a strong emphasis on tackling inactivity and engaging underrepresented groups.

We want to make sure absolutely everyone can benefit from the power of sport and I am grateful to all those across Government and the sport and physical activity sector who are working to make the ambition of Sporting Future a reality. The annual report is being deposited in the Library of both Houses and is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sporting-future-second-annual-report

Report on the “Tailored Review of UK Anti-Doping”

Today I am also publishing the “Tailored Review of UK Anti-Doping”.

We want to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of efforts to stop those who would wish to damage the integrity of sport through doping. This tailored review examines UKAD’s efficiency, effectiveness, governance and planning for the future.

The recommendations it makes will ensure that we are in the best place possible to continue efforts to stop drugs cheats and to continue to support athletes to compete on a level playing field.
Finally, we are taking action to incentivise local NHS organisations to take a more strategic approach to estates planning and management. I can reassure NHS organisations that they will be able to retain receipts from land sales, so these can be reinvested in the NHS estate, to renew and replace outdated facilities and to address backlog maintenance, in line with local priorities and STP strategies. Where surplus land is developed for housing, NHS staff will be given the right of first refusal on any affordable homes built. We have an ambition that this will allow up to 3,000 NHS workers and their families living in areas where accessing affordable housing can be challenging to own their home.

The Government have delivered their share of the funding needed; the NHS must also play its part. It cannot be right for NHS properties to remain unused and empty when their disposal could generate funds for reinvestment and thus improve facilities and services for patients. As Sir Robert recommended, in order to access capital funding STPs will need to develop robust estates plans with stretching disposal strategies and that reduce running costs and address backlog maintenance. The local NHS needs to act quickly to develop these plans and will be supported by advisors from the local strategic estates planning team.

I would like to again express my gratitude to Sir Robert, his advisory board and review team for their time, expertise and commitment.

The statement is available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.

[HCWS433]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU/Canada Negotiations: Passenger Name Record Data

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security and protecting our civil liberties.

The Government have decided to opt in to a Council decision authorising the opening of negotiations for an agreement between the European Union and Canada for the transfer and use of passenger name record (PNR) data.

This agreement will replace the EU/Canada PNR agreement which expired in 2009. The UK opted-in to negotiations for a new agreement which opened in 2010. When an envisaged agreement was presented to the European Parliament for approval in July 2014, the Parliament referred it to the Court of Justice of the European Union for an opinion on its compliance with the treaties and the charter of fundamental rights. In July 2017, the Court found that the envisaged agreement could not be concluded in its current form and the Council has now decided to reopen negotiations.

The UK, in common with the other EU member states and with an increasing number of third countries, places considerable value on the processing and analysis of PNR data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime.

PNR data is used by many countries to detect individuals involved in serious crime and terrorism-related activity as well as enabling the protection of vulnerable victims of trafficking.

The Government believe that PNR agreements between the EU and third countries play a vital role in assuring the protection of personal data within PNR data and providing legal certainty for air carriers required to disclose personal data to third countries’ authorities. It is for this reason that the Government have decided to opt in to the negotiation of an EU/Canada agreement on the transfer and use of PNR data to prevent and combat terrorism and other serious transnational crime.

[HCWS434]

TRANSPORT

Dartford Thurrock River Crossing Charging Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Dartford Thurrock crossing charging scheme account for 2016-17 is published today under section 3(1)(d) of the Trunk Road Charging Schemes (Bridges and Tunnels) (Keeping of Accounts) (England) Regulations 2003. A copy of the accounts will be placed in the Library of the House.

It is also available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.

[HCWS431]
Written Statements

Wednesday 31 January 2018

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I would like to inform the House that a cash advance from the Contingencies Fund has been sought for the Serious Fraud Office (SFO).

In line with the current arrangement for SFO funding agreed with HM Treasury, the SFO will be submitting a reserve claim as part of the supplementary estimate process for 2017-18.

The advance is required to meet a current cash requirement on existing services pending Parliamentary approval of the 2017-18 supplementary estimate. The supplementary estimate will seek an increase in both the resource departmental expenditure limit and the net cash requirement in order to cover the cost of significant investigations.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £9,500,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Serious Fraud Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £9,500,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS437]

TREASURY

Double Taxation Convention Protocol: Uzbekistan

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): A protocol to the double taxation convention with Uzbekistan was signed on 24 January 2018. The text of the protocol is available on HM Revenue and Customs pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS438]

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House this year’s financial summary of the defence equipment plan. This is the sixth consecutive annual publication of the equipment plan summary, and demonstrates the Ministry of Defence’s investment and the need to continue progress in driving improvements, reform and efficiency, with a plan to spend £180 billion on equipment and support over the decade out to 2026-27 which will provide our armed forces with the capability they need.

The Government remain committed to the defence budget increasing by 0.5% above inflation each year and the Department is focusing on where best to invest across the entire defence programme in order to remain on top of an ever-changing and increasing threat environment. However, it was evident following the 2016 annual planning cycle that both uncertainty and risk had increased in the equipment plan. It did not, unfortunately, prove possible to address these issues satisfactorily in the 2017 annual budget cycle (ABC17) as a result of which, the equipment plan emerging from ABC17 contains a high level of financial risk and an imbalance between cost and budget.

These risks have informed the Department’s work on the national security capability review and associated work in the 2018 annual budget cycle. The Department recently launched the modernising defence programme. We aim to use this work to deliver better military capability and value for money in a sustainable and affordable way, and to ensure that defence capabilities complement other national security capabilities in the most effective way.

[HCWS436]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

FCO Global Estate Update

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I announce today the planned move of the Bangkok Embassy in Thailand. The new embassy building will be based in the AIA Sathorn Tower and will provide a modern, dedicated base from which diplomats can work to promote UK interests in Thailand.

We anticipate moving into the new offices in 2019, until which point we will lease back our existing embassy site to keep disruption to a minimum. Our embassy will continue to provide essential consular services to British holidaymakers and business people, and to work with the Thai authorities on preventing child exploitation, organised crime, money laundering and human trafficking.

Our new and improved embassy will allow us to take this activity to the next level, including by strengthening our trade links, enhancing our strong collaboration on science and innovation, and maintaining our focus on supporting human rights defenders and promoting freedom of expression. The new embassy will demonstrate our long-term commitment to our relationship with Thailand—a key partner for the UK’s security and prosperity interests and leading member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The completion of the sale of the current Bangkok Embassy compound in Thailand is the biggest land deal in Thai history and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s (FCO’s) biggest ever sale, raising at least £420 million.

This deal is the result of considerable work by the FCO. The funds released will allow us to begin work on 30 to 40 major long-planned estates projects, and enable us to continue to update and modernise our global estate so that it meets our aspiration to provide a world-class platform for diplomacy.

[HCWS435]
In addition to the police funding settlement, the Government are taking decisive action to tackle the increasingly sophisticated cyber threat we face through the national cyber-security strategy, which is supported by a £1.9 billion programme of transformational investment from 2016 to 2021. The law enforcement response to tackling cyber-crime is an essential element of our national strategy, with the Home Office investing £30 million of national cyber-security programme funding in 2017-18 to support and develop the law enforcement response at the national, regional and local level. We will continue to invest in law enforcement capability throughout the lifetime of the programme.

As I set out in my statement of 19 December, the increase in funding to PCCs in 2018-19 must be matched by a serious commitment from PCCs and chief constables to reform by improving productivity and efficiency to deliver a better, more transparent service to the public. Since that statement, I have written to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council seeking their proposals to deliver further efficiencies. Following these proposals, we will agree appropriate milestones for delivery in 2018. If the police deliver clear and substantial progress against the agreed milestones on productivity and efficiency in 2018, then the Government intend to maintain the protection of a broadly flat police grant in 2019-20 and repeat the same flexibility of the precept, i.e. allowing PCCs to increase their band D precept by a further up to £12 in 2019-20. This approach gives policing the opportunity to make major improvements in efficiency, and use those gains to improve services to the public.

Since December, the Home Office has continued to work with the police to identify potential procurement savings. We have identified a further £20 million of potential procurement savings starting in 2018-19, taking the total to over £120 million.

In December I highlighted the opportunity for policing to save up to 1 hour per officer shift through mobile digital working, potentially releasing the equivalent of 11,000 police officers who can be deployed to meet changing demands. Since December I have established a small team who will work with the police through 2018 to audit the level of opportunity from mobile working, identify which approaches work best, highlight best practice, and help forces and the Home Office take the right decisions to maximise the gains from the use of mobile digital working.

We are also today publishing comparable national information on the financial reserves held by PCCs to assist the public in holding PCCs to account. As at March 2017, PCCs held usable resource reserves of over £1.6 billion. This compares to £1.4 billion in 2011. Current reserves held represent 15% of annual police funding to PCCs. There are wide variations between forces with Gwent for example holding 42% and Northumbria holding close to 7%. This is public money and the public are entitled to more information around police plans for reserves and how those plans will support more effective policing. So I am also today writing to PCCs setting out new guidance requiring them to publish their reserves strategies in plain English, with a clear justification for each reserve held.
I have set out in a separate document, available as an online attachment, the tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the different funding streams and between police and crime commissioners for 2018-19. These documents are intended to be read together.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-01-31/HCWS439/
Written Statements

Thursday 1 February 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Task Forces

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): Today I am publishing the updated list of Cabinet Committees and Implementation Task Forces (ITFs). The updated list includes several key changes:

- Housing taskforce: the ITF will now be chaired by the Prime Minister.
- Industrial strategy taskforce: a new ITF has been established to oversee the delivery of the industrial strategy.
- Rough sleeping and homelessness reduction taskforce: a new ITF has been established to co-ordinate action to reduce homelessness and halve rough sleeping over the course of the Parliament.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS441]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Faith Practices

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have today published the independent review into the application of Sharia law in England and Wales. The review has been laid before the House (Cm 9560). Copies of the report will be available from the Vote Office and it is also available on the Home Office website.

The review was commissioned by the then Home Secretary in May 2016 and was chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui, an internationally renowned expert in Islamic and inter-religious studies. Professor Siddiqui was supported by a review panel of experts that included experienced family law barrister Sam Montaz QC, retired High Court judge Sir Mark Hedley, and specialist family law solicitor Anne Marie Hutchinson OBE QC. The panel was advised by two religious and theological experts, Imam Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi and Imam Qari Asim.

Sharia law has no jurisdiction in England and Wales and the decisions of Sharia councils are not legally binding. The review focused on whether and to what extent the application of Sharia law by Sharia councils is incompatible with the law in England and Wales. This included ways in which Sharia law may be being misused or exploited in a way that may discriminate against certain groups, undermine shared values and cause social harms.

To gather evidence the review team issued a public call for evidence and ran a number of oral evidence sessions. During the course of the review, the review chair and panel heard evidence from stakeholders including users of Sharia councils, women’s rights groups, academics, lawyers and Sharia councils. I am grateful to Professor Siddiqui for the thoroughness of her review and for the review team’s comprehensive report.

The review found that most of the work of Sharia councils concerns Islamic divorces, and that the applicants are mostly women. While there are a number of reasons why women desire an Islamic divorce, a significant driver is that some Muslim couples do not have a civil marriage as well as an Islamic ceremony. The review also found evidence of a range of practices across Sharia councils, both positive and negative. The review concludes with a series of recommendations to Government.

The review made three recommendations:

1. Recommendation 1 (legislative change): amendments to marriage law to (a) ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the Islamic marriage ceremony and (b) establish the right to a civil divorce.
2. Recommendation 2 (building understanding): proposes developing programmes to (i) raise Muslim couples’ awareness that Islamic marriages do not afford them the protections under the law that come with a civil marriage because their partnership is not recognised as a legal marriage; and (ii) encourages Muslim couples that have or are having an Islamic marriage to register for a civil marriage as well.
3. Recommendation 3 (regulation of Sharia councils): proposes regulating Sharia councils through the creation of a state-established body that would create a code of practice for Sharia councils to accept and implement.

The Government will carefully consider the review’s findings. The review team’s failure to reach a unanimous agreement on recommendation three (regulation of Sharia councils) demonstrates the complexity of the issues. The Government consider that the proposal to create a state-facilitated or endorsed regulation scheme for Sharia councils would confer upon them legitimacy as alternative forms of dispute resolution. The Government do not consider there to be a role for the state to act in this way.

The review made three recommendations:

1. Recommendation 1 (legislative change): amendments to marriage law to (a) ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the Islamic marriage ceremony and (b) establish the right to a civil divorce.
2. Recommendation 2 (building understanding): proposes developing programmes to (i) raise Muslim couples’ awareness that Islamic marriages do not afford them the protections under the law that come with a civil marriage because their partnership is not recognised as a legal marriage; and (ii) encourages Muslim couples that have or are having an Islamic marriage to register for a civil marriage as well.
3. Recommendation 3 (regulation of Sharia councils): proposes regulating Sharia councils through the creation of a state-established body that would create a code of practice for Sharia councils to accept and implement.

The review found some evidence of Sharia councils forcing women to make concessions to gain a divorce, of inadequate safeguarding policies, and a failure to signpost applicants to legal remedies. This is not acceptable. Where Sharia councils exist, they must abide by the law. Legislation is in place to protect the rights of women and prevent discriminatory practice. The Government will work with the appropriate regulatory authorities to ensure that this legislation and the protections it establishes are being enforced fully and effectively.

[HCWS442]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Infrastructure Fund

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Today the Government announce that we will invest £666 million to help unlock up to 200,000 new homes through 133 marginal viability fund projects, within the housing infrastructure fund.
The Government have set out a plan that puts us on track to increase housing supply to 300,000 homes a year and this first wave of funding from the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund is part of a comprehensive programme to fix the broken housing market.

This investment will fund key local infrastructure projects including new roads, cycle paths, flood defences and land remediation work where it is needed for new housing to be built. Without this financial support, these projects would struggle to go ahead or take years for work to begin, delaying the homes these communities need.

The marginal viability fund was available to all single and lower-tier local authorities in England to bid into.

We received 430 bids from local authorities, worth almost £14 billion in total. This shows how much local authorities are willing to step up to fix the broken housing market, and we are committed to supporting this ambition. Bids went through a rigorous assessment process and were assessed on the basis of their strategic approach, value for money and the ability of the projects to be delivered. We are putting infrastructure at the heart of housing delivery and are committed to bringing communities, local authorities and the private sector together to solve this problem.

The second component of the housing infrastructure fund—the forward fund—is available to the uppermost tier of local authorities in England to bid into, and aims to pump prime a small number of strategic and high-impact infrastructure projects. Expressions of interest for forward funding are being assessed and the best proposals will be shortlisted to go through to co-development shortly. Local authorities will submit their final business cases with successful bids announced from autumn 2018 onwards.

The full list of successful marginal viability fund projects, and the indicative amount we are awarding (subject to final financial clarifications) can be found on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-infrastructure-fund [HCWS440]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Bulgarian presidency took place on 25 and 26 January in Sofia. Her Majesty’s ambassador to Bulgaria, Emma Hopkins, and a senior Government official represented the UK for interior day. I represented the UK for justice day.

Interior day began with a debate on European asylum policy. The presidency set out its objective to conclude negotiations on the reform of the common European asylum system (CEAS) package, including Dublin IV, by the end of June. Member states supported the aim of concluding negotiations by June but there remains a lack of consensus on the inclusion of burden sharing mechanisms in Dublin IV. The UK continues to support a comprehensive approach to migration but does not support a mandatory redistribution system within the EU and has not opted into the Dublin IV regulation.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the global UN compact on migration (GCM), which will be negotiated in the UN over the next six months. The discussion aimed to initiate consideration on the alignment of member states’ positions on the principles of the GCM text. The UK is committed to agreeing a global framework for a new approach to orderly, safe and regular global migration. The UK reaffirmed the Government’s principles that underline our approach to achieving this, in particular that refugees should seek protection in the first safe country they can reach; that a distinction needs to be maintained between economic migrants and refugees; and that states have the right to control their borders and the duty to accept their citizens back.

Interior day ended with a discussion on integrated border management. Member states highlighted priorities for co-operation among the relevant authorities and agencies involved in border security and with third countries to help secure the Union’s external border. These priorities related specifically to implementation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA) and related EU databases—the entry/exit system (EES) and the European travel information and authorisation system (ETIAS). The UK recognises the importance of increased border security across the EU. However, the UK is not part of the border aspects of the Schengen agreement and therefore does not participate in the EBCGA, EES or the ETIAS.

Justice day began with a consideration of the issues relevant to future co-operation between the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) and other partner agencies and offices of the EU, such as Europol, Eurojust and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). Member states agreed on the importance of clear working relationships, with a clear delimitation of responsibilities so that the EPPO does not limit or encroach upon other agencies’ competences. The Government have been clear that we will not participate in an EPPO and did not opt-in to the regulation.

The day continued with a discussion on the Brussels IIa recast regulation. Member states agreed that the continued requirement for exequatur in some family cases was a significant obstacle to the operation of the system and should be abolished. Similarly, it was agreed that the grounds for refusal of recognition of a judgment should be limited, which is of particular importance where children are concerned.

The Commission presented an update on the progress of the forthcoming legislative proposal on cross-border law enforcement access to e-evidence held by communications service providers. The Commission aims to present the proposal to the JHA Council in March. The Government will consider their position and whether to opt in to the proposal when it is published. The Commission also provided an update on the code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online which was signed in June 2016 by major social media companies and aims to ensure illegal hate speech is removed within 24 hours. The Commission detailed the progress made by social media companies and explained their intention to expand the number of signatories to the code.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the justice issues raised by artificial intelligence, in particular on questions of liability. Member states broadly agreed on the need for clear, but light touch, rules on liability which would create certainty to allow investment decisions to be taken without overregulating and discouraging innovation. [HCWS443]
The UK is a world leader in support for education in developing countries and, together with France, we have designated 2018 as the global year of learning.

DFID’s new education policy, which I am launching today, sets out my three priorities for action to ensure more children are learning the basics:

- We will support efforts to drive up the quality of teaching in developing countries. Skilled, reliable teachers need to be the norm everywhere.
- We will support education systems to stand on their own two feet, using resources effectively to ensure children learn.
- We will prioritise children with disabilities, children affected by crises and hard-to-reach girls. During this global year of learning, I will also be drawing attention to other aspects of the learning crisis. At the disability summit in July I will highlight the plight of children with disabilities; at UNGA in September, I will call on Governments to stamp out violence against children in school; and at the World Bank annual meetings in October, I will focus on the role that education plays in driving human capital and prosperity.

Today I can confirm that the UK will boost its contribution to £75 million per year for each of the next three years to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). This will be an almost 50% increase in our annual contribution to the GPE and demonstrates our determination to show leadership internationally to get children learning. This funding will provide quality education to 880,000 children each year. Our investment will be used to drive improved performance and efficiency and we have capped our investment at 15% of the overall GPE budget. This new commitment comes in addition to the vital work of DFID directly through its sizeable bilateral programmes on education.

I am proud too of the role the UK is playing globally and proud to lead a Department which is dedicated to making a difference in children’s lives.

A copy of the policy document will be placed in the Library of the House for the availability of Members. [HCWS446]

TRANSPORT

Maritime Training

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am proud that the United Kingdom has one of the most vibrant and competitive maritime sectors in the world. We are an outward-looking, global trading maritime nation proud of our maritime history but forward looking and ambitious for our future.

Our success though, relies above all else on our workforce. The United Kingdom is recognised all over the world for its leading maritime education and training and for the very best seafarers that are produced. Our well-trained and skilled cadets are responsible for many of our vital needs bringing them efficiently and safely to our shores.

I am therefore pleased to announce that we will be doubling the Government’s financial support for maritime training, the so-called SMarT fund, from £15 million to £30 million to introduce a new SMarT Plus option. I am committed to continue building capacity and diversity within our maritime workforce so it can capitalise on every opportunity the market provides. I recognise the importance of transferable skills and the essential role
seafarers play in supporting the wider maritime sector when they return from sea to shore-based careers. Increasing our support for maritime training is essential in order for our great maritime nation to maintain its global position as a market leader. This is never more important than it is today as we prepare to leave the EU and take an even more global outlook.

Seafarers are highly skilled professionals entering STEM related careers. Smart plus funding will be available from April 2018 and will also support the year of engineering through stimulating the availability of training opportunities for deck, engine and electro-technical cadets. The 2018-19 cohort of SMarT Plus cadets will begin their on-ship training in the months before we leave the EU.

A key strength of the UK’s maritime sector is our strong relationship with industry. I value the work of the UK Chamber of Shipping, Nautilus International and the Merchant Navy Training Board in developing and refining the SMarT Plus proposal in conjunction with my Department’s officials. An opportunity was clearly identified to create a resurgence in maritime training and increase the competitiveness of SMarT.

There is no shortage of people applying for cadetships and it is only right that we capitalise on this momentum and create the conditions for more UK training and employment opportunities within the maritime sector. I am delighted to be working with the maritime industry and trade unions and together we will build a stronger UK maritime workforce.

Notes:

SMarT Plus is a package that will see SMarT funding doubled, over a 7 year period, from £15 million to £30 million per year.

This will enable the cadet intake to increase from 750 to 1,200 each year.

In return, shipping companies will create additional UK training positions and commit to employ newly qualified SMarT Plus officers.

This will enable SMarT Plus officers to gain the 12 months sea time experience that is required to enable them to progress to their 2nd Certificate of Competency.

UK officers holding a 2nd Certificate of Competency are particularly valued throughout industry. Their quality, leadership and training makes them highly employable.

[HCWS444]
Written Statements
Monday 5 February 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 22 January 2018

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 22 January. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

EU Ministers discussed the Cotonou agreement, Libya and the Middle East peace process. In her introductory remarks the HRVP spoke about her recent visit to Cuba, as well as Syria and Iran. Member states raised DRC, Tunisia, the organisation for security and co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe.

Cotonou agreement

Ministers held an initial exchange about a future agreement between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of countries (ACP); the current Cotonou agreement is due to expire on 29 February 2020. Ministers expressed their broad support for the Commission’s approach to move towards an umbrella agreement at ACP level combined with three regional tailored partnerships for Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Ministers underlined the importance of building on the experience gained through co-operation under the existing Cotonou agreement, in particular on political dialogue and on migration. Discussions on the negotiating mandate will continue within relevant Council preparatory bodies, with a view to adopting a decision authorising the opening of negotiations and the negotiating directives within the first semester of 2018.

Libya

Ministers discussed the current situation in Libya. The UN Secretary General’s Special Representative, Ghassam Salame (SRSG), who joined by video conference for part of the session, gave an overview of the state of play of the political process, including progress towards the adoption of a new constitution and the forthcoming elections. He received the full support of Ministers in his efforts to bring about unity and reconciliation in the country. Ministers discussed the importance of EU engagement in Libya as a way of supporting the UN in its efforts to bring about political stability, as well as those UN agencies working to address the situation of migrants in Libya. Ministers also highlighted the importance of continuing to work with countries of origin, in particular in the Sahel region.

I intervened to underline the UK’s support for the SRSG, including his efforts to tackle modern slavery and people trafficking. I also emphasised the need for proper technical, legal, and political preparations in advance of any elections.

Middle East peace process

Ministers discussed the latest developments in the Middle East peace process and looked at how the EU could help to ensure engagement by all the relevant players in order to advance the peace process.

In the margins of the Council meeting, Ministers held an informal lunch with the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. This was an opportunity for the European Union to reiterate its united and clear messages on the importance of preserving a two-state solution and the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of two states.

Also in the margins, the President of the European Investment Bank (EIB) briefed Ministers on the proposal for an EIB subsidiary to focus on development outside Europe. There will be further discussion among Development Ministers next month.

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Zimbabwe;
- The Council adopted conclusions on sanctions on Venezuela;
- The Council adopted conclusions on sanctions on North Korea;
- The Council adopted conclusions on the integrated approach to external conflict and crises; The Council adopted EU priorities for co-operation with the Council of Europe;
- The Council approved upgraded generic standards of behaviour for common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions and operations;
- The Council agreed exercise specifications for the EU crisis management military exercises in 2018 (MILEX 18);
- The Council adopted a decision on the promotion of effective arms export controls;
- The Council authorised Europol to release to third countries and third parties, the operational action plans which are part of the EU policy cycle for organised and serious international crime (Justice and Home Affairs);
- The Council adopted a decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the EU within the EU-Ukraine Association Council and within the trade committee configuration (Trade);
- The Council agreed to withdraw its appeals against six judgments by the European Court of Justice related to imports of biodiesel originating from Argentina and Indonesia (Trade);
- The Council decided to publish the mandate given to the Commission on 13 November 2017 to modernise the existing association agreement with Chile (Trade);
- The Council authorised the EU Railway agency to open negotiations on the participation of Switzerland (Transport);
- The Council adopted a decision on an aviation agreement with Morocco (Transport);
- The Council decided not to object to Commission regulation on the use of bisphenol A in varnishes and coatings (Health);
- The Council appointed members of the Court of Auditors.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Upwards Extensions: New Homes

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government are committed to ensuring the planning system supports the delivery of more homes where they are needed. The opportunity for new homes is not always an empty plot, or the redevelopment of a derelict site. As set out in the White Paper, “Fixing our broken housing market”, it is important that development uses the space that is available efficiently, and avoids building at low densities especially in areas of high demand such as London. The Government
recognise that one of the ways to achieve this is to build up rather than build out, using the space above existing buildings to create new homes.

Alongside the White Paper, the Government confirmed their intention to bring forward policy changes to support this objective, which this written ministerial statement sets out.

Planning policies and decisions should respond positively to suitable opportunities to use the airspace above existing residential and commercial premises for new homes. They should allow residential and commercial premises to extend upwards, where such extensions would be consistent with the prevailing height and form of neighbouring properties and the overall street scene, are well-designed—including complying with any local design policies and standards—respect the privacy of neighbours and can maintain safe access and egress for occupiers.

Policies and decisions on upwards extensions should take into account national and local policies, as well as relevant legal requirements, including relating to the conservation of heritage assets such as listed buildings and conservation areas. This will ensure councils can continue to protect valued areas of open space and the character of residential neighbourhoods, and stop unwanted garden grabbing.

The Government will be consulting on changes to the national planning policy framework, including changes to incorporate building up to ensure effective use of land for current and future homeowners. Appropriate guidance will be produced in due course.

[HCWS449]
Written Statements
Tuesday 6 February 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Committee on Standards in Public Life

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): In July 2017, the Prime Minister asked the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life to undertake a review into the issue of abuse and intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates, including those who stood in the 2017 general election campaign. Concerns were highlighted by those across the political spectrum. The Committee published a comprehensive report in December.

The Government would like to thank the Committee on Standards in Public Life again for their considered and thorough report. The Prime Minister has today announced some initial measures based on the Committee’s findings and the Government will be publishing a substantive response in due course.

As the Prime Minister notes today, in public life, and increasingly in private conversations too, it is becoming harder and harder to conduct any political discussion, on any issue, without it descending into tribalism and rancour. Social media and digital communication—which in themselves can and should be forces for good in our democracy—are being exploited and abused, often anonymously. British democracy has always been robust and oppositional. But a line is crossed when disagreement descends into intimidation.

Individuals standing for elected office

It cannot be right that people looking to participate in our democracy are subject to abuse and intimidation for doing so. The Government will therefore consult in due course on the introduction of a new offence in electoral law on intimidating candidates and campaigners. We also propose to remove the requirement for candidates for local government to include their home addresses on ballot papers, if they do not wish to do so. This extends the protection already offered to parliamentary candidates.

Online content

We want users to be better informed about how reported social media content is dealt with. We will establish a new annual internet safety transparency report, to improve our understanding of the offensive content being reported, how social media companies are responding to complaints, and what content is being removed.

The Prime Minister has today called on social media companies to set out how they will respond to the recommendations in the report, and we have been encouraged by the positive response we have seen thus far. It is welcome that social media companies have agreed to take forward the recommendation for a ‘pop up’ social media reporting team for election campaigns and they will actively provide advice and support to parliamentary candidates.

Political parties

The report has a number of recommendations for political parties, which they will wish to consider carefully. The Prime Minister has noted that the Conservative party is putting in place a new code of conduct for members and supporters that puts respect and decency at its core. The Prime Minister is encouraging the leaders of other parties to follow this example.

Law, police and prosecutors

The Committee made a number of recommendations for national police leadership bodies, including the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the College of Policing, on devolved operational policing matters. Both the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the College will be responding to the Committee’s report separately, but we are pleased to confirm that they will implement each of the recommendations in the report that refer to them.

Some of these issues touch on devolved matters, and the UK Government will liaise with our colleagues in the devolved Administrations accordingly.

A more detailed response will be published by the Government in due course. Ministers would welcome further feedback from parliamentary colleagues, and the House may wish to debate and consider these matters further.

I have placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Prime Minister’s speech from today.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Sustainability of the Press

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The Prime Minister is today announcing that the Government will be establishing an external review, looking into the sustainability of high-quality journalism, including the national, regional and local press.

Robust high-quality journalism is important for public debate, scrutiny, and ultimately for democratic political discourse. Yet the press currently faces an uncertain future. Print circulations have declined, with readerships moving online, and the shift from print to digital advertising has led to a loss of revenue for the press. The Government are determined to ensure that the UK has a vibrant, independent and plural free press, which is able to provide high-quality journalism as one of the cornerstones of our public debate. As per our manifesto, we are committed to making sure content creators are appropriately rewarded for the content they make available online, and ensure there is a sustainable business model for high-quality media online. The review will help us deliver on these commitments.

We have already commissioned research to look into the current state of the local and national press markets. The review will bring together experts who will be able to assess the many factors affecting the health of the UK’s news sector. These factors include the impact of the digital advertising supply chain, the role of content and data in the market, click-bait and the role played by the online platforms.

The review will publish a report and a range of recommendations for the industry and Government to consider. The report is expected to be published later this year.

I have published a summary of the scope of this review on gov.uk. The terms of reference, chair and panel will all be announced in the coming months.

[HCWS454]
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Lebanon: Border Assistance

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The United Kingdom is strongly committed to supporting Lebanon’s peace, stability and prosperity. Through a long-standing Conflict Stability and Security Fund project worth £22.6 million over three years, the UK is helping the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) secure the Lebanon-Syria border. Our ambition is for Lebanon to have complete authority over its border with Syria.

In order to reach this objective, our Embassy in Beirut wishes to place an order worth £319,916.61 for communications equipment to support the LAF. On 7 September 2017, I made a written statement (HCWS118) in respect of our Embassy in Beirut placing an order of £1.8 million for additional defensive barrier towers as part of this project. This communications equipment will be used in the new towers to allow secure communications between troops and the headquarters of both the Land Border Regiment and the LAF.

The provision of this assistance is fully in-line with the Government’s security and stability objectives in the middle east. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials carry out regular reviews of our programmes in Lebanon to ensure funding is not directed to non-state actors.

[HCWS450]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Finance

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Yesterday, I laid before the House, the “Report on Local Government Finance (England) 2018-19”, which represents the annual local government finance settlement for local authorities in England.

I would like to thank all colleagues in the House, council leaders and officers, who contributed to the consultation after the provisional settlement was published before Christmas.

My Ministers and I have engaged extensively with the sector, including offering a teleconference to all local authorities, and holding meetings with representative groups including the Local Government Association and with councils and MPs. Representations from almost 160 organisations or individuals have been carefully considered before finalising the settlement.

This settlement is the third year of a four-year offer which was accepted by 97% of councils in return for publishing efficiency plans. This settlement sees two years of real-terms increases in available resources to local government: £44.3 billion in 2017-18 to £45.6 billion in 2019-20.

The current business rates retention scheme is yielding strong results. Local authorities estimate that in 2017-18 they will keep around £1.3 billion in business rates growth, which we expect will be maintained into 2018-19 and 2019-20. This is on top of the core settlement funding I am announcing today.

I commend local authorities for their work in securing efficiency savings supported by the long-term certainty of the multi-year settlement. Councils continue to seek to maximise public value for every pound invested in public services. Of course, there is further for all councils to go. To help this, I am extending the capital receipts flexibility programme for a further three years. This scheme gives local authorities the freedom to use capital receipts from the sale of their own assets to support transformation and unlock efficiency savings. We will also continue to work with the sector to help them increase transparency and share best practice supporting greater progress in delivering increased efficiency over the coming year. I expect this to have a tangible impact on the steps councils take to promote efficiency by 2019-20.

Social Care

I recognise the need to prioritise spending on social care services that councils provide to our elderly and vulnerable citizens. This is why we announced an additional £2 billion at spring Budget 2017 for adult social care over the three years from 2017-18. This year we have seen how this money has enabled councils to increase provider fees, provide for more care packages and reduce delayed transfer of care.

And, having listened to representations since the provisional settlement, I am today announcing a further £150 million in 2018-19 for an adult social care support grant. This will be taken from anticipated underspend in existing departmental budgets, and will not affect existing revenue commitments made to local government. This will be allocated according to relative needs and we will expect to see councils use it to build on their progress so far in supporting sustainable local care markets.

With this, and other measures, the Government have given councils access to £9.4 billion dedicated funding for adult social care over three years.

This is a long-term challenge that requires a sustainable settlement for the future. The publication of a Green Paper this summer setting out our proposals for reform sets us on the path to securing a resilient and sustainable system.

In children’s social care too, it is important to understand cost drivers as well as service quality and efficiency in a highly complex and critical service area. The Government have invested £200 million since 2014 in the innovation programme and partners in practice programme, as well as £920 million in the troubled families programme, to help the children’s social care sector innovate and re-design service delivery to achieve higher quality, improve family outcomes and secure better value for money.

I also recognise the good work that local authorities do in caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. I have therefore made £19 million available to local authorities in 2017-18 from within existing budgets, including the controlling migration fund, to develop the skills and capacity to be able to support these very vulnerable children.

Protecting residents from excessive council tax rises

Under the Localism Act 2011 and as re-affirmed in the Government’s 2017 manifesto, councils can set whatever council tax rates they wish, but they need the direct consent of local people if they wish to impose an excessive rise. This year, that referendum threshold is set...
in line with inflation at 3%. In addition, local authorities with responsibility for social care may levy a precept to spend exclusively on adult social care. As announced last year, this precept equates to up to 6% over three years, from 2017-18 to 2019-20, with a maximum increase of 3% in the first two years and 2% in the final year. This settlement strikes a balance on council tax between the need to relieve pressure on local services, including social care, while also recognising that many households face their own pressures.

New homes bonus

Local authorities are instrumental in ensuring the building of homes this country needs. By the end of 2018-19, we will have allocated £7 billion in new homes bonus payments to reward the building of 1.400.000 homes since the scheme was introduced in 2011. We recognise the need for continuity and certainty on the new homes bonus, and therefore for the year ahead there will be no new changes to the way the new homes bonus works. The new homes bonus baseline will be maintained at 0.4% and £947.5 million in new homes bonus payments will be paid in 2018-19.

Rural funding

I am committed to ensuring the needs of rural areas are met and recognise the particular costs of providing services in sparse rural areas. So in 2018-19, in response to representations made since the provisional settlement, I will increase the rural services delivery grant by £31 million —£16 million more than proposed in the provisional settlement. This will take the total to £81 million, a little over the 2016-17 level and the highest it has ever been. 2019-20 and later years

To meet the challenges of the future we need an updated and more responsive distribution methodology. We have published a formal consultation on a review of relative needs and resources and aim to implement its findings in 2020-21. There have been widespread calls for a thorough, evidence-based review, and we will deliver this. The review will examine the cost of delivering services across the country, including rural areas, and will consider which factors should be taken into account when considering a local authority’s relative resources.

Following the delay to the implementation of 100% business rates retention and reforms to the local government finance system, I acknowledge concerns around “negative RSG”. We will be looking at fair and affordable options that will address the problem of negative RSG that occurs in 2019-20, and will formally consult on proposals ahead of next year’s settlement.

We will also work towards implementing the next phase of our business rates retention reforms in 2020-21 to support the long held objective for local authorities of greater self-sufficiency and financial sustainability. This will give local councils the levers and incentives they need to grow their local economies. Local authorities will be able to keep more business rates, to the value of the revenue support grant, the Greater London Authority transport grant, the rural services delivery grant and the public health grant. Overall, this is equivalent to 75% retention at 2019-20 levels. Local authorities will then be able to keep the equivalent share of business rates growth on their baseline levels from 2020-21, when the system is reset. The Government intend to use the intervening period to develop a set of measures that support a smooth transition of funding for public health services from a grant to retained business rates.

Ahead of this, we will continue to test out aspects of the future business rates retention system in a broad range of authorities right across the country. And, to help us take forward our continued long-term plan to let local government keep 100% of its business rates, in 2018-19 we will continue to pilot 100% business rates retention in Greater Manchester, Liverpool city region, the west midlands, west of England and Cornwall, introduce a London pilot, and will take forward 10 further 100% business rates retention pilots. These are Berkshire, Derbyshire, Devon, Gloucestershire, Kent and Medway, Leeds city region, Lincolnshire, Solent authorities, Suffolk and Surrey. The 10 pilot areas will cover 89 local authorities in total.

I recognise that there is disappointment among those areas that were unsuccessful in their pilot applications this year and I am pleased to confirm that I intend to open a further bidding round for pilots in 2019-20. Further information on this will be published in due course.

Conclusion

Local government delivers vital services at the heart of the communities they serve. This settlement strikes a balance between relieving growing pressure on local government while ensuring that hard-pressed taxpayers do not face excessive bills. We have listened to representations made and delivered on these requests: two years of real-terms increases in resources, more freedom and fairness, and greater certainty to plan and secure value for money.

[HCWS451]

PRIME MINISTER

Clarification

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): During Prime Minister’s Questions on 24 January I understand that the monthly 12 hour figures I used, while accurate and drawn directly from data published by the relevant NHS authorities in England and Wales, are not directly comparable (Official Report vol. 635, column 256).

I should have used the latest annual data which shows that 3.4% patients waited over 12 hours in Wales last year, compared to 1.3% in England, and the latest monthly data on A&E performance which shows that 85.1 % of patients in England were seen within four hours in December 2017 compared to 78.9% in Wales.

[HCWS453]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): On 11 July 2017 the Government published the review of modern working practices, which was led by Matthew Taylor (Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts) at the request of my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister.

The Government set out in the industrial strategy, published in November, a long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK by focusing on the five foundations of productivity: ideas, people, infrastructure, business environment and places.

Good work and developing better jobs for everyone in the British economy is at the centre of our industrial strategy vision.

Building on the industrial strategy, today the Government are publishing a full response to the Taylor review, setting out how we intend to develop further the strength of the UK labour market and ensure it meets the challenges and opportunities presented by new ways of working and innovative business models. Alongside the full response, we are publishing four public consultations, which seek views on how to implement a series of proposals to enhance workers’ rights and ensure that the labour market is working for everybody.

The four consultations cover proposed changes on agency workers, employment status, enforcement and increasing transparency.

We are taking forward work on the vast majority of the review recommendations, and the plans we are outlining build on our pledge to not only protect, but enhance, workers’ rights. Copies of the Government response and consultations will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

TREASURY

ECOFIN: 23 January 2018

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Ministry of Defence Votes A estimate 2018-19, has been laid before the House today as HC730. This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2018-19.

EDUCATION

Schools and Early Years Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Following the two public consultations my Department ran recently, I am pleased to announce my intention to lay regulations in the House later today that will introduce net earned income thresholds under universal credit for free school meals, the early years pupil premium, and the early education entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds.
This approach is consistent with how other Government Departments have set criteria for other “passported” benefits.

The changes will come into force on 1 April 2018 for the start of the school summer term. Under our proposals, we estimate that by 2022 around 50,000 more children will benefit from a free school meal compared to the previous benefits system. In addition, we will apply transitional protection to anyone currently receiving free school meals.

These changes do not affect the criteria for universal infant free school meals, which will continue to be available to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 regardless of parental income.

For free school meals and the early years pupil premium we are introducing a net earnings threshold of £7,400 per annum. A typical family earning around £7,400 per annum would, depending on their exact circumstances, have a total household income of between £18,000 and £24,000 once benefits are taken into account.

For the early education entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds, we are introducing a net earnings threshold of £15,400 per annum. Under this new threshold, we estimate that by 2023 around 7,000 more children will benefit from the two-year-old entitlement compared to the previous benefits system.

The Government’s responses to these consultations have been published on the Department for Education’s website, and copies of the regulations will be laid shortly.

[HCWS459]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Finance Guidance and Claims Bill (Contingencies Fund Advance)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Financial Guidance and Claims Bill currently before Parliament provides for an arm’s-length non-departmental public body, known as the single finance guidance body, to take on their functions currently delivered by the Money Advice Service, The Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise.

Our intention, subject to parliamentary approval, is to launch the new body in autumn 2018. In order to avoid delay in the launch, expenditure is required in advance of the Bill receiving Royal Assent to cover the costs associated with the commencement of the recruitment of the Chair and Chief Executive of the body, including the staffing costs of the DWP public appointments, any media advertising, and miscellaneous administration costs. Advertising for the posts will be clear that the roles are dependent on the successful passage of the Bill through Parliament.

Parliamentary approval for resources of £30,000 for this new service will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department of Work and Pensions. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £30,000 will be met by repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS456]
Written Statements

Thursday 8 February 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): I am announcing today the appointment of Sir Brian Langstaff to head the public inquiry into the infected blood scandal. The inquiry will be established under the 2005 Inquiries Act, with full powers, including the power to compel the production of documents, and to summon witnesses to give evidence on oath.

In relation to the appointment of the chair, the Lord Chief Justice was asked to recommend a judge who, in his view, would be best suited to the task. The Lord Chief Justice recommended Sir Brian Langstaff: a highly respected and hugely experienced High Court judge. I have accepted the Lord Chief Justice’s recommendation.

Sir Brian will be the full-time chair of the inquiry from 1 May following his retirement from the High Court. However, in order that those who have been affected by this tragedy face no further undue delay, he will use the intervening period to conduct a further consultation on the inquiry’s terms of reference.

The infected blood scandal of the 1970s and 1980s was an appalling tragedy that should never have happened. The victims of this tragedy who have endured so much pain and hardship deserve answers. It is crucial that their views are properly reflected in the inquiry’s terms of reference. Sir Brian will want to listen carefully to the voices of those that have suffered before making a recommendation to me on what the scope of the inquiry should be. I will return to Parliament with the final terms of reference as soon as this process has been completed.

The Government will ensure that the inquiry has the resources that it needs to complete its work. The inquiry will, of course, also be independent of the Government.

It is very important that the inquiry can identify why and how this tragedy occurred and provide answers for all the victims who have suffered so terribly, and can identify lessons to be learned so that a tragedy of this scale can never happen again.

[HCWS464]

DEFENCE

National Memorial to British Victims of Overseas Terrorism

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to inform Parliament that the National Memorial to British Victims of Overseas Terrorism has now been completed at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, and is open to the public to visit.

The process to select the artist and design for the memorial began with a public online consultation in 2016. This consultation identified strong public support and set out what was important to those with an interest in the memorial. I am grateful to Baroness Chalker of Wallasey and the other members of the independent panel which took forward the selection of the artists and design for the memorial. They based their decisions on the results of the consultation in 2016.

The overarching themes of the consultation were that the memorial should be a place of remembrance, where people could pay their respects to those who had lost their lives. It was also clear that the memorial should be a place of contemplation and reflection, with many respondents suggesting that the memorial should be a place of tranquillity and quiet reflection, and a place for families to visit and sit. I am pleased with the way that the artist, Alison Wilding, and maker and sculptor, Adam Kershaw have responded to these themes through their work, “Still Water.”

I am grateful also to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, whose officials have delivered this project on my behalf. Those Departments that have a direct responsibility for supporting the families of victims of overseas terrorism will now work together to ensure that the families of future victims of terrorism overseas are connected with the memorial sensitively, and by the most appropriate part of Government at the time. The new, cross-Government Victims of Terrorism Unit is well-placed to consider this work.

On 17 May 2018, on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government, I will host a dedication ceremony at the site of the memorial for families that have successfully applied online to attend. Further information, including how to apply to attend the event, can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-memorial-dedication-ceremony.

[HCWS465]

EDUCATION

Social Work England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) and I are today launching a public consultation on the policy to establish regulations and the regulatory framework for Social Work England. The framework and the regulations within it are to be made under part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Social work is a complex and challenging profession. The best social workers deliver truly excellent provision that has the power to transform the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

We want all social workers to be equipped to deliver outstanding services. Key to delivering on this vision is a highly skilled and expert workforce. We have developed a significant reform programme, across child and family and adult social work, to improve both the quality of social work practice, and the systems which support social workers.

A fundamental part of this reform programme is delivering on our commitment to establish Social Work England: a new, specialist regulator for social workers.
in England. Like the other health and social care regulators across the UK, Social Work England’s primary objective will be protection of the public. It will achieve its objective through setting professional, education and training standards for social workers, and providing assurance that those registered meet the standards, are qualified and remain fit to practise. By doing so, it will promote public confidence and trust in this vital profession.

Health and social care professional regulation is undergoing change. While the regulators are generally effective in protecting the public from serious harm, there has been criticism, including from the regulators themselves, that the system can be slow, inefficient, overly adversarial and confusing to patients and the public. Government recognise that the regulation of all healthcare professionals needs to be faster, simpler, better and less costly and are reviewing the regulation of healthcare professionals through their consultation “Promoting professionalism, reforming regulation”. Social Work England is at the forefront of this reform.

Therefore, the regulatory framework for Social Work England, described in this consultation, aims to take account of the latest thinking, enabling the regulator to be more streamlined, proportionate and efficient. Social Work England will be able to operate systems and processes which adapt to emerging opportunities, challenges and best practice, ensuring professional regulation reflects the changing reality of delivering social work practice safely and effectively.

The consultation will run for six weeks and ends on 21 March. It seeks views on a range of key issues. A copy of the draft regulatory framework forms part of the consultation.

Copies of the consultation document will be placed in the Library of the House and available on the Government’s website here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication_filter_option=consultations&topics%5B%5D=all&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education&official_document_status=all&world_locations%5B%5D=all&from_date=&to_date

[HCWS463]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

I represented the United Kingdom at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 29 January in Brussels.

Council began with a presentation by the Bulgarian presidency, outlining its work programme until the end of June. This set out that discussion on the common agricultural policy (CAP) will be prioritised in Agriculture and Fisheries Council; regular updates on EU agricultural markets will continue, along with a discussion of proposals for strengthening the position of farmers in the food supply chain; and items on a spirit drink regulation, forestry, animal health and veterinary medicines will also feature.

The focus of this Council was an exchange of views on the common agricultural policy post 2020. Member states displayed a variety of positions regarding the future direction of the CAP. The UK committed to working closely with EU colleagues in tackling shared challenges in farming policy, and signalled future efforts by the UK Government to bring together agriculture and environment policy, such as the 25-year environment plan for England.

The Council moved on to EU agriculture markets, and Commissioner Hogan gave an update on the sugar, dairy and pigmeat markets. Alongside this update, the French and Belgian delegations prompted a further discussion with their ideas for releasing EU stocks of skimmed milk powder. The Polish delegation requested further discussion on the EU pigmeat market. Commissioner Hogan then updated the Council on December’s WTO ministerial conference and trade negotiations with Mercosur.

There were four further items discussed under “any other business”:

- the German delegation presented the conclusions of the Agriculture Ministers conference 2018 in the context of the global forum for food and agriculture (Berlin, 20 January 2018)
- the French delegation presented the conclusions from the ministerial conference on Xylella fastidiosa (Paris, 1 December 2017)
- the German delegation presented conclusions from the high-level meeting on African swine fever (ASF) at the International Green week (Berlin, 19 January 2018)
- the Czech delegation highlighted the involvement of European research in eradicating African swine fever in the EU.

On 23 June 2016, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until we leave the EU, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

[HCWS461]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Improvement: Suffolk

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

On 7 November and 30 November respectively I told the House that I was minded to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, locally-supported proposals I had received from the respective councils to merge district councils in east Suffolk and in west Suffolk, and I invited representations before I took my final decisions on these proposals.

Having carefully considered all the representations I have received and all the relevant information available to me, I am today announcing that I have decided to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, both proposals—that is to merge Suffolk Coastal and Waveney
district councils to become a new single district council named East Suffolk, and to merge Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council to become a new single district council named West Suffolk.

I have reached my decisions having regard to the criteria for district council mergers I announced to the House on 7 November. I am satisfied that these criteria are met and that both new district councils are likely to improve local government and service delivery in their areas, command a good deal of local support, and that each council area is a credible geography.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decisions. My intention is that if Parliament approves this legislation the new councils will be established on 1 April 2019 with the first elections to the councils held on 2 May 2019.

[HCWS462]
Petitions

Monday 22 January 2018

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Fair Funding for Schools

The petition of residents of Ilkley and Wharfedale,

Declares that the cuts in spending in schools in Ilkley and Wharfedale will lead to redundancies amongst teachers and teaching assistants, increasing class sizes, reduction in the range of subjects on offer and a decline in educational standards.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the cuts that have been made to school budgets in Ilkley and Wharfedale; further to protect per pupil funding in real terms in the schools of Ilkley and Wharfedale over the lifetime of this Parliament; and further to ensure no school loses out in real terms as a result of any new funding formula.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Grogan, Official Report, 16 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 3P.]

[PO02080]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The Department for Education announced the final details of the national funding formulae for schools and high needs on September 14 last year. This followed extensive consultations, with over 26,000 responses from individuals and representative organisations.

The introduction of the national funding formula is supported by significant extra funding of £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the budget announced at the 2015 spending review. Core funding for schools and high needs will therefore rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion in 2018-19 and £43.5 billion in 2019-20. As the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed, school and high needs funding will be maintained in real terms per pupil for the next two years. With the additional funding, the national funding formula will:

Increase the basic amount of funding that every pupil will attract.

Recognise the challenges of the very lowest funded schools, by introducing a minimum per pupil funding level. Under the national funding formula, in 2019-20 all secondary schools will attract at least £4,600, and all primary schools will attract at least £3,500 per pupil. In 2018-19, as a step towards these minimum funding levels, secondary schools will attract at least £4,600, and primary schools £3,300.

Provide a cash increase for every school and every local area from April 2018. Final decisions on local distribution will be taken by local authorities, but under the national funding formula every school will attract at least 0.5% more per pupil in 2018-19, and 1% more in 2019-20, compared to its baseline.

Provide significantly larger increases for underfunded schools, of up to 3% per pupil in 2018-19 and a further 3% per pupil in 2019-20.

Full details on the provisional allocations for local authorities and schools can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-funding-formula-tables-for-schools-and-high-needs. These include notional school level allocations showing what each school would attract through the formula.

Under the final national funding formula, schools in Keighley would gain 2.1% more funding if the formula were fully implemented (based on 2017-18 data). Bradford schools will continue to have higher per pupil funding than the national average under the national funding formula, which reflects their individual circumstances, in particular the high proportion of pupils with additional needs (deprivation, low prior attainment, English as an additional language, etc) in Bradford schools. The national funding formula allocates additional funding to schools with high numbers of pupils with additional needs to help those who are most likely to fall behind their peers.

To provide stability for schools through the transition to the national funding formula, local authorities will continue to set their own local formulae, in consultation with local schools, which will determine individual schools’ budgets in their areas in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Bradford local authority will be confirming individual schools’ 2018-19 budgets in the coming weeks, to provide schools with their allocations ahead of the new financial year as normal.

TRANSPORT

Congestion on the A40 between Witney and Oxford

The petition of residents of Witney and West Oxfordshire,

Declares that current high levels of traffic congestion on the A40 between Witney and Oxford have become unsustainable and the residents of Witney and West Oxfordshire require a permanent solution; further that the Government should bring forward proposals for improvements to be made to the A40; further that West Oxfordshire residents and businesses unduly suffer due to current poor provision for roads, cycleways and public transport; further that changes should be made to the A40 to ensure the area’s ongoing commercial and residential success; and further that with plans for significant further development at the Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village, alongside other projected growth in the area, the aforementioned factors will continue to worsen over time.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robert Courts, Official Report, 20 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 1243.]

[PO02095]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Government have an ambitious strategy for tackling congestion across the country. This includes significant new investment in both the strategic and local road networks, as well as encouragement for more sustainable transport including buses, walking and cycling.

This section of the A40 is the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council. But the Government recognise its importance to the economic growth of Oxfordshire. The Government are investing £35 million on public
transport improvements on the A40, alongside £9.5 million for Didcot station, which is a key gateway to Science Vale and the Enterprise Zone. This is in addition to investing some £19.4 million, in this financial year 2017-18, to reduce congestion at key locations and improve the maintenance of local highway assets across the county as a whole.

Oxford and Oxfordshire local authorities and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership secured £55.5 million in January 2014 through their City Deal, which runs until 2021. The deal supports business expansion by delivering major improvements to transport links, including the A34 and the A40 ‘Northern Gateway’, with a new £28.8 million link road from the A40 to the A44.

In January 2017, it was announced that Oxfordshire would become home to one of the first Garden Villages in the country, at a site north of Eynsham. The new garden village will provide much-needed homes and jobs, and is likely to enhance the case for improvements to local transport links, including upgrades to the A40.

The A40 is also likely to be on the Major Road Network. This major new programme will see substantial amounts of new investment available for each road enhancement scheme on the final network, funded from the National Roads Fund, which will be established in 2020-21.

I would encourage local partners to share their views on how to define the Major Road Network and how investments on this new network should be planned and assessed by responding to the Government’s consultation, which runs until 19 March this year. I would also encourage local partners to continue to work together to explore further options to address the issues along the A40 for the County Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership to determine priorities for investment.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Emotional Assistance Pet Act

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that there is compelling evidence from clinical and laboratory studies that interacting with pets can be beneficial to the physical, social and emotional well-being of humans and that the human-animal emotional bond does not differ from the one that we sustain in relation to close family members; further that the twenty-first century is the beginning of the revolution in ethics related to scientific evidence regarding consciousness in animals—now confirmed that it is astonishingly close to humans; further that mental health services in the UK are overstretched, have long waiting times and a lack of specialist services in some regions; further that the Mental Health Foundation also recognises the value of “pet therapy” in suicide prevention and treating depression and treating depression leading to it; further that there is no scientific research (to support the thesis that tenants who have pets are worse, more difficult or cause more damage to properties than those who do not); and further that almost all tenancy agreements, by default, contain a no pet clause, which is nothing more than prejudiced practice, as a result, people who have pets are especially victimised in their attempt to simply put a roof over their heads in their difficult housing crisis context.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce legislation that recognises the importance of the emotional relationship of man and their non-human family members; further to put the interest of the most vulnerable and the public interest above the right of property owners if the property is a subject of commercial gain; and further that the legislation should allow the emotional support animal access in housing facilities, even when the complex has a no pet policy or breed/weight discriminatory policies.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Grant Shapps, Official Report, 15 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 3p.]

[PO02079]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price):

The Government recognise that there is emerging evidence that there may be health benefits to using pets as therapy for people with complex needs, and we would want to see commissioners and providers have the flexibility to be able to continue to explore the benefits of this, as well as other types of therapy and support. This is why we have given Clinical Commissioning Groups the freedom to commission innovative services where they meet the health needs of local populations.

Legislation to enshrine the use of animals as therapy would be disproportionate, in regards to a relatively small area of health provision.

We appreciate the problems that families with pets can face in finding accommodation in the private rented sector.

All private landlords and letting agents operate on a commercial basis and, as for any business, it is reasonable for them to seek to reduce their risks. Not all properties are equally suitable for families with pets and the Government would not seek to intervene in commercial decisions as to how properties are marketed to different types of tenants.
Petition

Monday 29 January 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Corby Urgent Care Centre

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Corby Urgent Care Centre should receive proper funding.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel Corby Clinical Commissioning Group to provide adequate funding to allow the Corby Urgent Care Centre to continue running.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Pursglove, Official Report, 14 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 1083.]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay):

The provision and reconfiguration of services is a matter for the local NHS. NHS Corby Clinical Commissioning Group has provided assurance that any proposals for changes to services people currently received will be subject to full public consultation in due course.
Petition

Monday 5 February 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Proscription of Hezbollah

The petition of residents of the Hendon constituency,

Declares that demonstrations against the legitimate and democratic state of Israel where offensive and anti-Semitic language is used are not acceptable and that they, the petitioners, condemn such actions; further, that they, the petitioners, note that the police will not take any legal action against perpetrators under the current law; and further, that they, the petitioners, demonstrate their commitment to democracy, tolerance and freedom of speech be seeking the elimination of hatred.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to proscribe the political as well as military arm of the Hezbollah organisation under the Terrorism Act 2000.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Matthew Offord, Official Report, 17 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 1022.]

[PO02099]

Observations from the Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace):

Hezbollah’s external security organisation (also known as the Military Wing) was proscribed by the UK Government in March 2001 and in 2008 the proscription was extended to Hezbollah military apparatus including the Jihad Council. While the UK proscribes Hezbollah’s military wing, we do not proscribe the group in its entirety.

Hezbollah’s military wing is also designated in the UK under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing Act 2010. Therefore, funds or economic resources owned, held or controlled by its military wing in the UK can be frozen. In July 2012 the EU also designated Hizballah’s military wing as a terrorist organisation under the EU asset freeze regime.

The current proscription and asset freeze already sends a clear message that we condemn Hezbollah’s violence and support for terrorism. Groups are not free to spread hatred, fund terrorist activity or incite violence as they please, irrespective of whether they are included on the list of proscribed organisations or not.

Peaceful protest is a vital part of a democratic society and it is a long-standing tradition in this country that people are free to gather together and to demonstrate their views, however uncomfortable these may be to the majority of us, provided that they do so lawfully. There is, of course, a balance to be struck. Protestors’ rights need to be balanced with the rights of others to go about their business without fear of intimidation or serious disruption to the community. Rights to peaceful protest do not extend to violent or threatening behaviour and the police have powers to deal with any such acts. The management of protests is of course a matter for the police. Similarly, the investigation and prosecution of all criminal offences is a matter for the police, together with the Crown Prosecution Service.

The UK Government condemn any language or act which attempts to delegitimise the State of Israel, and also hate crime of any kind, directed against any community, race or religion, which has absolutely no place in our society. Violence against anyone in this country is a crime and will be treated seriously.

The Government acknowledge the petitioners’ request to extend the proscription of Hezbollah to cover the group’s political wing, however, while the list of proscribed groups is kept under review, the Government do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is or is not under consideration for proscription.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 25 January 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Democracy in Hong Kong

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Democracy in Hong Kong on 23 January 2018.

Mark Field: Many people will have followed the media coverage last year when three high-profile pro-democracy activists, Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow, were sentenced to imprisonment. We were further concerned when we heard that the British national Ben Rogers had been denied entry to Hong Kong in October last year. He is a champion of democracy and human rights, well known to Members of all parties. The Prime Minister spoke about his case in the House, we summoned the Chinese ambassador to the Foreign Office to discuss it and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government raised the issue with the Hong Kong Secretary for Labour and Welfare during his visit to Hong Kong in November.

I wrote to the Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam setting out our position on all four of those cases. Her response was consistent with previous public comments made by the Hong Kong authorities on the issue. [Official Report, 23 January 2018, Vol. 635, c. 124WH.]

Letter of correction from Mark Field:

An error has been identified in my response to the Westminster Hall debate on Democracy in Hong Kong.

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: Many people will have followed the media coverage last year when three high-profile pro-democracy activists, Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow, were sentenced to imprisonment. We were further concerned when we heard that the British national Ben Rogers had been denied entry to Hong Kong in October last year. He is a champion of democracy and human rights, well known to Members of all parties. The Prime Minister spoke about his case in the House, we summoned the Chinese ambassador to the Foreign Office to discuss it and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government raised the issue with the Hong Kong Secretary for Labour and Welfare during his visit to Hong Kong in November.

I wrote to the Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam setting out our position on this case. Her response was consistent with previous public comments made by the Hong Kong authorities on the issue.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 30 January 2018

EDUCATION

Skills Devolution (England)

The following is an extract from a speech made by the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills during a Westminster Hall debate on Skills Devolution (England) on 23 January 2018.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): T-levels are not in place yet. I wish they were, but they are coming down the road soon. They are part of a consultation. We are also changing completely the approach to careers, and—I am skimming through my notes now—there is the devolution of 25% of the adult education budget. The areas where it is being devolved have asked for more time, but it will be devolved in 2019-20.


Letter of correction from Anne Milton:

An error has been identified in the speech I made in the Westminster Hall debate on Skills Devolution (England) on 23 January 2018.

The correct response should have been:

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): T-levels are not in place yet. I wish they were, but they are coming down the road soon. They are part of a consultation. We are also changing completely the approach to careers, and—I am skimming through my notes now—there is the devolution of 50% of the adult education budget, of which 25% is being devolved to London. The areas where it is being devolved have asked for more time, but it will be devolved in 2019-20.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 6 February 2018

LEADER OF THE HOUSE
Business of the House

The following is an extract from questions on the Business of the House to the Leader of the House on 1 February 2018.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Rent-to-own companies such as BrightHouse charge eye-watering interest rates for essential goods. The Financial Conduct Authority has just revealed that the average debt for rent-to-own customers has doubled. May we therefore have a statement and real action from the Government and FCA to keep this sector in check?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning point about the debts people get into by using these high-cost lenders to facilitate the purchase of essential white goods, furniture and so on. I know from my time as City Minister that the FCA takes this incredibly seriously. It has capped the interest rates that such payday lending companies are allowed to charge and it is doing further work to ensure that we protect consumers from the poor practices of some of those rent-to-own companies.

Letter of correction from Andrea Leadsom.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) during questions on the Business of the House.

The correct response should have been:

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning point about the debts people get into by using these high-cost lenders to facilitate the purchase of essential white goods, furniture and so on. I know from my time as City Minister that the FCA takes this incredibly seriously. It has capped the interest rates that such payday lending companies are allowed to charge and it is doing further work to ensure we protect consumers from the poor practices of some of those rent-to-own companies.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 8 February 2018

WORK AND PENSIONS

Carillion: Pension Protection

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 5 February 2018.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Financial directors must not cause detriment to any private sector pension scheme. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the rules and regulations regarding the investigation of this sort of practice are toughened up, because we cannot allow this to happen in future?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are seeking to ensure that the regulator will—our White Paper will come out later in the year—have more rights to fine, follow criminal procedures and look into mandatory clearance. Those of us who have studied corporate governance realise that the rules changed in 1991—the Cadbury report and the OECD corporate governance rules—and were strengthened in 2002. I believe that now, under this Conservative Government, we will be strengthening the corporate governance rules again. [Official Report, 5 February 2018, Vol. 635, c. 1187.]

Letter of correction from Ms McVey:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone).

The correct response should have been:

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are seeking to ensure that the regulator will—our White Paper will come out later in the year—have more rights to fine, follow criminal procedures and look into mandatory clearance. Those of us who have studied corporate governance realise that the rules changed in 1991—the Cadbury report and the OECD corporate governance rules—and were strengthened in 2002. I believe that now, under this Conservative Government, we will be strengthening the corporate governance rules again.